

FROM FR. JASON



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On Monday, December 15, the Church, in the heart of Advent, puts before us a woman who is a living catechesis of what it means to be seized by the love of Christ and to respond to it. Her name is St. Paula Francesca Maria di Rosa – known to history as Mother Maria Crocifissa di Rosa – foundress of the Handmaids of Charity of Brescia. She is a saint of our time, a woman of the 19th century who speaks powerfully to the men and women of the 21st. Let us look at her life as the Lord looked at it, with eyes of mercy and election.

She was born in 1813 into one of the wealthiest and most noble families of Brescia. Beautiful, intelligent, refined, with a lively character and a

passionate temperament. At twenty years old she was the queen of society: dances, concerts, receptions, suitors lined up at her door. Everyone said: “This girl will make a brilliant marriage.” Even her own mother had already chosen the fiancé. But the Lord had another plan.

In 1836 a terrible cholera epidemic struck northern Italy. In a few weeks Brescia became a city of the dead and the dying. The hospitals overflowed; the sick lay abandoned on the floors, in corridors, in the streets. The stench of death was everywhere. Most people fled or locked themselves in their homes. Not Paula. One morning she heard the desperate cry of those poor people and, without thinking twice, she crossed the threshold of the hospital of San Clemente – a place no “respectable” young lady would ever enter. She rolled up her sleeves, cut her long hair so it would not get in the way, and began to wash pus, change bandages, hold the hands of the dying, close the eyes of the dead, and bury them with her own hands.

When her terrified mother came looking for her and said, “Paula, come home! This is not work for you!” she answered with astonishing freedom: “Mother, these sick people are my family now. Jesus has called me here.” From that moment she no longer belonged to herself. She belonged to the Crucified One whom she had recognized in the poorest of the poor.

A few years later, in 1840, at only 27 years old, she founded the Handmaids of Charity. She wanted her sisters to be women completely given, without dowry, without social distinction, available day and night, ready to go wherever misery called. Her motto was simple and tremendous: “The love of Christ urges us.” She repeated to her sisters: “We must love the poor with the heart of Jesus, with tenderness and without measure. If we have to choose between liturgy and a sick person who needs us, let us leave the choir and run to the sick person: charity is the supreme liturgy.”

She herself lived what she preached. During the Ten Days of Brescia in 1849, when the city rose up against the Austrian occupiers, the hospital became a battlefield. Cannonballs fell on the roof, the wounded arrived by the hundreds. Maria Crocifissa never abandoned her post. She went out into the streets under the bullets to pick up the wounded – Italians and Austrians alike – because for her every man was a brother for whom Christ died.

She died at only 42 years old, exhausted from love, on December 15, 1855. At her funeral the entire city of Brescia – nobles, workers, priests, and above all the poor – wept as if they had lost a mother. And she truly had been a mother. **Why does the Lord place this woman before us today, in this Advent of 2025?** Because the cholera of our time is no longer only a bacterium. It is loneliness, despair, addiction, the culture of death, the rejection of life, the silence of God that many experience. The dying are no longer only in the hospitals; they are in our apartment buildings, in our families, in our own parishes. They are the brother who no longer comes to Mass, the young person who has lost meaning, the elderly person abandoned in a nursing home.

Come, St. Maria Crocifissa di Rosa, teach us to love as you loved. Make us mad with the madness of the Cross, so that the world may believe that Jesus is alive and that He still passes by doing good today through poor sinners like us.

Peace,