



MARY, QUEEN OF FAMILIES: THE FORGOTTEN APPARITION OF LE GHIAIE DI BONATE

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Last summer, during a brief break in the pandemic, I was sitting at a family dinner, close to my aunt, Emma (90 years old), and casually the conversation turned to St. John Paul II and the Holy Virgin's apparition at Fatima.

All of a sudden my aunt Emma said, "Well, I was present at a Virgin apparition when I was young..."

"Sorry auntie, you were what?"

"Yes, I was present at two of the 13 apparitions that took place at Le Ghiaie di Bonate. I remember very well. It was spring 1944, because the war was still raging in our region, and it was very difficult to get there."

"But auntie you never told us anything like that before!"

"When you grow old, you have very little concern about daily life in the present, and remembrance of old times comes back very easily and strong."

And she briefly recounted to the amazed party her experience.

The apparition site was some 15 miles north of our home and the word spread instantly, despite censorship and harsh war-time. She and her friends first went on a small horse-cart from the farm, along adjacent country roads. But they did not get too far because all the roads were clogged with people; and so they had to walk the last 4 miles, thus ending up very far from the place where the seer was receiving the apparition.



Adelaide Roncalli in ecstasy at Le Ghiaie di Bonate, with doctors surrounding her.

Then she went a second time, two days later, and this time she and her friends rode their bicycles at night, so they could reach the apparition site. They made their way to the precise spot where my aunt could see the event from a very short distance.



Adelaide Roncalli among the faithful at Le Ghiaie di Bonate.

The seer was seven-year-old Adelaide Roncalli, a blonde girl of humble origins, who wore a white ribbon in her hair. She was standing on a podium and after some minutes she went into a trance

glancing at a remote point. And thus she stood, despite the doctors crowding around her tiny body, piercing her arms and cheeks and monitoring her blood pressure and heart beat.

After few minutes, the seer came around and briefly released a short summary of the message received from the Holy Virgin to the surrounding crowd and then she was taken away by the police force that was in charge of her security.

Here aunt Emma finished her story; and she could not tell me what happened afterwards, and why this apparition has had so little recognition from the official Church.

I had driven tens of times through the village of Bonate and had seen the brown tourism road sign, showing the way to the "Site of the 1944 Apparitions." (Yes, the road sign actually does say, "Site of the 1944 Apparitions," but no mention of any sanctuary of the Virgin). And so now, the surprising revelation by aunt Emma ignited my desire to learn more about this event.

My research was not easy because most of the publications were written and published by local authors for use only by the supporters of the apparition. However, thanks to the help of my many Christian friends around Lombardy, I could put together enough details to arrive at a reasonable understanding of the events of that fateful May in 1944.

Most, if not all, Marian apparitions are marked by common features: One or more seer; very often young, but certainly always very simple persons, a message entrusted to the seer for universal revelation and miracles. Le Giaie was by no means less in this "standard."

The Seer

Adelaide Roncalli (her grandfather was a relative of Angelo Roncalli, better known today as, St. John XXIII) was a country girl of seven at the time of the apparition. On May 13, she was playing with her siblings in the field close to her parents' farm at Le Giaie (literally, "The Gravels" because it is located by the side of the Brembo river) when her aunt, Annunciata, asked her to gather some wildflowers to adorn the small Madonna altar at the farmhouse.

While Adelaide was picking some elder flowers she suddenly stood still, as if lost to the world. Her siblings immediately ran home yelling, "Come quickly, Adelaide is standing dead!" But her parents did not do anything.



Adelaide Roncalli on her first Communion.

Adelaide then recovered, eagerly walked home and told her siblings, "Do not tell anybody, but I have just seen the Holy Virgin." Her younger sister, Palmina, however, told their parents about what had happened. They did not believe Adelaide and punished her. But the news spread like wildfire.

The Holy Virgin appeared to this very young girl, speaking in plain Bergamasco accent, over two successive periods: From 13 to 21 of May and, after one week of announced hiatus, from 28 to 31 of May. Most of the times, she was accompanied by St. Joseph and the Child Jesus, and a large part of the message received by Adelaide concerned the challenging time the Christian family was facing and on the importance of a faithful and honest life of the spouses as the key to a happy and virtuous life. The Holy Virgin also gave Adelaide some news about the war and the current times and predicted for her a troubled life, but for which She would compensate with eternal life in Paradise.

Poor Adelaide dearly paid for her visions of the celestial Mother. Due to the immense resonance of the Le Ghiaie facts, she was separated from her family and put into a religious boarding school for more than one year.

A priest (we will not disclose his name for mercy's sake) entrusted by the bishop of Bergamo to stay close to the girl and prepare the evidences for the oncoming trial, exerted all possible psychological and moral pressure on the girl and literally dictated to her the terrible abjure memo that the child finally wrote and signed: *"I am a liar I did not see the Holy Virgin and I made up the story myself."* Based on this forced confession, in 1948 the diocesan court of Bergamo ruled that there was no evidence of supernatural intervention at Le Ghiaie and forbade any type of Marian cult.

Adelaide spent the successive ten years wandering from one religious boarding school to another to keep her away from Le Ghiaie. Then at age 15, she entered the Sacramentine cloister as the Virgin had promised her. But after a few years of persistent gossip, and because she was held suspect when not in open hostility by the official Church and the other sisters, Adelaide was forced to quit the habit and returned to a secular life. She became a nurse, married, had children, lived in anonymity in Milan, and died in 2014. She disappeared from public life; and only in the late 1980s did she release a notarized declaration, in which she stated once and for all that she genuinely had had the apparitions of the Holy Virgin, in May 1944.

The Message

The apparitions occurred over 13 meetings, in which the Holy Virgin spoke of several subjects to Adelaide, including the then terrible war-conditions in Italy, fear for the life of the Holy Father who, at that time was made almost a prisoner in Rome by the German army. But without question the focus of the messages was on a few, core themes: Family, repentance and sanctification of suffering.

All the scholars that have studied the texts of the revelations to Adelaide are unanimous in understanding the three themes as being tightly interlinked, since the sins (THOSE SINS, as the Virgin told the seven-year-old girl) committed by mothers and fathers bring disruption to the family and open the door to sorrows and disgrace. Hence repentance from sins, a return to the sanctity of the family, and incessant prayer to restore disordered family life. It is also very notable that the last apparition of the first cycle (May 21) was purely a speechless vision which many analysts interpret as a fine theological sermon on the Christian family.

This was the vision: Adelaide saw the Holy Family sitting in a temple, together with some praying animals (a donkey, a dog, a sheep and a horse). All of sudden the horse left the temple through the wide-open door and began stomping a beautiful white lily field nearby. St. Joseph went for the horse and brought him back to the temple where he joined the praying group again. The horse is the father who is free (the temple is open) to destroy marital fidelity (the white lily): only the perseverance of prayer and the Christian life can sustain and keep the ordered life of the family. And yes, of course, according to the diocesan court this was the invention of a seven-year-old girl!

Well, you do not need to be an educated theologian to appreciate that the family-focused message of Le Ghiaie came right at the beginning of probably the very first period in the history of humanity when the destruction of the traditional family became a priority: Sexual revolution, divorce, abortion, homosexuality and its derivatives. It is to be remembered that the seer of Fatima, Lucia dos Santos, predicted that the last fight of the devil for the domination of the earth would be against the family.

The Miracles

As in all Marian events, the most glorious miracle of all generated by the apparition was the grand awakening of the people's faith. Just from May to July of 1944, a multitude estimated at 3 million (3

million!) flooded the crumbled roads and the precarious railroads of North Italy to Le Ghiaie, to pray at the place where Adelaide saw the Holy Virgin. The pilgrims asked for the safe return of sons and husbands from Russia, for the end of the civil war, for healing of diseases; but most of all they prayed for the conversion of their households.

We have positive evidence of all this because a lot of visitors wrote their prayers on small slips of paper and left them at the apparition spot. A few thousand of them were happily preserved by Don Cesare Vitali, then the parish priest of Le Ghiaie, and lately studied by Ermenegilda Poli who confirmed that two appeals to the Virgin predominate: Bring back my husband/son from the war and convert my father/husband/son to the true religion. The endless processions marched day and night to the tempo of rosary and Marian chants and it is recorded in the newspapers that the bystanders at café terraces stood up and took their hats off at the passage of the pilgrims.

Spring 1944 was a severe war-time period for the North of Italy, with daily air raids, aimed at destroying the heavy war industry, as well as the morale of the population by massive bombing of cities. Nothing happened to Le Ghiaie, nor to any of the pilgrims heading there, though once back home they had to suffer the raids of allied aircrafts. Several times airplanes were seen and heard above the crowd gathered to attend the apparitions, but no harm came to the people.

According to Mons. Vittorio Bonomelli, a priest who acted as allied intelligence during most of the war, the news of the apparition quickly spread among the allied forces and particular attention and instructions were given to the pilots operating in the sector. He also disclosed that the apparitions of the Virgin saved the city of Bergamo from a massive bombing the allied HQ had already planned, one of the few cities in North Italy to be spared from a common and terrible fate.

Miracles are frequently, if not always, associated with healing from chronic disease or deformity, and Le Ghiaie was no exception to the rule of Marian apparition. During the two cycles of apparitions and for the first months afterwards unexpected and inexplicable healings happened at a very frequent pace: paralytics stood up and left their wheelchairs or crutches; children with impaired hearing returned to hear, totally or partially blinds recovered the sight and a lot of other healings occurred to youngsters, adults and elders alike. Many of the priests that were present at the time reported this incredible season of grace in their diary with the word of Matthew 11, 4-5 "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."

Among the tens of reported and evidenced graces during the first period of Le Ghiaie, I wish to single out the story of Bianca Nicoletti, a young girl of five, suffering of Pott's disease, a tuberculosis of the spine, leading to the degeneration of the intervertebral joints and very often of the vertebrae. In 1944 there was very little chance to cure the disease; and the doctors of Udine treated the young girl with a cast back brace for her entire upper body, in the hope of a possible surgery when (and if) the girl turned 12.

In July 1944, her mother heard about the apparitions of the Virgin to Adelaide and decided to go there. Udine is approximately 200 miles from Le Ghiaie and mother and girl alone did the entire journey, travelling by railroad, in freight wagons when necessary. The girl could not walk, and the mother literally carried her for all the journey. And when the railroads were stopped because of the wreckage caused by air raids, they went by stealing passage on the few trucks that dared to defy the allied road bombing and strafing.

It took them some days, but eventually they made it to Le Ghiaie where, during a prayer session, the girl asked her mother to put her on the ground. The cast simply burst and she started walking, recovered forever. A lot of people witnessed the miracle, and all their records were collected, together with the incredible results of the new specialized medical examination back at home. The Holy Virgin had promised Adelaide that the pains of the infirm would always be compensated, if asked through prayers, perseverance and repentance of sins. The mother of Bianca is the perfect example of true devotion that leads to redemption.

Many observers see Le Ghiaie as the completion of the revelation of Fatima; and as at Fatima, thousands of people had the opportunity to appreciate the "sun dance" on May 21, at the occasion of the last apparition of the first cycle; and these people then left accurate records of the miracle of the sun, when it spun around fast, opaque white in color, which did not hurt the eyes to look at, and which radiated a light of many colors. The phenomenon was visible for ten minutes in many different places around Bergamo and was positively confirmed by the media of the time.

The Present

Despite the large quantity of evidence and the endless stream of pilgrims in the first ten years after the apparitions, the church is still denying the event and remains anchored to the extorted confession of a persecuted seven-year-old girl: "I am liar." As a matter of fact, a lot of eminent churchmen were fully

convinced of the truth of Le Ghiaie di Bonate, among them Pope St. John XXIII (who wrote a letter, stating that the confession of Adelaide was invalid from a canonical perspective). There was Blessed Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster, Archbishop of Milan, who sent Father Agostino Gemelli, a physician and psychologist and founder of the Catholic University of Milan, to examine Adelaide whom he found perfectly normal and unable to make up this story. And there was Pope St. John Paul II, who introduced in 1986, in the Litany of Loreto, the invocation to the Queen of Families.

All bishops of Bergamo, from the time of the event up to now, are firm believers of Le Ghiaie, though none of them had enough courage to start a revision of the 1948 trial. Nowadays, at Le Ghiaie, there is still the old, small chapel that was built before 1948, surrounded by a little gallery and a lot of trees and greenery. Recently in 2019, the bishop of Bergamo, Francesco Beschi, authorized the cult of Mary Queen of Families at the small chapel, where flocks of believers still come to implore the Mother of the Family.



Le Ghiaie di Bonate chapel today.

At the end of this incredible story, I guess the readers will share the same simple questions that haunt all believers of Le Ghiaie: Why such a perseverance in rejecting the evidence? Why deprive the People of God of the comforting company and motherly care of the Holy Virgin? I am sure there might be hundreds of good answers, starting with the current preference of the Church for pastoral issues rather than supernatural events, or of smelling "the smoke of Satan in the temple of God," as prophetically announced by Pope St. Paul VI. But I am not a theologian nor a cleric scholar. I am a believer and can

suggest a couple of insights.

Sometimes the devil's advocate wins the lawsuit, and in the case of Le Ghiaie this is particularly evident and true, when you look at the dramatic disruption that the family has endured over the last 50 years. The Virgin came to warn us about a terrible incumbent danger; but we simply shrugged our shoulders and went the easy way the devil had planned for us.



The faithful at Le Ghiaie di Bonate chapel.

No matter how powerful and formidable the intervention of heaven is, without man's cooperation, nothing can be achieved on earth in virtue of the supreme liberty God has awarded to us. And this brings to my mind the Gospel of Luke (16, 19-31) when the dead and condemned rich man asks Lazarus to go back to his brothers and warn them, and Abraham replies, "If they did not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Note: Most of this essay was outlined and meditated upon, on May 13, the anniversary of the first

apparition of the Virgin to Adelaide, while I was walking alone the 15 miles from my home to Le Ghiaie, to thank Our Lady Queen of the Families, for the unexpectedly fast and complete recovery of a very close friend of mine who had been struck by a life-threatening case of Covid.

Completed on May 26, Feast of Our Lady of the Fountain at Caravaggio.

Maurizio Mandelli is a businessman by trade and enthusiastic amateur scholar of local history and the arts. He has published two books (War of the Spanish Succession in Lombardy and The Italian Campaign of Napoleon III). He is a regular contributor to local magazines on religion, ethics, society, history and the arts.

The [featured image](#) shows, Our Lady of Le Ghiaie di Bonate. The painting of the Virgin in a red robe, with two grey doves in her hands, was made under the instruction of Adelaide herself.

