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**A journey into the history and mystery of the Feast of Saint Mary Mother of Consolation**

In a few days, like every September, the city of Reggio Calabria will prepare to wear its most solemn dress to celebrate one of the most heartfelt and eagerly awaited events for the entire community but, also, the event that has taken deep root in its identity: the Feast of Santa Maria Madre della Consolazione.

Although the official patron is Saint George, it is Our Lady of Consolation who occupies the central role in the hearts of the people of Reggio, standing as a protective figure and spiritual guide. Over the centuries, it is she who has collected the silent supplications, the most intimate hopes and the tears of a community that has always turned to her with trust and devotion. Every prayer said in front of her effigy, every lit candle, represents a gesture of love and faith that bears witness to a bond that spans generations.

Lately, there has been much criticism from many sides regarding the upcoming Marian celebrations, participation of celebrities, organization and much more, but, wanting to look beyond the significant religious value, with this story we will try to demonstrate that today the Feast of Our Lady of Consolation has become much more than a religious celebration.

It is increasingly becoming a large moment in which the city regenerates itself, strengthening its social and cultural ties.

Families reunite andevery citizen of Reggio who emigrated for various reasons and lives in other places, wherever he is, responds to the call of his own land so as not to miss the opportunity to live a profound experience in his beloved city. This year, even the many touristscoming from other nationsthey will be surprised by the historical, cultural, social and religious richness of the event, experiencingthis unique experience of social aggregation in which to discover centuries-old traditions with profound spiritualitywhich also have their roots in legend, myth, habits and folklore of a tradition wrapped in popular faith and capable of identifying a strongcommunity pride.

For many it is a moment of historical and anthropological remembrance, for others an opportunity to rediscover their roots, an occasion to feel part of a shared heritage with the pride of belonging to a community that has been able to keep this centuries-old rite alive.

Well, we can say without fear of contradiction that anyone who participates in the life of Reggio Calabria during the Marian celebrations immerses themselves in a complex cultural universe, where the sacred and the profane blend harmoniously. Religious events, such as solemn processions, alternate with secular events ranging from stalls to rides, up to the final fireworks, making the atmosphere even more colorful and vibrant. But also food and wine moments that are passed down from generation to generation, such as frittole and sausage, symbol of the centrality of the festival for the community, mostaccioli, the so-called nzudde, calia and many other foods that have stopped time, handing it down to the history of Reggio Calabria.

The city, with these elements and with this extraordinary scenography, presents itself with its streets adorned with lights and animated by events of all kinds, becoming the theatre of a social aggregation that involves people of all ages and of all social and economic classes.

What not everyone knows is that the story of the Madonna della Consolazione is intertwined with that of Reggio Calabria, but it is a story that, to this day, brings with it unsolved questions and mysteries that fascinate scholars and devotees. In this story we will try to summarize the main curiosities, mysteries and stories of the “festa maronna”.

The figure of the Virgin Mary is not only a religious symbol, but represents a common thread that connects past and present, around which the devotion of the people of Reggio has consolidated over time.

We sing “ora è sempri, viva Maria” also because the heart of the celebration beats around an element of extraordinary importance: the famous painting of the Madonna.

However, the origin of this painting remains an enigma shrouded in time. According to some historical sources, there were even two paintings: the first, now disappeared, and the second, which is still venerated today. But even on the latter, there is no lack of uncertainty. It is not clear, for example, who the artist is who created it.

The story of the “first Painting” tells of a Genoese family, who moved to Reggio at the end of the 15th century, who brought with them a sacred image of the Madonna with Jesus and who decided to build a chapel on a hill called "La Botte" initially entrusting its custody to the Franciscan tertiaries. It should be noted that this painting was without the figures of St. Anthony and St. Francis, present in the currently venerated Painting and which will be discussed in detail later.

The custodians, the French tertiaries (or more precisely Franciscan tertiaries) are the members of the Third Order of Saint Francis, a lay community founded by Saint Francis of Assisi for people who, while not entering monastic life (like the friars of the First Order or the nuns of the Second Order), desired to live according to the values ​​and ideals of Franciscanism. The Third Order, also known as the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS), was founded by Saint Francis around 1221 to provide a way for lay men and women to live a life of poverty, prayer, and charity while remaining in the secular world. Unlike monks and nuns, the tertiaries did not take vows of enclosure or absolute poverty, but were committed to living according to the principles of Saint Francis in the context of daily life and work.

Why might it be important in this story to specify who the French tertiaries were?

In addition to being the first custodians of the "first Painting", they were also called "Romiti" because of their secluded life dedicated to prayer, which often took place in secluded places far from the world, similar to that of the hermits. They were not true hermit monks, but lived in communities and followed a rule inspired by Franciscanism, characterized by an austere and simple lifestyle, which included the renunciation of material goods and a strong spiritual commitment. Therefore, the term "Romiti" marked the choice to detach oneself from worldly life, even if not totally like the hermits, but still remaining close to community life and the teachings of Saint Francis.

Therefore, the name “Eremo” originates from the “Romiti”, which are the archaic linguistic form with which the “Hermits” are identified, and by adding it to the locality “La Botte” the identification of the place which still today hosts the current Painting is created.

There is still a fascinating and mysterious enigma surrounding the Painting from Genoa. In fact, although many have dedicated themselves to the search for more detailed information on this precious relic, also bringing to light interesting discoveries, doubts and controversies remain that are still awaiting confirmation. Research on this small and precious Painting continues, and with it the hope of shedding light on an important part of the history and devotion of Reggio. Each new detail discovered brings us a little closer to understanding the essence of this much-loved and venerated symbol.

Attempts have been made to precisely identify the period in which it was created, the pictorial style that distinguishes it, the posture of the Madonna, the precise dimensions and, above all, the name of the artist who created it.

While the name of the artist, the exact provenance of the Painting remain unknown, as do its final destination and its current location, the only historical certainty is linked to the circumstance in which this Painting was replaced by the one that is currently venerated.

The circumstance dated to the early 1500s, in order to be presented in detail, requires a further step that allows for the correct historical context.

First of all, it should be noted that in 1518, Pope Clement VII established the Capuchin Order and, thanks to the arrival of some of them in the province of Reggio Calabria, the custody of the first Painting was entrusted to them.

Specifically, the Brief of Pope Clement VII also recognized the friars Ludovico Comi and Bernardino Molizzi, both natives of Reggio Calabria, the right to lead a hermit life according to the Rule of the Seraphic Patriarch, Saint Francis of Assisi. The two Capuchin friars from Reggio first built a house in Motta di Filogaso, a small Calabrian town, then lived among the ruins of an ancient Basilian monastery along the Tuccio valley (in the areas near the towns of Roghudi and Bagaladi in the Province of Reggio Calabria), finally, in the year 1532, called by the archbishop of Reggio Calabria, Gerolamo Centelles, they moved to the hill of the Hermitage La Botte above the city in a small camp.

The encounter between these Capuchin friars and the first Painting provides another certainty, that is, that it was initially placed in the chapel of Giovan Bernardo Mileto, the first great benefactor of the Capuchin friars. It was he, in fact, who generously welcomed the Capuchins to Reggio Calabria, after the bishop Gerolamo Centelles invited them to settle in the city in 1532.

To better present the replacement of the first with the current Quadro it is necessary to make another historical reference.

The date to which the reproduction of the current Painting is attributed is 1547, in fact, the story tells of a painter from Reggio, a certain Niccolò Andrea Capriolo, who, commissioned by the noble Camillo Diano, depicted the original image of the Madonna, that of the first Painting, in a new painting of considerably larger dimensions than the one brought to Reggio by the Genoese family, and inserted the figures of St. Anthony and St. Francis. The donation of the new Painting, the current one, by Camillo Diano was an act to express gratitude towards the Capuchins and, for this reason, it was enriched by the addition of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Anthony of Padua, symbols of recognition for the tireless dedication and commitment with which these friars served the people of Reggio Calabria, not only in spiritual needs, but also human and social.The ancient icon was used on the main altar of the new Capuchin sanctuary.

As soon as the work was produced by the artist, Camillo Diano donated it to the Capuchin friars to replace the first one brought by the Genoese family, of smaller dimensions, which was retained by the Diano family.

Thus the traces of the first painting were definitively lost due to the transfer of the Diano family to Malta andits history becomes confused after Napoleon's invasion of the island.Since then the mystery of the first Painting has become the object of many reconstructions without anyone knowing to this day where it is located.

This act of faith gave birth to the devotion of the current Painting which has grown over the centuries, taking deep root in the community of Reggio.

The currently venerated painting depicts the Madonna on a throne, with the Child Jesus on her right arm, crowned by two angels who support the crown on the Virgin's head with one hand and the palm of victory with the other. This depiction has its origins in the most ancient representations of the Madonna della Consolazione that came from Crete, where a Venetian-Cretan school was active in the 12th-13th centuries that marked the history of Byzantine art. A distinctive feature of these sacred images is the position of the heads, opposite to each other, and the movement by which the Virgin holds the child with her right hand and points to him with her left.

As already mentioned, in the current painting Camillo Diano had Capriolo depict two figures on either side of the Madonna's throne: Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Anthony of Padua.

To the right of the Madonna we find Saint Francis of Assisi who in his right hand holds the book of Genesis, as indicated by the incipit “in principium creavit Deus celum / terra autem erat inanis et vacua” (In the beginning God created the sky, but the earth was lifeless and empty). In his left hand he shows the sacred stigmata and holds an extremely simple-looking Latin cross.

To the left of the Divine Lady, St. Anthony of Padua holds a lily while in his other hand he clutches a closed red book. At the foot of the Virgin's throne a scroll reads "opus Andria Cap… pi\_ uri 1547".

Another curiosity is linked to the faces of the Painting.

The face of the Madonna would return the features of the Virgin, as they were portrayed in the first Painting. The patron would have been reproduced in the features of Saint Francis turned towards the Virgin to ensure greater proximity to the prayers addressed to Her, while Saint Anthony would have the features of Giovan Bernardo Mileto, the other benefactor from Reggio of the founders of the Order.

The artistic information about the author reported on the Painting signed “Andria Cap … pitturi” is practically non-existent. Only the stories handed down to today allow us to affirm that Capriolo was the artist but it is not known, nor is any further work attributed to him. Other words, not very legible, are present and are still being studied by experts.

Over the years, the Painting has undergone various restorations with mixed results, until 1972 when the restoration was entrusted to the Greek painter resident in Rome and accredited to the Holy See, Dimitriu Vakalis, who executed it with a masterly hand, as can still be seen today. The same artist made a very faithful copy of the original, which is preserved in the large refectory of the Convent of the Hermitage. Another copy, made by Prof. Michele Prestipino, is located in the private chapel of the Bishop, in the Episcopio.

In conclusion of this first contribution we can affirm that we have tried to valorize the importance of the Madonna's Feast by telling the story of the first Painting and its replacement with the current one, their mysteries and the curiosities found among various sources.

In the next one, new aspects of this event will be presented in which time seems to stop, in which every citizen of Reggio feels part of something bigger, because it is a celebration that reminds us of the importance of our roots, of our faith and of being united, especially in difficult moments. It is also an opportunity to stop, reflect, and feel, once again, that indissoluble bond that unites us all under the loving gaze of our beloved Madonna.