

OUR LADY OF THE ASSUMPTION
1908-2008



*S. Gabriele
dell'Addolorata*

SAINT GABRIEL OF OUR LADY
OF SORROWS



ave you ever wondered about the paintings on the ceiling of Our Lady of the Assumption Church? As a series of three large medallions, they represent religious figures whose significance dates back to the early days of the parish.

The paintings are the work of the well-known Philadelphia-based Italian painter, Mario Sgambati, who was commissioned by Father Francis Rauseo in 1950, when the church was undergoing major renovations.

In the center, largest and most imposing of the three, is the medallion depicting the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, patroness of the parish. The painting is modeled after a work of the Italian Renaissance painter, Guido Reni.

At the entrance of the church, close to the choir loft and organ, is the painting of Saint Cecilia, patroness of music and musicians. The choir formed in 1941 at Our Lady of the Assumption was called the Saint Cecilia Choir.

The front medallion, closest to the sanctuary, is probably the least known. It depicts a young man clothed all in black except for the insignia on his garments, his hands folded together. He is standing on a cloud, underneath which are two angels, one holding a stalk of lilies, the other a bouquet of roses. Each angel is looking down and dropping flowers. The young man's gaze is also directed downward. His body is surrounded by clouds that are ablaze with golden light, and a yellow halo encircles his head. On each side of him are small winged cherubim.

The lily indicates purity; the roses are a symbol of the Blessed Mother and of love; the insignia on the clothing identify the Passionist Order of religious; and the halo and heaven-like setting mark the young man as a saint.

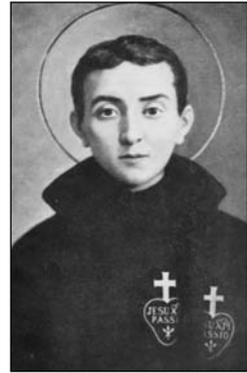
This, then, is a painting of the Italian saint, **San Gabriele dell'Addolorata**, known in English as Saint Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows (or Saint Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother). His placement so close to the sanctuary is a testament to the devotion and affection that the founders of the parish had for this saint. It is the purpose of this booklet to tell his story, and to reveal his special significance for Our Lady of the Assumption Parish.



BIOGRAPHY OF SAN GABRIELE DELL'ADDOLORATA

Francesco (Francis) Possenti was born into a large aristocratic family in Assisi, Italy, on March 1, 1838, the eleventh of thirteen children. Handsome, vivacious, and very popular—fond of dancing, fine clothes, and the theater—Francis led the carefree life of a cultured young man. He had several romantic involvements, and was almost engaged to a local girl.

“Our Lady was the principal motivation of Gabriel’s whole life. She began her work in him at Spoleto, accompanied him and continued her work in him while he was with the Passionists, and she brought this work to completion when she finally came to take him.”
(Father Norbert, Gabriel’s spiritual director)



His mother died when Francis was only four. After this, his father moved the family to Spoleto, where Francis spent his childhood. He studied first under the Christian Brothers and then the Jesuits, always excelling at his studies.

Twice during his childhood Francis fell seriously ill. Each time, he prayed that if he recovered he would enter the religious life; but each time, after his recovery, the promise was forgotten.

Growing up in a pious family, Francis would often pray at home before a *pietà* (a statue of Mary holding her dead Son) that had belonged to his mother. In 1855, the death of his sister, Maria Luisa, who had been like a second mother to him, affected Francis profoundly; he began to spend time in prayer before the image of Our Lady of Sorrows housed in the Cathedral of Spoleto.

(Continued on next page)



ne day, on August 22, 1856—the Friday within the Octave of the Feast of the Assumption—while he was participating in a procession of the ancient icon of Our Lady of Sorrows, it seemed to Francis that the Blessed Mother looked directly at him from the icon, and spoke to his heart: “Francis, you are not made for this world. Follow your vocation.”

From that moment, he was changed. Soon after—to everyone’s great surprise—he left his privileged life to join the Passionist novitiate.

He took his vows in the Passionist community on September 21, 1856—the feast day of Our Lady of Sorrows—taking the name *Gabriele dell’Addolorata*, Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows.

In 1859, he moved to the small isolated monastery of Isola del Gran Sasso, in the Teramo province of Abruzzo, where he became known for his great charity, and his all-consuming love for Mary and Christ Crucified. It was here that he succumbed to tuberculosis. Cheerful to the end, though racked with pain, he died, at the rising of the sun, on February 27, 1862. He died in the presence of the community, holding close an image of Our Lady of Sorrows, and smiling peacefully.

Gabriel was buried the day of his death. Four years later, the Passionists were forced to abandon the monastery, and the church where he lay buried went deserted for thirty years.

And then, in 1892, Gabriel’s fame exploded when his body was exhumated, and miracles began taking place at his tomb.

He was beatified on May 31, 1908, by Pope Pius X, and canonized on May 13, 1920, by Pope Benedict XV. His feast day is February 27.



Icon of Our Lady of Sorrows

“Gabriel ... experienced and showed that from the moment of the Incarnation, the coming of Christ, the Savior of all men and women, occurs through the mediation of his Mother; this was what God had willed.”

(Cingolani, Gabriele, C.P., Saint Gabriel Possenti, Passionist)



The Passionists

“The way of the Cross is the road which leads to Paradise; it is the sure way to holiness. The Passion of Christ is the greatest and most stupendous work of Divine Love.” (St. Paul of the Cross)

The Passionist Order was founded in Italy in 1747 by Paolo Francesco Danei, later known as Paul of the Cross. Early in life, he became convinced that the Passion of Christ was the most overwhelming sign of God’s love for us, as well as the surest way to heaven. He devoted his life to spreading this message, and to founding an order whose members would do the same.

The order became known officially as the *Congregazione della Passione di Gesù Cristo*, the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ. The members, called Passionists, were to live a penitential life, in solitude and poverty, contemplating the mystery of the Cross, and preaching missions to share this message of God’s infinite love revealed in the Passion of Jesus.

Because of the austerity of the order, it did not at first attract many young men. But this did not discourage Saint Paul of the Cross, who wrote that his main goal was to form "a man totally God-centered, totally apostolic, a man of prayer, detached from the world, from things, from himself so that he may in all truth be called a disciple of Jesus Christ."

Just such a young man was Francesco Possenti. Father Bompiani, his Jesuit director at college, reported, “At first, he was inclining to our Society... Then taken by the thought of doing penance, he turned his heart and thoughts to the Congregation of the Passionists.”

The Passionist Habit and Emblem

The Passionist habit consists of a black tunic and mantle, on which is placed on the left side, over the heart, the sign which Saint Paul of the Cross is said to have received in a vision: a heart surmounted by a white cross, and within the heart, the words, “*Jesu XPI Passio*,” the Passion of Jesus Christ. (The two words are in Latin, and the initials *XPI* are the first three letters of “Christ” in Greek.) At the base of the heart are three nails, which together with the cross above, are symbols of the suffering and death of Jesus.



"We pledge to keep deep in our hearts the memory of the Cross and to do what is in our power to remind others of it." (A Passionist Vow)



Saint Gabriel, Patron Saint of Young People

“In every event of his life he [Gabriel] is seen as a young man in love... All saints are people who are in love, because they are people who are fulfilled... Gabriel is the saint of love in its most intense phase. His life ended when love was still song and poetry. For this reason, although he is a saint for everyone, as are all the saints, he is in a special way the saint for young people.”
(Cingolani, Gabriele, C.P., *Saint Gabriel Possenti, Passionist*)

As a teenager, Francis Possenti led a seemingly full and happy life. Well-loved and accepted, he loved all beautiful things, and threw himself into the enjoyment of life, although never neglecting his Christian duties. He did everything wholeheartedly. He was eager to love, and give himself fully to what life had to offer. Married life and a promising career awaited him. And yet Francis felt as if something was missing. After the shock of the death of his sister, he began seeking a deeper meaning in his life, and spent much time praying for help. This is the moment when the Blessed Mother called him. He reacted as someone who has fallen in love. With his whole heart, he answered with a complete and unequivocal “yes.”

Francis joined the Passionists when he was 18, and he died at 24, before he could be ordained a priest. In 1926, six years after Saint Gabriel’s canonization, Pope Pius XI chose him to be patron saint of young people, as well as students and those studying for the priesthood.

Saint Gabriel’s burial place at Gran Sasso is now a shrine, one of the most popular in Italy and in Europe, especially for young people. Each year in March, 10,000 students flock to his shrine 100 days before their final exams. Each August the *Tendopoli*, or Tent Festival, brings in thousands of teenagers from all over Italy, who camp at the shrine for four days of lively religious meetings, prayer, and testimony.



*Shrine of Saint Gabriel
Gran Sasso, Teramo*

“Quel ragazzo ha lavorato col cuore.”
(What that boy did, he did with his whole heart.) (Father Norbert, *Gabriel’s spiritual director*)



Saint Gabriel, Patron Saint of Abruzzo



abriel had been less than six years with the Passionists, and he died even before becoming a priest. He had led a simple life, and few people outside of Gran Sasso even knew him. It took six months before news of his death reached the Passionist house in Rome. To them, he was an insignificant novice.

But the people close to him remembered him: his fellow Passionists, and the townspeople. He had been an ordinary person like themselves, and yet had achieved extraordinary spiritual virtues. He had shown them a heart totally devoted to the Blessed Mother, and they felt close to a saint who loved Mary as they did.

Throughout Teramo, word of the saintliness of his life quickly spread, and the people began devotions to him. In 1891, during his canonization proceedings, a committee was sent to examine his remains, and the first miracle attributed to him occurred. When the committee tried to remove his body, the people surrounded the town, and blocked the exit roads. “Their” Gabriel would remain in their midst. Two years later, the Passionists were allowed to return to the monastery, and took on the task of caring for his tomb.

Today, Saint Gabriel’s shrine at Gran Sasso, Teramo, attracts more than two million pilgrims each year, and numerous miracles have taken place there.

Pope John XXIII acknowledged this special devotion of the Teramo region to Saint Gabriel by naming him, in 1959, the patron saint of all Abruzzo.

“Gabriel would contemplate Christ’s Passion as it was reflected in the heart of Mary; he would place himself in Mary’s heart... Looking upon the Crucified Lord with the heart and from within the heart of His Mother, he would also feel Mary’s pain.”
(Bernard Silvestrelli, a fellow novice)



San Gabriele dell'Addolorata and Our Lady of the Assumption

1908

Italy

Beatification of *Gabriele dell'Addolorata*.

Strafford

Founding of Our Lady of the Assumption Parish and blessing of its first home, the wooden chapel.

1920

Italy

Canonization of *San Gabriele dell'Addolorata*

Strafford

Donation of the sum of \$2300 by an unknown donor toward the church building fund. This paved the way for Our Lady of the Assumption, a very poor parish, to receive permission to build a new stone church to replace the old wooden chapel. The cornerstone for the new church was laid the next year.



When the Italians first came to settle in the Strafford area, they brought with them their language, their customs, and their religion. For these immigrants from Abruzzo, their devotion to *San Gabriele dell'Addolorata* was an important part of their spiritual life.

Father Scialabba, despite his Sicilian origins, grew very close to his *Abruzzesi* parishioners, and adopted their traditions as his own. He acknowledged their great love for *San Gabriele* by giving prominent place, in a niche in the side altar of the church, to a large statue of this saint. In addition, he established in 1926, six years after the saint's canonization, the *Società San Gabriele*, the Saint Gabriel Society.



The Saint Gabriel Society



Banner of Saint Gabriel Society

First formed in 1926 by Father Scialabba, the Saint Gabriel Society was reported to consist of “about one hundred prominent members of the parish.” Its first officers were Antonio DiDomenico, president; Joseph DiSolis, secretary; and Vincenzo D’Ascentiis, treasurer. The purpose of the society was to collect money for funeral benefits for members, and to plan the annual celebration in honor of Saint Gabriel.

Newspaper accounts show that Saint Gabriel feast day celebrations took place yearly, in late summer, between 1926 and 1940. The festivities included a Solemn High Mass, a parade, band concert, and fireworks.

In 1939 and 1940, according to *Suburban & Wayne Times* articles, a new feature was added: the “Application of the Relic of St. Gabriel.” This was the practice by which the saint’s relic was displayed so that people could approach it, and possibly touch it, for healing or intercession. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to determine the origin or the fate of the relic used at Our Lady of the Assumption.

The last reported occurrence of the feast was in 1940; it was most likely brought to an end by the WWII draft. Significantly, at this feast, the committee was headed by women: Mrs. Benedetto Amodei, Mrs. Antonio DiDomenico, Mrs. Frank Donatoni, and Mrs. Sabatino Gentile. Other members of the committee were John Donatoni, Frederick D’Addezio, James Manenti, and Emidio Novelli.



About the Artist, Mario Sgambati



Mario Sgambati was born in Naples, Italy, on January 28, 1899, to Dr. Pasquale Sgambati and Angelina Mollica. He won a scholarship to study engineering at the Industrial School in Avellino, Italy, but soon transferred to the Academy of Fine Arts, Naples, to pursue his love of painting.



Sgambati was heir to the tradition of the modern Neapolitan School of painting begun by Domenico Morelli (1823-1901), who was considered the foremost artist of Italy in the late 1800s. Morelli's top pupil was Vincenzo Volpe (1855-1929). Sgambati studied for seven years under Volpe, who was then president of the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples. The Neapolitan School is characterized by its use of brilliant color, and its bold rendering of light and dark. Both Morelli and Volpe in their later years specialized in sacred art.

Sgambati immigrated to the United States in 1922, first settling in Florida, where he taught geometry at a high school in Tampa. While thus employed, he was commissioned to do some works of art at the Ringling Mansion in Sarasota, Florida. From 1929, he began to devote all his attention to painting, specializing in ecclesiastical work. He moved to Philadelphia, and established a studio, first in his home, and then at 700 Washington Square. In 1934, he married Theresa Perfetti, and they raised a family of four girls.

Sgambati did mainly religious works, but was also sought after for portrait painting. Emanuel Utti, who apprenticed with Sgambati for seven years in the 1940s, remembers him very fondly: "He was a brilliant man...well-spoken, a beautiful man, a gentleman in every sense of the word."

According to Utti, who cleaned and restored the paintings in the 1980s under Father Daniel Pirolli, (and is himself a noted ecclesiastical painter continuing in the tradition of Sgambati), the scenes were not painted directly on the ceiling, but were done on an actual-size canvas in the artist's studio. Then, the finished canvas was applied to the ceiling with paste, and a decorative frame was painted around the edges.

Other works by Mario Sgambati can be seen in churches around the Philadelphia area, including Saint Mary Magdalen de Pazzi, Our Lady of Angels, Saint Donato's, and Saint Lucy's, all in Philadelphia; and Saints Cosmas and Damian in Conshohocken. In addition, his work can be found in other locations, such as the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC.

Mario Sgambati died on May 22, 1969, at the age of 70, having spent forty years at his art.



Gabriel's Resolutions

On his path to holiness, Gabriel dealt with personal challenges by formulating resolutions for himself. He eventually wrote up 41 resolutions, some of which are:

I will receive all things from the hand of God, as being sent by Him for my own personal benefit.

"Faithfulness in little things" is the motto I will always follow in my effort to reach holiness.

I will try to reproduce in myself whatever I see edifying and virtuous in the conduct of others.

I will give to God the best that I have – the entire affection of my heart.

Quotations from the letters and writings of St. Gabriel

"Love Mary! ... She is lovable, faithful, constant. She will never let herself be outdone in love ... She does not look to see what kind of person you have been. She simply comes to a heart that wants to love her. She comes quickly and opens her merciful heart to you, embraces you, and consoles and serves you. She will even be at hand to accompany you on the trip to eternity." (letter to his brother)

"La mia vita è una continua gioia ... La contentezza che io provo è quasi indicibile ... Non cambierei un quarto d'ora di questa vita." (My life is a continuous delight ... The happiness that I feel is almost inexpressible ... I would not change one quarter hour of this life.) (letter to his father)

"Mary, dear Mother of mine, come fast!" (on his deathbed)

Acknowledgements

Cingolani, Gabriele, CP, Saint Gabriel Possenti, Passionist: A Young Man in Love
Poage, Godfrey, CP, Son of the Passion: The Story of Gabriel Francis Possenti
www.passionist.org www.regione.abruzzo.it www.stgabrielwordpress.com

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Preghiera a S. Gabriele Dell'Addolorata

O beato S. Gabriele, Iddio ti ha ispirato ad amare la Passione di Gesù, com'era riflesso nel cuore di Maria, Sua madre. Al suo canto, eri sotto la croce di Gesù, mirandolo e dividendo con lei, la sua compassione.

O S. Gabriele, speriamo, come te, di crescere in amore di Dio e di tutto il suo popolo. Ricordaci nelle nostre tribulazioni della vita. Ricordati anzitutto dei giovani e dei bisognosi.

*Aiutaci nei nostri giorni, con le tue sante preghiere.
E alla fine della nostra vita, possiamo raggiungerci in cielo
nella beata compagnia di Gesù e Maria.
Così sia.*

Prayer to St. Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows

O good St. Gabriel, God inspired you to love the passion of Jesus, as it was reflected in the heart of Mary, His mother. By her side, you stood beneath the cross of Jesus, gazing on Him as she did, and sharing her compassion.

O St. Gabriel, we wish, like you, to grow in love for God and all his people. Remember us in the trials of our life. Remember especially those who are young and in need.

*Support us, all our days, by your holy prayers.
And when this life is done, may we join you in heaven
in the joyful company of Jesus and Mary.
Amen.*

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