

**The Perfection of an Ordinary Life:  
The Story of St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother**

**Dianne K. Salerni**

## **Introduction**

It is difficult for young people in modern America to relate to the lives of the saints. When we think of saints, we often think of people who lived in foreign lands many centuries ago—people from the Middle Ages whose lives were so different from our own that we can hardly understand them.

St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother is an exception.

This young man lived in Italy less than two hundred years ago. Although that may seem like a long time, life in the mid-1800's had more in common with today than you might realize. Of course, they didn't have cars and planes, but they did have trains. They didn't have phones or computers, but they did have the telegraph. People all over the world were beginning to travel more easily and communicate more readily. It was the beginning of the technological age we enjoy today.

St. Gabriel did not grow up poor. His family was wealthy, and he was highly educated and given every advantage for success in his society. He was a young man who enjoyed reading novels, dancing, theater, and the company of pretty girls. It is said that he had a fondness for clothes and always took care to dress in the most fashionable style. In all these things, he was very like today's modern teenager.

He was also known for his serious devotion to prayer and contemplation. At a young age, Gabriel felt the calling to lead a religious life, but he did not make the decision lightly or quickly. He spent several years trying to make up his mind, and when he did decide to join a religious order, he had to overcome the strong objections of his father to do so. Once he joined the Passionists and took the name Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother, he devoted himself to a life of prayer and virtue. Although stricken in early adulthood with tuberculosis, the young man was known among his teachers and fellow students for his cheerful disposition and acceptance of God's will. There are some accounts that he may have performed a heroic deed in the last years of his life to save a village from a band of thieves, although most historians believe that this story is untrue or greatly exaggerated. Still, the young Passionist won the admiration of almost everyone he encountered. He died of tuberculosis before reaching the age of 24 and one year before he would have been ordained as a priest.

For all intents and purposes, St. Gabriel was a young man with a fairly ordinary life who distinguished himself by his good nature, his school studies, and his devotion to the Virgin Mary. One famous quote from this young saint is *Our perfection does not consist of doing extraordinary things but to do the ordinary well*. In this, St. Gabriel makes an admirable role model for young people today.

### **Early Life**

The child who would someday take the religious name of Gabriel was born March 1, 1838 in the town of Assisi in Italy. He was baptized Francis Possenti after St. Francis of Assisi, the 13<sup>th</sup> Century saint known as the patron of animals, the environment, and Italy. In fact, young Francis Possenti was baptized in the same font that was used to baptize St. Francis over 600 years earlier.

His parents were Sante and Agnes Possenti, and Francis was the eleventh of thirteen children born to this family. His father was a lawyer and an important government official. Soon after the birth of Francis, Sante Possenti was offered a position in Spoleto, a town in central Italy, and the family moved away from Assisi. Young Francis was well-loved by his parents and siblings and may even have been a bit spoiled! As a young child, he was known for his temper tantrums, which often flared up without warning; however, he was also known for the loving apologies he gave afterwards, which made him a family favorite.

Although the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a time of great technological advances, such as the telegraph and photography, the science of medicine was not very well developed and illness was a common cause of death. In 1842, young Francis lost a nine year-old sister, Adele, to a quick and serious illness, followed shortly by his mother, Agnes. He was only four years old.

After the death of his mother, Francis became devoted to his older sister Mary Louise, who, although only thirteen years old herself, acted as a substitute mother for the child. In addition, his father hired a governess named Pacifica to help raise the boy and his young siblings. There was also a tutor engaged to educate the boy, a cleric by the name of Philip Fabi. Together, Pacifica and Philip began the early education of young Francis Possenti. They found him to be a

lively and engaging student—and also sometimes a stubborn, disobedient, and willful one. It was lucky for Francis that he had learned the art of making a sincere apology! He had to use this skill often, and usually his charm and loving nature caused his family and his teachers to excuse and forgive his faults.

In 1851 at the age of twelve, Francis fell ill from a fever. Although the doctor assured his family that the illness was not serious, Francis did not believe it. He had seen his mother and sister die from such illness in a matter of days. Also, his brother Paul, a soldier, had died from food poisoning while far from home in 1848. Francis was certain that he, too, would die, and he prayed passionately for the Lord to save him, promising that he would enter a religious order and devote himself to God if his life were spared. Shortly thereafter, the boy recovered, and while he did not forget his promise, he did put it out of his mind for awhile.

As Francis grew into an adolescent, he was very popular among the youth of Spoleto. He had many friends, and they attended social events together and went hunting for small game for sport. Francis had a love of the theater, and he acted in many productions. He was an excellent dancer and a popular dance partner for the young ladies of the town. He had various minor romances, but when his father suggested that one of the girls would make a good wife, Francis disagreed. Even then, he knew that he was not headed in the direction of a secular life—he would not go into business, marry, and raise a family. Although he had not yet redeemed his promise, he always kept it in the back of his mind.

His social popularity earned Francis two nicknames among his friends: “the dancer” and “*il damerinō*” (the ladies’ man). His fondness for fashionable clothes won him a third nickname: “the dude.” Already a handsome young man, Francis made certain he was always well-dressed in the latest style. When his father decided he was old enough to wear a tall hat, Francis was quite proud of his new accessory—at least until his friends made fun of him and squashed the hat flat by smacking it with an open palm. Francis didn’t like this at all and later inserted a few pins through the top of the hat. The next boy to smack it flat was also the last one to do so!

Francis enjoyed hunting with his friends and was reportedly a good shot. However, one day when walking in the woods outside Spoleto, he tripped and his gun accidentally fired. The bullet grazed his head—it was a very near miss! The dangerous accident reminded Francis of the promise he had made, and once again he contemplated a life of religious devotion.

In the early months of 1853, the Possenti family experienced another, tragic loss. One of the oldest brothers, Lawrence, committed suicide after becoming involved in a scandal. The family was devastated, and later that year they were frightened again when Francis became very ill with a throat abscess. Once again, the young man was afraid that he would die ... and he was filled with guilt that he had never kept his promise. After a night of prayer, the danger passed, and Francis began to recover. As soon as he was strong enough, Francis applied to join the religious order of the Society of Jesus, also called the Jesuits.

Francis soon received a letter of acceptance and was invited to enter the Society as a novitiate, or novice, as soon as he had finished the school year and acquired the permission of his father. However, this was not so easy to obtain, for Sante Possenti believed Francis was too young to make such a decision. He did not approve of his son's interest and encouraged the boy to return to his social life among his friends. Perhaps Francis himself was not sure either, for he made no further effort to join the Jesuits and did nothing towards his vocation for two more years.

### **The Passionist**

In 1855, the town of Spoleto was stricken by an epidemic of cholera, a disease caused by contaminated drinking water. It was a frightening time, and many, many people died, including Mary Louise, the sister who had taken over the role of mother to Francis after the death of Agnes Possenti. Following his sister's death, Francis consulted about his vocation with a distantly related uncle who happened to be a Franciscan monk, and it is believed that he received some advice from this holy man on how to proceed.

In August of 1856, after the epidemic had finally passed, the citizens of Spoleto organized a religious procession, or parade, through town in order to give thanks to the Madonna for saving them from the disease. The ancient icon of the Virgin Mary from the Spoleto cathedral was paraded through the town as part of the celebration, and when this painting passed by Francis, who stood in the street to watch, he received a vision. Francis clearly saw the eyes of the Holy Mother look at him and heard her voice ask him why he had waited so long in the world when he was meant to take a religious life. This was enough of a sign for Francis.

Immediately, he went to see his priest, who was surprised to learn that Francis did not want to continue his application to join the Jesuits, but had instead decided that he more rightly belonged in the Passionist Congregation, a different religious order. Francis wished to become a Passionist and devote his life to the study of the Passion of Christ and the Sorrow of Mary. Passionists lived a life of solitude, poverty, and prayer. Through his own reflection, and possibly with the advice of the Franciscan uncle, the young man had finally decided what he wanted to do.

There were still obstacles to overcome—chiefly the objections of his father. Sante Possenti was very much opposed to Francis joining a religious order, and he argued long and hard against it. He even called upon various other relatives to visit Francis or write letters to the boy to dissuade him. Eventually, the relatives who were supposed to help discourage Francis turned to Sante and told him it was time to accept the boy's decision. Francis knew what he wanted; his vocation was real. He was not making a hasty decision, but fulfilling his dream.

In September of 1856, Francis entered the Passionist Novitiate at Morrovalle in western, central Italy. This was the place where novices would spend a year learning about the practices of the Passionists before taking their vows. Francis adapted very quickly to the life of a novice and was more certain than ever that he had found his proper place. The Passionists devoted themselves to the veneration of Christ's Passion—the physical, spiritual, and mental suffering of Jesus before and during his trial and execution. In addition, Francis dedicated special attention to the sorrows of the Holy Mother during her Son's crucifixion. A year later, in the fall of 1857, Francis took his vows in the Passionist Rite of Investiture and Profession. At this time, he took the religious name Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother.

At this time, Italy was not unified as the country we know today, but was instead composed of a collection of smaller territories, each with a different government. During the mid-1800's, a number of wars and revolutions took place across the country as various territories fought for power. Because of this violence, Gabriel and the other seminarians, or students for priesthood, were moved twice to continue their studies in a safer location. In July of 1859, they went to a retreat in the mountains of Gran Sasso, near the town of Isola.

There is a story about Gabriel that takes place during the time he lived at Gran Sasso that may or may not be true. According to this legend, Gabriel encountered a group of bandits who were taking advantage of the unrest in Italy to rob and terrorize innocent people. It may have

been a couple of bandits robbing people on a back road, or, in some versions of the story, it was a large group of bandits terrorizing the entire town of Isola. Supposedly, the unarmed young man was able to snatch a pair of pistols from one of the bandits. Gabriel warned the bandits to leave in peace, and when they laughed at the sight of a young seminarian brandishing pistols, he proved his deadly marksmanship by shooting a tiny lizard in the road with a single shot and frightened the bandits away.

It is a fun story, but probably not true. It appears in only one early biography of Gabriel, written by an author who admitted he made up parts of his book to make it more exciting. Additionally, there are contradictory details about where and when the incident took place. It is unlikely that a group of bandits would be so easily frightened away—and even more unlikely that the gentle Gabriel would have threatened them. There is also another reason why the story is probably untrue. At the time this incident supposedly happened, Gabriel was suffering from tuberculosis and was probably not out walking any place where he might have encountered bandits.

Early in 1861, Gabriel was diagnosed with tuberculosis, a deadly infection of the lungs that was common in that time period. It was almost always fatal. The young seminarian bravely faced his diagnosis, and for a long time he refused to excuse himself from any of his duties at the seminary. Eventually, his superiors had to forbid him engaging in any activities that would further weaken him. His fellow students waited upon him and nursed him and found him always to be in good spirits. He wrote letters to his family, knowing that they would probably be the last ones he would ever write. Young Gabriel died on February 27, 1862—a few days before his twenty-fourth birthday and before he'd had the opportunity to be ordained to the priesthood.

### **The Saint**

Gabriel's body was placed in a tomb in the Passionist Community church. Shortly thereafter, the Passionist order was forced to leave their monastery in Isola Gran Sasso. Revolutions in Italy had resulted in laws against the Church, and even religious orders committed to prayer and poverty were required to give up what property they had. The Passionists left their home in the mountains and did not return for thirty years.

About three decades after Gabriel's death, one of his fellow novices who was now a leader in the Passionist order, Reverend Francis Xavier Del Principe, began the process of applying with the Church for the beatification of his former companion. Beatification is a declaration made by the Church that a certain person was holy in life, blessed in Heaven, and thus worthy of religious honor. In 1892, religious investigators were sent to the church at Isola to identify the remains of Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother, the man born as Francis Possenti.

Although this investigation was supposed to be private, the religious authorities were surprised to find the local people of Isola waiting for them outside the church. These people had apparently been tending Gabriel's tomb for years, and they were afraid that the committee had come to take away the body of the young man they called "The Holy Religious." In spite of the fact that Gabriel had not lived among the community for more than a couple years and hardly ever left the seminary, he had gained a reputation among the people as a holy man. Therefore, the religious committee decided not to remove the bones of Gabriel from the church, but to simply re-inter him in a new tomb with appropriate honors.

In 1908, Pope St. Pius X beatified Gabriel, conferring on him the title "Blessed." One of his brothers, Michael Possenti, was present at the ceremony, as well as the priest who had served as Gabriel's mentor during his time with the Passionists. Two miracles were presented as evidence of Gabriel's blessedness: the unexplained healings of Mary Mazzarella, a young woman from Isola who recovered from an incurable case of tuberculosis, and Dominic Tiberi, who was cured of an inoperable hernia.

The canonization of Gabriel, in which he was officially declared a saint, was delayed by the outbreak of World War I and did not take place until 1920. The two specific miracles presented at his canonization were the healings of John Baptist Cerro and Aloysius Parisi, both crippled by illness or accident and unable to walk before the intercession of St. Gabriel. When Pope Benedict XV proclaimed Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother a saint, he also declared him the patron of Catholic youth, students, and young men studying for the priesthood.

## **His Legacy**

Today, millions of people visit the shrine of St. Gabriel in the Gran Sasso Mountains of Italy every year. It is a tradition for high school students of the region to visit his tomb 100 days before their expected graduation as they ready themselves for their final examinations. St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother is considered a positive role model for Catholic youths—a well-liked young man who loved all the social things that young people enjoy today, but who also understood the importance of self-discipline and reflection and devotion to the Lord and the Holy Mother. Even though he died at a tragically young age, St. Gabriel impressed everyone who encountered him with his gentle and pious nature, so much so that the people of Isola faithfully tended his tomb even after the Passionists were forced to abandon their monastery. Although St. Gabriel may not have performed extraordinary deeds in his lifetime, he lived a simple life extraordinarily well—and, in that, he sets an example for all of us, young and old.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. Look again at the quotation from St. Gabriel's writing that appears in the Introduction. Explain the meaning behind this quotation in your own words.
2. What qualities did St. Gabriel have as a young man that made him popular among his family and his peers?
3. What evidence do we have that St. Gabriel's vocation was not a passing fancy, but a true calling to a religious life?
4. How do you think St. Gabriel was finally able to overcome his father's objections to his vocation?

5. Why do you think St. Gabriel made such an impression on the people of Isola that they tended his tomb after the Passionists had left and objected to the idea of moving his remains to a new location?
  
6. What qualities of St. Gabriel are significant to our lives today?

### **Vocabulary**

**Beatification**– An official action by the pope in which a deceased person is declared to be enjoying the happiness of heaven and receives the title of “Blessed”

**Canonization**– An official action by the pope in which a deceased person is declared to be a saint and is placed in the official canons, or lists, of the saints

**Cholera** – An infectious and often fatal epidemic disease caused by contaminated water

**Franciscan** – A member of the religious order founded by St. Francis of Assisi

**Icon** – A religious painting, often displayed in a church

**Investiture**– The formal ceremony in which a novice receives the habit, or clothing, of a religious community

**Jesuit**– A member of the Society of Jesus, a religious order founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1534

**Monastery** – The place of residence of a religious community living in seclusion

**Novitiate** – A novice, or beginner, in a religious order

**Passion of Christ**-- The physical, spiritual, and mental suffering of Jesus Christ before and during his trial and execution

**Passionist**-- A member of the religious order founded by St. Paul of the Cross

**Saint** – A person of exceptional holiness in life, recognized through canonization by the Church

**Seminarian** – A student in a religious school studying for priesthood

**Tuberculosis**– An infectious disease of the lungs

**Veneration** – profound respect, admiration, and awe

**Vocation** – A divine call to God's service

The Author:

Dianne K. Salerni

We hear the Dead (Sourcebooks Fire, May 2010)

<http://www.diannesalerni.com>

<http://diannesalerni.blogspot.com/>