

Venerable Mother Clelia Merloni
Foundress of the Congregation of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Founding the Congregation

After various experiences of religious life in different congregations, Clelia entered the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Mary of Divine Providence, founded in Como by Don Luigi Guanella. Immersed in a life of self-giving and prayer, she sensed a strong calling to establish a new congregation dedicated to works of charity which would visibly express the love of Christ. Thus she founded the Congregation of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Viareggio, Italy, May 30, 1894.

The Congregation expanded rapidly and seemed to hold great promise. The sisters bestowed their loving attention on the orphaned, the poor, the sick, and the young. These, too, were the recipients of the wealthy estate which Joachim Merloni left to Clelia who had the consolation of seeing her father finally reconciled to God before his death in 1895.

In 1896 a financial disaster due to the dishonesty of Clelia's financial administrator caused her to endure direct humiliation and poverty, and led her to an evangelical trust in the providence of the Heavenly Father.

Numerous consequences of the bankruptcy followed. Public opinion, previously so favorable to the Apostles, now turned against them and especially against Venerable Mother Clelia who was undeservingly blamed as the person primarily responsible. The situation became such that her life was in danger and, having been advised to leave Viareggio, she sought temporary refuge in Broni with a few Apostles.

Bitterly difficult years followed, during which her daughters were forced to beg in order to sustain the works they had undertaken. During this time the providential encounter with the Bishop of Piacenza, Bishop Giovanni Batista Scalabrini, occurred. For a long time he had been searching for a foundation of Sisters to assist the emigrants who had left Italy in search of livelihood in the Americas. On June 10, 1900, Bishop Scalabrini granted episcopal approbation to the Congregation of the Apostle Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and approved its rule with a new Missionary dimension. The same day he accepted the religious profession of Clelia Merloni and ten other sisters. Since the works at Viareggio had already been closed, the central seat of the congregation was established in Piacenza.

On August 10 six Apostle Missionaries departed from Genoa on the ship "Piedmont" for São Paulo, Brazil. In October, four more sisters left for Santa Felicidade in Paranà, Brazil.

Two years later, on June 16 1902, six Apostle Missionaries, sailed from Genoa on the English ship "The Vancouver" for Boston, Massachusetts, to aid the Missionaries of St. Charles.

The works multiplied and the congregation continued to take root. By 1903 there were already 30 houses and nearly 200 Sisters.