

Holy people

Servant of God Giovanna Meneghini

Foundress Ursulines of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Vicenza

Giovanna Medeghini, the foundress of the Ursulines of the Sacred Heart of Mary, was born on May 23, 1868, in Bolzano Vicentino, while her parents, inhabitants of Grigno in Trentino, then Austrian territory, were returning home with the flock. She came to Breganze, in the province of Vicenza, where she lived with her uncle and aunt Baggio. In Breganze she lived, developed as a person and as a Christian, and chose her vocation. From early in life, with her humble roots, she developed a personality singularly endowed with distinction and intelligence, with spiritual goodness and deep religiosity, without having had opportunities for study



Still very young, she had a perception about the foundation which God would entrust to her: when she was fifteen, Christ became the object of her thoughts and dreams, so that she decided to consecrate herself to Him as a virgin. It was a decision without any regret or change of mind, lived at the height of joy and in a constant quest.

Her actual religious vocation began to emerge two years later, in 1885. At that time, she spent two weeks at the Institute Farina of Vicenza, but then she realized that the place of her vocation was Breganze. She saw, with her inner eyes, “a white little house” and sensed that God would give her some sisters for a new religious family.



She drew close to Saint Angela Merici and her Rule in 1890, when Monsignor Andrea Scotton suggested to some young women of his parish a form of consecration which would allow them to live in their families and carry on their work, according to the Rule of the Brescian saint. At twenty-two, she became the leader of the growing group of young women consecrated in secularity. From Angela she learned the joy of her consecration, which had made her “Christ’s spouse”, the cohesiveness of a life lived for “God alone”, and insight into education. As an educator and an apostle, she encouraged young women and was a point of reference for everybody and a teacher of the spiritual life for many, either in parish life, in the work environment or in families.

She succeeded in founding the community, observing what was God’s will for her life through the inner experience of her consecration, which rooted her in Christ’s love; through her dedication to girls and her care for women of the lower class, whose salvation became the object of her apostolic concern; and through constant discernment.

Her first intuition of religious life in a community, passing through the experience of consecration in the world, had assumed the exact outlines of a calling to found a religious family based on the Rule of Saint Angela, in order to live consecration and the mission to women’s world in a community.

She initiated a small community on the feast of the Epiphany in 1907. It was a poor and hard-fought beginning, as Giovanna could not live in the group at that time, if not from outside, but it had the power of a vocational answer to love,

sustained by boundless faith. Earning a living through manual labour, the sisters prepared themselves, little by little for the activities for the training of little girls and young women, fully participating in parish life, and being present in the living fabric of families, especially in hard times.

In 1910 she entered her house, among her daughters. Three years later, on July 16, 1913, the whole community donned the religious habit with Giovanna and began to prepare themselves for holy vows.

On September 8, 1914, Giovanna and her twelve companions pronounced their religious vows, while another group was donning the habit and beginning their training.

God called her to Himself on March 2, 1918, at less than fifty years of age, while the little tree, only just born and not yet formally recognized, still needed her presence. She would help the community from heaven, like a star always high above its path through that “dark way” beyond which she had always pointed out “the light” of God as a safe destination.



In the operational and social context of her life choices and concrete actions – God’s love – Giovanna demonstrated the ability to redeem women’s reality, not so much in theory, but in practical deeds. In her surroundings, the lower class world, she stimulated an awareness of the true demands of womanliness, those which find confirmation in the Gospel.

Mother Giovanna’s project was outlined, but post-war conditions and the poverty of their origins did not allow the sixteen sisters, left without their foundress, to articulate the novelty of their new institute, as the Church tended to require; diocesan approval arrived on September 8, 1941; papal approval on March 25, 1950; the “Decretum Laudis” on July 16, 1971. In 1984, in the fertile post-conciliar period, the congregation obtained the approval of its new Rule of Life by the Holy See.