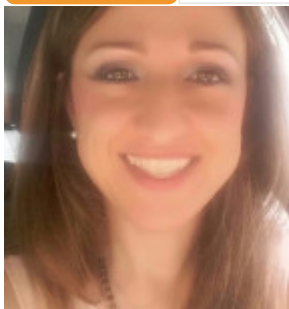


ITALY

'My friend Pierina Gilli and the miracles of Mary, Mystical Rose'

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"For the glory of my Mother Mary in Montichiari, I have chosen this Religious Order of Don Orione in my plans," said Jesus to Pierina Gilli (1911–1991), the Montichiari visionary, on 14 July 1980. During the apparition on 24 March 1983, Pierina saw Our

Lady surrounded by Don Orione priests. During this period, they supported the apparitions by taking care of the chapel of Fontanelle di Montichiari and the pilgrims. Among them was Don Bruno Libralesso, who is now the spiritual animator of Don Orione's Piccolo Cottolengo in Seregno.

The priest recounted his friendship with the visionary to the *Daily Compass* just over a year after the Diocese of Brescia, in agreement with the Vatican, granted *nihil obstat* to the devotion to Mary, Mystical Rose and Mother of the Church. This devotion is linked to the *apparitions* (still unrecognised) that Pierina experienced from 1944 onwards, which often referred to the Orionines towards the end, encouraging them to protect the sanctuary. The religious themselves then had to leave the area in obedience to the Brescia Curia, which was hostile towards the events at the time.

Don Bruno when did you frequent Pierina Gilli?

During the years when I was a vocational counsellor at the Orionine seminary in nearby Botticino Sera, from 1977 to 1983. Pierina gave me a book entitled *Maria Rosa Mistica*, published by Propaganda Mariana, full of the descriptions of miracles, which he shows with the special dedication she wrote for him. I visited her almost daily, noting down the many prodigious events that she told me about, as well as those that I witnessed while documenting the flow of pilgrims to Montichiari. Years ago, there was only a chapel near the miraculous water source indicated by the Virgin Mary. All the documents relating to the miracles were taken to the mill near the chapel, where there was a room dedicated to their safekeeping. However, the Curia then decided to send us away, despite the fact that Our Lady had asked for a charity to be set up — a home for the suffering — near the sanctuary that was to be built with five domes, according to her instructions.

Was there something special about Pierina?

She combined simplicity, humility and patience with holy shrewdness. For example, she once told me that, as a group of pilgrims were leaving the chapel, two of them had stopped her to ask what the bishop's attitude was towards her and the apparitions. With her genuine smile, she replied: 'I respect journalists. I pray for them, but I don't give interviews'. It turned out that the two were indeed journalists, and Our Lady had inspired her to remain silent.

What miracles did the visionary share with you?

One evening, I went to see her, and she confided in me about an engineer and professor from Pavia who had fought against religion for many years. He urged his students not to believe priests' nonsense because, he said, God and Our Lady do not exist. He was anti-clerical, but his wife was devout and often asked him to accompany her to shrines.

Although he disagreed with her, her husband accompanied her. On the return journey, however, he would shower her with insults, to which she responded with silence. One summer, while on holiday at Lake Garda, she found a magazine that mentioned the alleged apparitions of the Virgin Mary, and asked her husband to take her there. They went to Pierina's house and then to the water fountains. The wife began to pray in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary in the nearby chapel while her husband waited for her in the car. He was angry. After a while, however, he began to feel afraid to go into the chapel. He had wanted to go there precisely because he had seen two large tears running down the face of the statue of Mary. In an instant, he became aware of all his misdeeds, fell to his knees and wept. Before his wife had noticed, he went outside, leaned against a wall and continued to sob. His wife, unaware of what had happened, returned to the car, expecting the usual insults, but her husband remained silent. The next day, at school, he said nothing negative about the Church for the first time. The pupils asked him why, but he put off explaining until the following day. One pupil recorded the story, and I obtained a copy. I was also able to meet the teacher in Montichiari. Some pilgrims pointed him out to me and told me that he had organised a pilgrimage. I confirmed the story and asked for a written account of it. However, this was not the only conversion; others also took place through Pierina.

Which are the most significant for you?

A Hungarian parish priest was in Desenzano del Garda with his lover. There, he heard about the Mystical Rose and, wanting to visit the site, asked his companion to wait on the beach while he went to investigate. When he arrived in Montichiari, he asked where the visionary lived. However, when he arrived at her house, he saw that the chapel was already occupied by a group of pilgrims. He therefore knelt down in the last pew. Pierina was concluding the prayer with the ejaculation she always repeated: 'Nos cum prole pia benedicat Virgo Maria.' The priest joined in, and Pierina then asked the pilgrims to wait a moment. She went up to the priest, who was wearing summer shorts, t-shirt and flip flops, and asked him to bless those present. Embarrassed, the man tried to object, pointing out his attire, but she replied, 'You are a priest, aren't you? Then come and bless us'. He obeyed and the pilgrims received the blessing in total contemplation, paying no attention to his attire. As they left the chapel, Pierina said to him with a sincere smile, 'Father, Our Lady is not happy with the choice you are making. She wants you to return to being a good and holy priest in your parish.' The man was stunned. How could Pierina know everything? He did as she advised, going down to the chapel to ask Jesus for forgiveness. He kissed the crucifix, drank the water from the spring, left his lover, and happily returned to being a parish priest. Pierina recounted this with infinite

joy.

Our Lady came to Montichiari to save religious vocations from lack of prayer, mortal sin and betrayal, and to do so she used her messages and her dress bearing three roses to represent prayer (white rose), sacrifice (red rose) and penance (yellow rose). Do you know of graces that saved vocations?

Don Giuseppe Rigo, an Orionine priest and novice master, came to me with two clerics, one of whom was in a deep crisis and considering leaving the priesthood. He asked me if I could take them to Montichiari to pray and drink the water from the Marian spring. I did so, and then accompanied them to Pierina, who gave Don Rigo a statue of Mary, the Mystical Rose. After speaking with Pierina, the clerics returned to the seminary and decided to become priests. The one who was most in crisis went on to work on a mission, doing so with great love, and all three became holy priests. Many miracles are associated with religious figures.

Do you know of any others?

One day, Pierina told me about a young German deacon who had fallen out with his bishop and been refused ordination. Tired of waiting, he left the seminary and decided to remain a layman. However, at that time he met Father Taddeo Laux, a German priest devoted to Maria Rosa Mistica, who took him on a pilgrimage to Montichiari. Upon arriving at the chapel, they kissed the crucifix and drank the spring water. Then they went to see Pierina, who told the deacon to ask the bishop for forgiveness, assuring him that he would then be ordained. He obeyed, and when he asked for forgiveness, the bishop began to cry, embraced him, and ordained him. Once he had become a priest, he celebrated one of his first Masses at the altar of the Mystical Rose in the cathedral. At that time, it was not yet possible to celebrate Mass in Montichiari.

Are you aware of any physical miracles involving religious figures?

After hearing another story from Pierina one day, I went to see Don Luigi Zanotti, the parish priest at the Church of St Francis in Malavicina. He told me about his mother, Oliva Sudiro, who suffered from a serious skin disease that caused terrible sores and an awful smell. He was forced to put two doors between the house, where she lived with him, and the church. Every time he distributed Communion, he opened the two doors to bring it to his mother. One morning, Oliva did not receive Communion because she was seriously ill in bed. However, a religious friend of Pierina's, knowing the situation, asked his mother to bring her a bowl of water from Montichiari. This man was Brother Ettore Boschini, who is now recognised as a Servant of God. He later asked Andrea Tornielli to write a book about this story, titled *Fratel Ettore & il Miracolo di Rosa Mistica* (Brother

Ettore and the Mystical Rose Miracle) and published by Edizioni Ares. The nurse to whom Oliva was now forced to entrust herself washed her sores. The following morning, during Mass, Don Luigi saw his mother on the other side of the glass, beckoning him to bring her Communion. Stunned, he obeyed and saw that she was completely healed, with skin as soft as a young woman's. The parish priest notified her brother, who was a doctor. He wrote a scientific report complete with analyses and test results, but the bishop of Brescia at the time, Luigi Morstabilini, dismissed it.

There are many healings that science has been unable to explain.

I remember Pierina telling me about a woman from Verona who had undergone surgery in Bologna for a serious tumour. The doctors told her that she had to return for a second operation because they had not been able to remove it all. She went to Montichiari to ask Mary, Mystical Rose for help and, when the time came for her to undergo surgery again, the doctors found no trace of the tumour or the previous operation. While I was photographing the crowd in Montichiari, I saw a man walking barefoot on sharp gravel with a picture of Maria Mystical Rose pressed to his chest. When the procession was over, I approached him and asked why he was walking like that. He replied that he had received a great grace; he had such a serious heart defect that the doctors would only operate on him if he signed a waiver releasing them from all responsibility. The man, who was a father and lived in the province of Caserta, had therefore gone to consult his parish priest, who was connected to the apparitions and had asked the parishioners to pray a novena to Mary, Mistical Rose for the miracle of healing. The man then went to Padua for the operation. However, after taking X-rays, the doctors realised that the malformation had disappeared for no apparent reason. When I asked the man if he had come to Montichiari alone, he showed me the bus full of his fellow villagers and pointed out his parish priest. I went to the priest and asked him why he was there. He told me the same story.

Did Pierina also talk to you about the apparitions?

One thing she told me more than once was the true meaning of the roses: the white one represents prayer, the red one represents sacrifice, and the golden one represents immolation, not reparation as many repeated.

A whole book has been dedicated to Pierina Gilli's holiness (Diari. Le apparizioni di Rosa Mistica a Montichiari & Fontanelle con i più importanti documenti d'inchiesta, Ed. Ares). What do you recall?

Lucia, her dear friend, who accompanied Pierina to Heaven just a few days after she died, told me that Pierina never complained about the harsh behaviour of the religious authorities towards her, the 19 years she was forced to spend in a convent under the

name Rosetta, or being thrown out for wanting to become a nun.

The former superior of the nuns at the hospital in Montichiari told me about Pierina's time working there as a nurse. Now in her eighties, I went to visit her in Friuli, where she was living. She told me that one night she had heard Pierina crying and shouting, 'Stop, stop, you're hurting me'. When the nun rushed to her, she saw that Pierina's hair was braided into two tight plaits which fell out as soon as the door was fully opened. She also told me that Pierina was prone to strange ailments that would appear and then suddenly disappear. Once, she saw her body covered in painful boils that the doctors could not explain, which disappeared suddenly after a few days without a trace. The mother superior also told me about a time when Pierina had back pain and was accused of being a morphine addict who complained to make everyone believe she was a clairvoyant. Yet she assured me that she only injected Pierina with morphine when the pain became unbearable. Finally, a doctor believed her, took an X-ray and discovered that she had a hundred stones in her kidneys. She then had an operation. I knew this because Pierina had once shown me the stones in a glass jar — they were as big as hazelnuts.