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Everything is ready: the city of Reggio Calabria is preparing to experience one of its most solemn and deeply felt moments, the Feast of Santa Maria Madre della Consolazione. The event that represents the beating heart of the religious and civil life of the city brings together the community in an embrace of faith, tradition and shared identity.

The streets begin to fill with faces illuminated by devotion and hope, while the anticipation grows for the imminent procession that will see the Sacred Effigy of the Madonna della Consolazione cross the city, carried on the shoulders of the faithful, from the Basilica dell'Eremo to the Duomo.

It is not just a material journey, but a spiritual journey, imbued with profound meanings that link the past to the present, the faith of mothers and fathers is passed down seamlessly to new generations. Each step of the procession is marked by prayers and songs that resonate in hearts, creating an atmosphere of collective recollection. Anyone who has experienced these moments knows that the feast of Consolation is not only a religious event, but an experience that touches the heart and soul. Closing your eyes, you can almost feel a mystical wind that caresses your face, bringing with it the scent of promises made and hopes entrusted to the Virgin.

Our story continues[insert hyperlink to previous article]sinking its roots in ancient times, when, in 1569, the first church was built on the hill of the Hermitage and the cult of Santa Maria della Consolazione began to spread among the people of Reggio. Over the centuries, the city has faced numerous trials: devastating earthquakes, Turkish invasions, plagues that decimated the population. Yet, in every moment of difficulty, the people of Reggio have always turned to their protector, Mary, invoking her with trust and entrusting their fears and hopes to her. It was customary, in moments of greatest danger, to carry the sacred effigy from the church of the Hermitage to the heart of the city, so that the Madonna could watch over her children more closely and intercede for them.

To better understand the religious and cultural value of the procession, it is necessary to point out that in the 16th and 17th centuries this type of demonstration inside churches or around sacred places was frequent throughout Southern Italy, according to the ancient use of the Christian rite.

An emblematic episode dates back to 1576, when a terrible epidemic struck Reggio Calabria, causing over 700 deaths in a few months. In that period, the Capuchin friars, guided by the charity of the benefactress Maria Mazza, set up a lazaretto on the hill of the Savior to welcome and care for the sick. It was then that one of the friars, Antonino Tripodi, received a divine sign: a voice invited him to announce the imminent end of the plague and to urge the people to go to the sanctuary for a solemn thanksgiving.

Miraculously, the epidemic stopped and the sick were healed. This event marked a turning point in popular devotion, consolidating Our Lady of Consolation as the official protector of the city.

In 1592, the city authorities officially proclaimed November 21st as a feast in honor of the Madonna della Consolazione, establishing an indissoluble bond between the city and its patron saint. Thanks to her intercession, Reggio Calabria overcame several calamities, including the Ottoman invasion of 1594, the earthquakes of 1607 and 1638, and another epidemic in 1636. Whenever the people were in difficulty, the procession of the Madonna marked the moment of rebirth and hope, an act of collective faith that strengthened the identity and unity of the community.

Another historical moment of great impact occurred in 1719, when a German officer, seriously wounded in battle, went to the sanctuary to ask for healing. His prayer was answered, and as a sign of gratitude he left his crutches as an ex voto, helping to strengthen the Madonna's fame as a consoler of the suffering.

An interesting historical curiosity concerns the plague epidemic that hit Reggio Calabria between the summer of 1743 and October 1745, an event that highlights dramatic similarities with more recent situations, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The epidemic spread from the international port of Messina, with which, despite the bans imposed by the Reggio authorities, illegal trade continued across the Strait. The plague made its official appearance in Reggio Calabria on July 17, 1743, with the first case reported in the city, and led to the celebration of the traditional Feast of Santa Maria Madre della Consolazione in a “peopleless” form, without the usual participation of the community due to the containment measures.

This period, narrated in detail by Spanò Bolani in his "History of Reggio Calabria", allows us to grasp surprising parallels with what happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, not only for the impact on daily life, but also for the reactions of the authorities and citizens. Then as now, the fear of contagion led to the adoption of drastic measures to safeguard public health. Between 1743 and 1745, the city was placed in isolation by means of a strict sanitary cordon, and the entire population was quarantined, with the absolute prohibition of leaving their homes.

The ordinances of the time, often brutally enforced, reflected the emergency management methods typical of the 18th century. Violators of the rules, considered a threat to the community, risked extremely severe penalties, including the death penalty. At a time when medical science had not yet developed the diagnostic and treatment tools we have today, the authorities' response necessarily had to rely on coercive measures to prevent the spread of the disease.

This tragic page in the history of Reggio allows us to reflect on the dynamics of collective fear, restrictive measures and the resilience of a community in the face of an invisible threat. The plague of 1743, like the recent pandemic, is a powerful reminder of how, despite the centuries that have passed and the great social and technological differences, humanity continues to face the same vulnerabilities in the face of disease.

These events gave rise to the expression of the poet from Reggio, Ciccio Errigo: “With earthquakes, with war and with peace, this festival is made and this festival is made” in which he celebrated the Feast in honour of the Madonna della Consolazione, considering it an unavoidable moment in the life of Reggio.

During the 18th century, devotion to the Madonna della Consolazione took root further in the social and religious fabric of the city. The clergy and civil authorities collaborated to obtain official recognition of the Virgin as the Principal Patron of Reggio Calabria from the Pope. This recognition sanctioned the profound connection between the city and its protector, a bond that continues to manifest itself every year with the same intensity of faith and participation.

In the 19th century, the city faced new challenges, including famines and other epidemics, but once again faith in Our Lady of Consolation allowed the people of Reggio to overcome these dark times.

In 1896, an agreement was signed between the Episcopal Curia and the Municipality, which established the division of tasks: the Curia would take care of the religious organization of the festival, while the municipal administration would manage the civil aspects. Since then, the Feast of Santa Maria della Consolazione has become a key event for the city, in which the sacred and the profane merge in a collective experience of profound spirituality and sharing.

This celebration is not only a religious event, but represents the beating heart of a community that, year after year, proudly and faithfully renews its bond with its Patron Saint. It is a moment in which past and present merge, in which historical memory and faith intertwine, creating a unique and unforgettable experience.

An experience that certainly has its fulcrum in the procession.

The first to carry the Madonna della Consolazione in procession were the Capuchin friars in their capacity as custodians of the Painting. The only written sources on the first transporters of the Holy Icon refer to the descent of the Painting in 1656, when Reggio Calabria remained unharmed among many centers of the kingdom infected by the plague.

It was on that occasion that the Reggio Senate established that every year and for all future generations, the administration of the city of Reggio Calabria would offer a large candle to the sanctuary of the Virgin Mother of Consolation in thanksgiving, on the occasion of the feast. This solemn promise, written on a marble in the town hall, was and is maintained over the centuries up to today, even if often the size of the candle was proportionate to the merits recognized in the year to the celestial intercession.

In this sense, another episode of historical interest occurred in 1672, the public granaries from which flour was supplied were empty and the administration of the time issued a proclamation to communicate that bread could still be made for only another 3 days. Panic spread through the streets of Reggio, when the cry for help to Mary ran through the town, a crowd of people formed headed towards the sanctuary of the Hermitage. The spontaneous procession was led by the municipal administration of the time made up of the mayors: two belonging to the noble class, Giovanni Melissari and Francesco Antonio Plutino and one for the common people, Giulio Cesare Dattola. The three, barefoot, followed by many fellow citizens, between invocations and prayers carried the Painting to the cathedral.

When the procession had just arrived at the mother church, suddenly word came that three unexpected ships, loaded with grain, had landed in the harbour of Reggio. Wonder, skepticism and then relief and joy passed through the faithful and unbelievers. The miracle of the grain had happened before their eyes. On that occasion, the sailors present vowed to carry the simulacrum of the Virgin by hand in the future.

In 1693, for all the graces received, it was decided to create a structure to carry the Painting to the Cathedral. The guardian fathers of the two convents of Reggio, fr. Antonino da Sant'Agata of the “Old Place”, called “of Consolation” and fr. Ludovico Diano, superior of the Capuchins of the Immaculate of the “New Place”, called “of the Conception”, accompanied on their shoulders the holy Image placed on a light base decorated with flowers and candles, to the Cathedral.

In later times, the float of the Madonna della Consolazione became increasingly complex, enriched with frames and ornaments offered by the veneration of the faithful and in thanksgiving, while rituals and devotional practices were determined for the procession and the celebration.

After the sailors' vote for the history of wheat, due to the difficulties with fishing in the waters in front of the city of Reggio Calabria, it was the fishermen who carried the vara from the first movements. Local sailors and those from Bagnara, joined the porters from Cosenza and of course from Reggio.

Since the early 1950s, the procession began to be regulated with the first intervention in this sense by Archbishop Monsignor Giovanni Ferro who forbade the bearers from wearing bare feet during the rite of transport, abolished the figure of the capo vara who guided the procession route placed on top of the apparatus and instituted the position of ecclesiastical assistant. The regulation continued first with Don Italo Calabrò (1952/1974), then Monsignor Salvatore Nunnari (1974/1999) and from 1999 Don Gianni Licastro.

During the procession, the movements are coordinated by the ecclesiastical assistant with the help of the pole leaders. There are 4 poles, crossing the float from the front to the back, thus becoming 8. The mythicization of the float has led some scholars to think that the pole leaves a permanent mark on its bearer, under the loving and compassionate gaze of the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus.

Another ritual that can be found during the procession is the cry, which resounds around the float and which underlines the arrival of the Sacred Image, recalls the mystery of the divine incarnation and is addressed to all those present. In this sense, the figure of the so-called “u griraturi”, the one who launches the cry, is significant. It is a cry that, thanks also to the bearers, has resounded for over 500 years through the streets of Reggio Calabria. A very important role is that of the bearers. The chain of bearers is united by the same feeling, all different, but fused as one body intent on a physical effort in the name of religious piety, in faith and in the testimony of the Marian devotional charism. Therefore, the bearers qualify themselves as witnesses of a message of love that the Mother of Jesus has manifested towards Reggio with the obligation to give concrete proof of it. Through them, the rite is perpetuated in a form of popular tradition that is now lost in time and that places them as “representatives” of a historical-religious itinerary. This applies to all carriers, past, present and future, who, by perpetuating themselves, have a positive impact on the community in which they live.

Another important aspect of the procession is the cry: 'EH GRIRAMULU TUTTI CU' CORI!' 'OGGI E SEMPRI VIVA MARIA!' (Let us shout with all our hearts! Today and always long live Mary!).

The cry breaks out solemnly at every stop of the Vara, it is a sound of love, of joy, of hope, sometimes, even of pain for all that the fragility of the human condition entails. It is intoned by a bearer - “u griraturi” (the shouter) - who, with a cry that is at first silent, becomes overbearing, deafening and liberating, becomes capable of involving all those present, finding fullness of communion in the acclamation to the Virgin Mary.