



Blood, Milk, and Family:

Foundations of the Spirituality of Southern Italians and Sicilians

Rev. Cav. William Rock, FSSP



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In *The Madonna of 115th Street*, an anthropological treatment of the devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel by the immigrants from the Mezzogiorno in Italian Harlem, the author, Robert Orsi, treats scientifically the way of life, experiences, and beliefs of the devotees during the years of 1880 to 1950.

Early on in his work, he explores the concept of the *domus* which was “at once the building” where the family resided and carried out its traditions and rituals, “and [the] family” itself.¹ It was, moreover, “the chief unit of social relationship and cultural transmission.”²

He goes on to explain that blood bonding was an important element in the forming of the *domus*.

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With regard to the Southern Italians who immigrated to the United States in the late 1800's, Orsi recounts that:

Many in the first generation believed that a mother's blood was mixed in with the milk her child suckled. This blood-sharing was thought to be the **essential foundation of personal identity and morality** [emphasis added]. "Blood" was the symbol of this deepest intimacy: it was the spiritual expression of value placed on family solidarity and loyalty in the domus-centered society...There were a number of levels to this blood unity. It referred, first of all, to the blood-bond existing between mother and child, the essential blood tie; it also meant the special bonds that exist among siblings: the brother-sister relationship or the brother-brother relationship was thought to be closer than the father-son or father-daughter relationship because brothers and sisters were of the same blood, had suckled their mother's blood. But a blood-bond was also thought to exist among Italians.³



Italian immigrant family on ferry, leaving Ellis Island. Photo by Lewis Wickes Hines.
Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2022653374.

One's blood bonds and membership in a *domus* were fundamental to one's identity and moral life. Unfortunately, as the work explained, there were negative elements which arose in such a *domus* and blood-bond centered culture. For example, an over emphasis on the blood bond could lead to an almost ignoring of the father's part in the generation of his children and his being regarded as a second-class member within the *domus* compared to the mother and children.

Not only did the *domus* and blood bonding have fundamental roles in Southern Italian and Sicilian culture, but they also had fundamental roles in the religious understanding and practice of these peoples as well. As Mr. Orsi also wrote: "Son and mother, brother and sister were bound by deep ties of blood, and so were the human and the divine."⁴ There was a mutual influence between Christianity, on the one hand, and the cultural foundations of the *domus* and blood bonding, on the other. Christianity spiritually elevated and provided a needed moral correction to the associated negative elements, while the *domus* and blood bonding became the means by which Christianity was interpreted and lived. The result was a Christianization of the *domus* and blood bonding in which they were purified and elevated from the natural and domestic to the supernatural and ecclesiastical. This purification and elevation reveal the essential and foundational elements of Southern Italian and Sicilian Christian spirituality, Christian morality, and Christian identity – a spirituality, morality, and identity base, as it were, on blood, milk, and family.

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It is true that it is by the grace of Baptism, merited for us by the Blood of Christ, that one becomes a Christian, becomes an adoptive child of God, and becomes a member of the Church, the *domus* as it were, of God. But one must remember that every grace one receives comes also from Mary, the Mediatrix of All Graces, both by her offering of her Son on the Cross as Co-redemptrix and by her unceasing intercession before the Throne of God in Heaven.⁵ So, while the graces which make one a child of God and part of His *domus* are from the Blood of Christ, they are also, as it were, processed by and through Mary in a similar way as the blood of the mother, it was thought, would be with the milk given to her child. The dilemma, attributed to St. Augustine,⁶ of being unable to decide whether to receive nourishment from the Blood flowing from the wound on Christ's side or from Mary's milk is thus solved in that the Blood of the wound of the Son is processed and provided by the Mother. Thus, it is that all Christians are part of the *domus* of God and siblings with each other through a blood bond and, in a certain way, a milk bond as well.

In such a spirituality, God and the Saints are as close as one's relatives, the veil between the here and the hereafter is thin. In this bond of blood, milk, and family there is a closeness, familiarity, and intimacy between the believer, on the one hand, and God, the saints, and other Christians on the other. But this is an intimacy necessarily measured by the *rispetto*, respect, now Christianized, which is expected in the *domus*. An elevated respect must be shown first to God and to Christ, and then to Mary, and then to the Saints according to their place in the Divine *domus*. And just as one acts in such a way so as not to bring *vergogna*, shame or dishonor, on the family, on the *domus*, so does one follow Christian morality so as not to bring *vergogna* on the Divine Household, so as not to betray the blood-milk-family bond one has with his supernatural mother, the Madonna, and his supernatural bother, Christ, and his follow siblings of the Divine *domus*. Sin is not viewed as a personal affair, but one which involves, in harmony with Scripture and Divine Revelation (see, for example, 1 Cor 12:26-27), all members of the Mystical Body.

All of this taken together, then, reveals the foundational expression of one's Christian identity. I am a Christian because I am the child of the Madonna and the sibling of Christ.



Saint Augustine hesitating between the wounds of Christ and the milk of the Virgin
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References

1. Orsi, Robert A. *The Madonna of 115th Street – Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (3rd ed.). (New Haven: Tale Nota Bene, 2002), p. lxiv, quoting Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
5. See Ott, Ludwig. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. Trans. Lynch Patrick. Edited by Bastible, James. Updated by Fastiggi, Robert. (Baronius Press, 2018), pp. 228-232.
6. *Patrologia Latina* 36, 827

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Prayer to St. John Bosco

Father and Teacher of Youth

Feast Day: January 31st



Bosco in 1880

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O glorious Saint John Bosco, who in order to lead young people to the feet of the divine Master and to mold them in the light of faith and Christian morality didst heroically sacrifice thyself to the very end of thy life and didst set up a proper religious Institute destined to endure and to bring to the farthest boundaries of the earth thy glorious work, obtain also for us from Our Lord a holy love for young people who are exposed to so many seductions in order that we may generously spend ourselves in supporting them against the snares of the devil, in keeping them safe from the dangers of the world, and in guiding them, pure and holy, in the path that leads to God. Amen.

O glorioso san Giovanni Bosco, che per condurre la gioventù ai piedi del divino Maestro e formarla alla luce della fede e della morale cristiana vi siete eroicamente sacrificato fino al tramonto di vostra vita ed avete fondato un apposito Istituto destinato a continuare e ad estendere fino agli estremi confini della terra la nobilissima opera vostra, ottenete anche a noi dal Signore un santo amore per la giovinezza esposta a tante seduzioni e fate che ci prodighiamo generosamente per sostenerla contro le insidie del demonio, per preservarla dai pericoli del mondo ed avviarla, pia e pura, sul sentiero che la conduce a Dio. Amen.

Born: **August 16, 1815 - Castelnuovo d'Asti**

Died: **January 31, 1888 - Torino**

Canonized: **April 1, 1934 by Pope Pius XI**

Major Shrine: **Basilica di Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, Torino**

Patron Saint of: **YOUNG PEOPLE** (especially boys, abandoned, troubled, or delinquent youth), **APPRENTICES, EDITORS, PUBLISHERS, EDUCATORS**, and **STAGE MAGICIANS/ENTERTAINERS** (as he used acrobatics, juggling, and simple illusions with ropes and coins to attract crowds of street children and teach them truths about God and the Faith).

He dedicated his life to the care and education of disadvantaged and delinquent youth developing teaching methods based on reason, religion, and loving kindness, which became known as the Salesian Preventive System.

The Prophetic Vision of St. John Bosco: The Two Columns

Gretchen Filz

January 31st is the feast day of St. John Bosco. John Bosco (also called Don Bosco) was a Catholic priest who lived in Italy in the 19th century. He is most famous for his work with troubled, city-dwelling male youth who became disenfranchised following the Industrial Revolution, and who often ended up living a life of petty crime.

Fr. Bosco formed a club of sorts for these boys called the "Oratory". He catechized them in the faith and instructed them along the path of virtue, often using sports as a teaching tool. The small band of boys eventually grew to 700. After facing many obstacles, John Bosco eventually founded the Salesian Society, named after St. Francis de Sales, which saw to the founding of Salesian Homes for boys where they could live and be educated.

St. John Bosco was perhaps so dedicated to his task because of a dream he had about his life's work. St. Bosco dreamed of a prison filled with young boys which caused him much distress. He wrote of the dream:

"To see so many boys, from 12 to 18 years of age, all healthy, strong, intelligent, insect bitten, lacking spiritual and material food, was something that horrified me I must by any available means prevent boys ending up here."



Syrio, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

In his dream, when some of these boys were abused for their crimes, he heard it said to him, "Not with blows, but with charity and gentleness must you draw these friends to the path of virtue." St. Bosco took this dream as his life's mission.

At the time of Don Bosco's death in 1888 there were 250 homes for boys founded by the Salesian Society containing 130,000 children; of these, over 6,000 became priests. The [Salesian Society](#) still exists today and is the second largest religious order in the world, continuing St. Bosco's mission of helping and educating poor and disenfranchised youth.

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The Prophecy of the Two Columns

St. Don Bosco is also known for his many prophetic dreams which you can read about [here](#). His most famous dream regards future troubles for the Church and is known as the Prophecy of the Two Columns. In his words, here is the dream:

"Try to picture yourselves with me on the seashore, or, better still, on an outlying cliff with no other land in sight. The vast expanse of water is covered with a formidable array of ships in battle formation, prows fitted with sharp spear-like beaks capable of breaking through any defense. All are heavily armed with cannons, incendiary bombs, and firearms of all sorts - even books - and are heading toward one stately ship, mightier than them all. As they try to close in, they try to ram it, set it afire, and cripple it as much as possible.

This stately vessel is shielded by a flotilla escort. Winds and waves are with the enemy. In this midst of this endless sea, two solid columns, a short distance apart, soar high into the sky: one is surmounted by a statue of the Immaculate Virgin at whose feet a large inscription reads: Help of Christians; the other, far loftier and sturdier, supports a [Communion] Host of proportionate size and bears beneath it the inscription Salvation of believers.

The flagship commander - the Roman Pontiff [the Pope]- seeing the enemy's fury and his auxiliary ships very grave predicament, summons his captains to a conference. However, as they discuss their strategy, a furious storm breaks out and they must return to their ships. When the storm abates, the Pope again summons his captains as the flagship keeps on its course. But the storm rages again. Standing at the helm, the Pope strains every muscle to steer his ship between the two columns from whose summits hang many anchors and strong hooks linked to chains.



The entire enemy fleet closes in to intercept and sink the flagship at all costs. They bombard it with everything they have: books and pamphlets, incendiary bombs, firearms, cannons. The battle rages ever more furious. Beaked prows ram the flagship again and again, but to no avail, as, unscathed and undaunted, it keeps on its course. At times a formidable ram splinters a gaping hole into its hull, but, immediately, a breeze from the two columns instantly seals the gash.

Meanwhile, enemy cannons blow up, firearms and beaks fall to pieces, ships crack up and sink to the bottom. In blind fury the enemy takes to hand-to-hand combat, cursing and blaspheming. Suddenly the Pope falls, seriously wounded. He is instantly helped up but, struck down a second time, dies. A shout of victory rises from the enemy and wild rejoicing sweeps their ships. But no sooner is the Pope dead than another takes his place. The captains of the auxiliary ships elected him so quickly that the news of the Pope's death coincides with that of his successor's election. The enemy's self-assurance wanes.

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Breaking through all resistance, the new Pope steers his ship safely between the two columns and moors it to the two columns; first to the one surmounted by the Host, and then to the other, topped by the statue of the Virgin. At this point something unexpected happens. The enemy ships panic and disperse, colliding with and scuttling each other. Some auxiliary ships which had gallantly fought alongside their flagship are the first to tie up at the two columns.

Many others, which had fearfully kept far away from the fight, stand still, cautiously waiting until the wrecked enemy ships vanish under the waves. Then, they too head for the two columns, tie up at the swinging hooks, and ride safe and tranquil beside their flagship. A great calm now covers the sea."

And in conclusion to this dream:

"Very grave trials await the Church. What we have suffered so far is almost nothing compared to what is going to happen. The enemies of the Church are symbolized by the ships which strive their utmost to sink the flagship. Only two things can save us in such a grave hour: devotion to Mary and frequent Communion. Let us do our very best to use these two means and have others use them everywhere."

Many interpret John Bosco's vision as regarding the trials the Church has endured, and is continuing to endure, at the dawn of the third millennium; namely, rampant secularism and apostasy which has led to attacks against the Church and Her teachings.

St. Don Bosco, pray for us!

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Main Altar at the Basilica di Santa Maria Ausiliatrice (Torino), the major shrine of St. John Bosco.

Fuoco E Gioia

A Bite of Catechism

What is a Holy Day of Obligation ?

A Holy Day of Obligation is a solemn feast on which the Catholic Church requires the faithful to participate in the Mass, just as they are required to do on Sundays.

“On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass.”

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, **2180**

2026 Holy Days of Obligation (per USCCB)

- Thursday, January 1, 2026 – Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God
- Thursday, May 14, 2026 – Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord
- Saturday, August 15, 2026 – Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
- Sunday, November 1, 2026 – Solemnity of All Saints
- Tuesday, December 8, 2026 – Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary
- Friday, December 25, 2026 – Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

Note: Always check your local diocesan calendar. In the United States, the obligation may be suppressed or transferred depending on the day the solemnity falls. In 2026, All Saints falls on a Sunday, the Assumption may not be obligatory when it falls on a Saturday, and the obligation for the Ascension varies by ecclesiastical province.

Fraternal Head's Up

A venial sin wounds our relationship with God. A mortal sin severs our relationship with God. To deliberately miss Sunday Mass or a Holy Day of Obligation, without a serious reason, is grave matter and can constitute a mortal sin when done with full knowledge and deliberate consent.

“Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.”

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, **2181**

Interesting Note

Attending Mass on Ash Wednesday is strongly encouraged, but it is not a Holy Day of Obligation.

Takeaway

Do not miss Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation.



[Elevation of the Host by Simone Martini in Assisi, c. 1325, with elevation candle](#) / Public Domain

Per i Più Piccoli

An Excerpt from *Our Friend, St. Anthony the Abbot*

This book includes a foreword by Reverend Ernest G. Rush of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Lyndhurst, NJ.

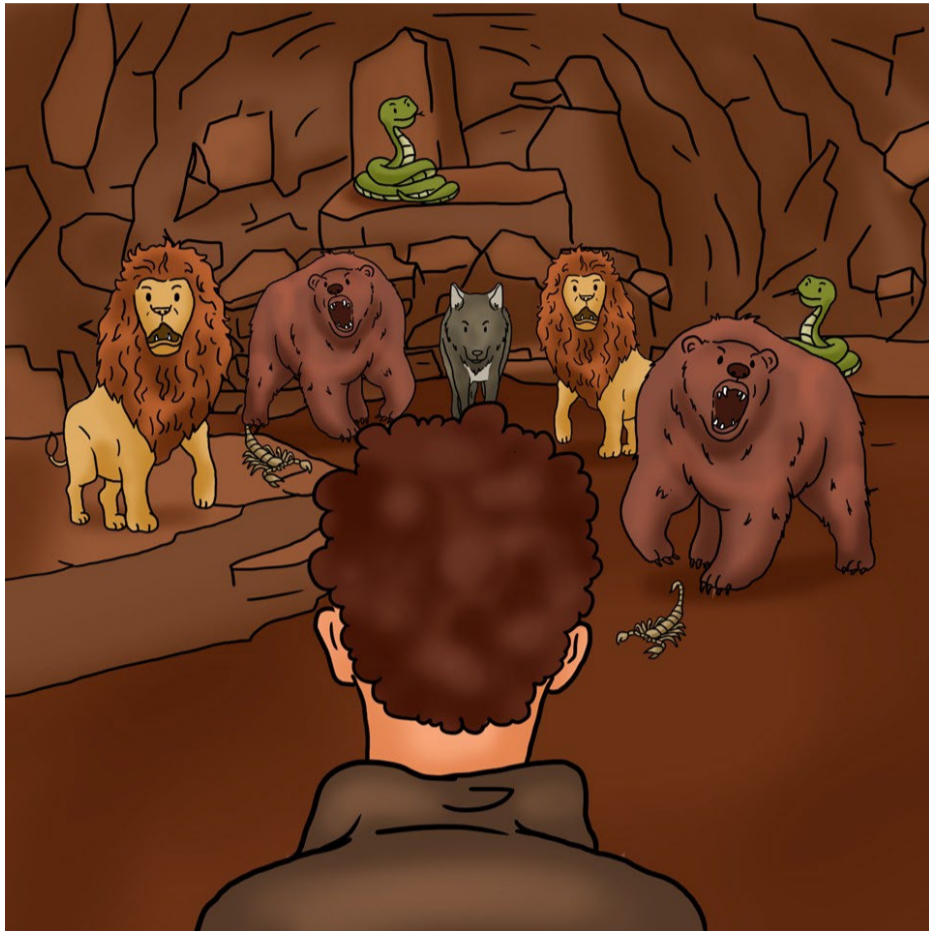


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The devil sent many beasts to scare Anthony. But Anthony knew there was nothing to fear! He knew that if the devil had any power, only one beast would have been needed.

Anthony challenged the beasts to attack if they had any power. Anthony declared, "Faith in Our Lord is a seal and a wall of safety!"

