

Daily Saints - 24 December



Feast of Saint Paola Elisabetta Cerioli

Born: January 28, 1816, Soncino, Italy, **Died:** December 24, 1865, Seriate, Italy, **Beautified:** 19 March 1950, Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City by Pope Pius XII, **Canonized:** 16 May 2004, Saint Peter's Square, Vatican City by Pope John Paul II, **Patronage:** Institute of Sisters of the Holy Family; Family of Bergamo

Costanza Cerioli was born on 28 January 1816 in Soncino, Italy into a noble family. She was the last of 16 children of Francesco Cerioli and Francesca Corniani. She was a frail child plagued by a heart condition throughout her life.

Costanza lived at home until she was 11 years old when she was sent off to school in Bergamo; here she remained for five years, suffering terribly from the loneliness of being away from home. But this experience helped her grow to depend on God, finding her comfort in him alone.

At age 19, Costanza returned to Soncino where a planned marriage awaited her; 59-year-old Gaetano Busecchi, the widow of a countess, was set to be her husband. Seeing it as God's will, she accepted this proposal and was married on 30 April 1835.

Her marriage lasted 19 years and was marked by suffering on all sides: her husband's difficult character and poor health weighed on her, and three of the four children that Costanza gave birth to died prematurely; Carlo, her greatest "consolation", lived to be 16.

Before his death due to serious illness in January 1854, Carlo spoke these prophetic words to his mother: "Mama, do not cry... the Lord will give you other children". At the end of that same year, on 25 December, Gaetano also died.

This marked a dark period for Costanza, causing a profound existential crisis. Never had she found herself so alone and abandoned, her life so seemingly senseless. It was during this time that the words spoken by her son became a constant echo in her soul and sustained her, becoming her "guiding light".

She sought spiritual direction and entrusted her tragedies and entire life into the hands of God, asking constantly for the grace to live her life with eyes of faith.

Costanza continued to feel the need to express her "maternity" and to "give of herself" to others, as she had done with Carlo. She was now 38 years old and, inspired by the Gospel, understood that charity was the only truly meaningful road.

She thus began to visit and assist the sick and share her belongings with the poor and orphans. Looking into the searching and frightened eyes of the orphaned children who begged along the streets inspired her to make even more courageous decisions.

She began to give all her wealth and belongings to the poor and opened her home to welcome orphans. Her family and neighbors would remark: "The anguish that this devout woman passed through must have driven her crazy... she does not realize what she is doing".

The money she received once she sold her jewelry was used to purchase materials for the orphanage. Even before giving away all her goods, she had made the most important decision: to give her entire self to God, making a perpetual vow of chastity on 25 December 1856. And with her confessor's approval, she made vows of poverty and obedience on 8 February 1857.

It was not long before other young women desired to join Costanza and "follow" in her works of charity. God's plan was unfolding before her eyes with greater clarity; in silence, prayer and recollection she began to draw up the Rule for her "work".

On 8 December 1857, Costanza, "mother of many orphans", founded the Institute of the Sisters of the Holy Family in Comonte, Italy. She took the name "Sr Paola Elisabetta", and summarized the charism of the Congregation in this way:

"The humility, simplicity, poverty, and love of work found in the Holy Family of Nazareth are what makes up the specific spirituality of this Institute. The Sisters that belong to it must strive to model themselves on this life, full of the recollection, hiddenness and same spirit of humble labor that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph lived in this blessed home".

From that day, Mother Paola dedicated herself to the growth and development of the religious community. On 4 November 1863, in Villacampagna, a male branch was also founded by her, the Religious of the Holy Family.

With the House of Nazareth as the model of both branches, Mother Paola entrusted her "work" to the special protection of St Joseph and willed that the orphans under their care be known as the "sons and daughters of St Joseph".

She was very attentive to the education of these parentless children and the problem of poverty. Her motherly spirit was limitless and she understood the importance of carefully and properly forming her religious sons and daughters so that they would be able to love and educate well the children God placed under their care, these "neglected and lost ones".

Mother Paola Elisabetta died unexpectedly in her home in Comonte on 24 December 1865. She was 49 years old.