

ITALY

Our Lady of the Roses and her relationship with Franciscan saints

ECCLESIA

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A month ago, the Year of St Francis began, proclaimed by Pope Leo XIV because 2026 marks the eighth centenary of the death of the Poor Man of Assisi (3 October 1226). This jubilee year gives us the opportunity to remember, among other things, the special link

between the Franciscans and the apparitions that occurred between the 1960s and 1980s in San Damiano, a hamlet of San Giorgio Piacentino, in Italy, although they have not yet been recognised by the Church. These apparitions were said to be of Our Lady of the Roses to Rosa Buzzini Quattrini (26 January 1909 – 5 September 1981).

The origins of these controversial Marian apparitions began with Rosa's sudden healing on 29 September 1961, when she was visited by someone who would later reveal herself to be Our Lady. The attitude of the ecclesiastical authorities evolved over time, softening after Rosa's death, partly thanks to the intervention of St John Paul II. Having learned of the good fruits and vocations that had arisen in San Damiano, he asked that pilgrims be given the spiritual assistance they needed (see here). It should be noted that the visionary always obeyed the instructions of the two bishops who led the Diocese of Piacenza during the years of the apparitions: Monsignor Umberto Malchiodi, who forbade Rosa from going to the miracle pear tree during the apparitions from February 1968 onwards, and Monsignor Enrico Manfredini, who forbade her from transmitting Our Lady's messages further from June 1970 onwards. This demonstrates she is a true daughter of the Church.

Rosa was a humble peasant woman, the wife of Giuseppe Quattrini and mother of three children. She was also a Franciscan tertiary. She often urged people to meditate on the example of St Francis, one of the four protectors of the Garden of Paradise – the name given to the garden at her former home, a farm which was given to the Quattrini couple on a sharecropping basis and which was very poor. It was here that Our Lady appeared to Rosa several times. The garden was also visited by the Holy Trinity, countless angels, and saints. The other three protectors are also Franciscans: St Anthony of Padua, St Leopold Mandic, and St Pio of Pietrelcina. Each of them conveys a specific meaning, as we learn from the collection of writings based on notes taken by people close to Rosa, who recorded what she said she had heard from Jesus, Mary, and other inhabitants of Paradise.

St Francis encourages us to imitate Christ and to lead a simple, evangelical life.

St Anthony, who, according to popular tradition, helps us to find lost objects, inspires us to hunger and thirst for God and helps us to find Him when we lose Him because of our sinful lives. St Leopold Mandic spent many hours in the confessional, inviting us to make frequent examinations of conscience under the careful guidance of Mary, in the light of God's merciful love and loving justice. Padre Pio shed his blood for humanity like Jesus (cf. Roland Maisonneuve, San Damiano all'alba del terzo millennio, EdizioniVilladiseriane, 2009, p. 203).

Padre Pio (25 May 1887 - 23 September 1968) played an important role in the whole story of San Damiano in the early years of the apparitions, also acting as Rosa's spiritual guide while he was still alive. The visionary visited him twelve times in San Giovanni Rotondo, seeking his advice and confessing to him. The parish priest of San Damiano at the time was Don Edgardo Pellaconi, a spiritual son of the saint from Pietrelcina who was initially very sceptical about Rosa's visions of the Virgin Mary. The priest stated: 'I was waiting for confirmation of whether it was true or false. I took Mamma Rosa to San Giovanni Rotondo. I spoke to Padre Pio several times about her, and he gave me objective confirmation of the truth of the apparitions' (ibid., p. 31). Several other witnesses, including lay people and priests, attest to how Padre Pio spoke highly of Rosa and her mental balance, recommending that she go to San Damiano. Don Vasco Pirondini, for example, who visited the stigmatised Capuchin quite frequently, testified: "I always talked about San Damiano with Padre Pio. He told me what he told others. Say hello to Rosa and tell her to continue on this path" (ibid., p. 32).

Returning to Don Edgardo Pellacani, he knew Rosa well even before the apparitions, as she was a member of his parish. However, when the peasant woman began to have mystical experiences, he did not believe her at first and thought she had gone mad. One day, for example, Rosa went to speak to Don Pellacani in the sacristy after Mass and told him, 'Father, last night I saw our church full of people. There were people everywhere: in the nave, in the choir and in the bell tower.' The priest interrupted her rudely, telling her that it must have been a dream. Another day, a similar scene. At the request of OurLady, Rosa returned to Don Pellacani. 'Last night,' she said, 'I saw you distributing Communion for over an hour.' The parish priest replied ironically, saying that the church could only have been filled if the dead in the cemetery had risen. Don Pellacani's scepticism was understandable: at the time, the parish of San Damiano had around 150 inhabitants, not all of whom were practising Catholics, and the church, which was built before the village became depopulated, had 750 seats.

As the parish priest himself explained: 'Even on solemn days, the distribution of Communion never lasted more than four or five minutes' (ibid., p. 25). Even before Padre Pio's confirmation, it was the facts that changed Don Pellacani's mind.

16 October 1964: Our Lady appeared to Rosa in her garden, first on the plum tree, then on the pear tree. The pear tree miraculously blossomed, as did the plum tree branch touched by the Heavenly Mother. Thousands of people flocked to see this inexplicable out-of-season flowering with their own eyes, as reported in the chronicles of the time, which lasted 17 days. Don Pellacani had tried in vain to prevent the news from reaching the press. He questioned Rosa repeatedly about the details of the apparition, but she never contradicted herself. At a certain point, the priest — knowing that she was 'as ignorant as a pumpkin' and spoke almost exclusively in dialect — noticed a change in Rosa. A change that, a few months after the seer's death, he himself described as follows: "Rosa Quattrini spoke as she had never spoken before. Not that she was eloquent, or showed an education that she had never had. But she used Italian words she had never used before, and her speeches were organised in a way that was completely foreign to her. She also behaved with great confidence, showing an ease that no one had ever seen before. In short, she had been transformed" (Gente, 30 December 1981, p. 44).

This is one example above all of Rosa's ignorance. One day, Our Lady told her, "You must pray a lot because Freemasonry wants to cause the Church so much harm". The visionary then met a priest and told him: "Father, we must pray a lot for a lady is doing so much harm to the Church." When the priest asked who that lady was, Rosa replied,

'Our Lady calls her: Freemasonry.' The priest explained to her what Freemasonry was. Having cleared up the misunderstanding, they laughed heartily together.

What Rosa had prophesied to her parish priest, as well as to others, came true.

However, the visionary always remained humble, as Don Pellaconi testified: 'I saw my church full, with crowds of pilgrims in the churchyard and elsewhere, filling the nave, choir and side aisles. Many times I distributed Communion for more than an hour. But Mamma Rosa never came to me and said, 'You see, Father, I was right!'. She never came, never.'

This humility links Rosa di Gesù-Maria (the name given to her by the Blessed Virgin) to St Francis once again. And we return to where we started, remembering one last detail. Our Lady announced to Rosa that a sanctuary would be built at San Damiano and entrusted to the Capuchin friars. She said that 'all the states of the world [...] will come here to my feet'. Only time will tell if this prophecy will also come true.