

CHAPTER NINE

MY FRIENDS IN HEAVEN

During our trip to Tuscany I very much wanted to visit Cortona. Inspired by the book and film *Under the Tuscan Sun*, I dreamt of resting in the coolness of the famous fountain and experiencing the sweetness of the dark grapes that had basked in the sun. I wanted to find out whether they really “smell purple”.¹⁴ However, the lady at the tourist information office brought me down to earth and kindly informed me that the fountain was a part of the stage design, just like some of the other elements portrayed in the film. So we ended up eating

¹⁴ Frances Mayes, *Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy*, London: Bantam Books, 1996, 2003, p.122.

some juicy grapes on the steps of the town hall (luckily they proved to be real) and doing some traditional sightseeing.

There was, however, a pleasant surprise in store for us. Cortona turned out to be a much more interesting place than the film had suggested. This small town, one of the oldest ones in the region, located on a hill, had been a thriving Etruscan centre in the seventh century BC. Among other amazing places there is a cathedral, a couple of incredible churches, a palace, the Archdiocesan Museum with famous paintings by Fra Angelico and the Medici fortress. At the very top of the town, from which there is a magnificent view of Lake Trasimeno and neighbouring Umbria, is the Sanctuary of St. Margaret.

As I entered the last temple marked on the plan of the city, I did not know much about it. I walked down the left aisle towards the altar, where I saw St. Margaret herself encased in a silver reliquary (which reminded me a bit of the scene from Snow White). Although the sight of a body that was more than seven hundred years old was a little terrifying, it reminded me strongly that the saints were real people, just as we are.

A desire arose in my heart to learn more about this mysterious woman. Reading the story of her life was like reading a thriller and crime novel in

one.¹⁵ The plot included an evil stepmother, passionate love, rage, treacherous murder, an illegitimate child, rejection and finally conversion. I will not reveal more, so that I don't spoil your joy if ever you have the opportunity to read about this extraordinary woman.

This, one could say, personal encounter with St. Margaret of Cortona evoked my interest in the lives of other saints. A couple of days later, in Siena, I "met" St. Catherine (her head is exhibited in the Dominican Basilica of San Domenico). After returning home, I found a book about the life of this exceptional Italian girl, who was uncompromising and merciless towards the faint-hearted, persistent towards the doubting, gentle towards the defeated and meek, like a flower, yet unyielding like a sword and full of fervent fire which destroyed every obstacle.¹⁶

After "becoming acquainted" with St. Catherine, I researched other saints, and in this way my circle of friends in heaven was slowly extending. If they had written something during their lives, I also read their writings. I made a note of

¹⁵ Curzia Ferrari, *Quadro Velato: Il Romanzo di Margherita da Cortona*, Ancora, 2005.

¹⁶ Edgarda Ferri, *Io, Caterina: La vita di una Donna, il Mistero di una Santa*, Milan, 1997.

inspiring thoughts in my spiritual journal so that I had them at hand. Now, in everyday life I often turn to them for help. Sometimes I check who is “on duty” in the liturgical calendar; at other times I choose a specialist in a given field. I often solved parenting dilemmas with the help of St. John Bosco; when headache strikes, I ask St. Teresa of Ávila for intercession, and when I lack trust I remind myself about the “Little Flower”, St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Nowadays we have patron saints for nearly every occasion. It is really worth asking them for help, entrusting ourselves to their care and making friends with them.

Although I did not accomplish my initial goal during my visit to Cortona, because what I had wanted to see turned out to have been merely a part of a stage set, I received much more. I began to understand what the communion of saints really means. Now, during the Easter Vigil, when we sing the Litany of the Saints I smile while mentioning some of the names and remind myself of the lives of these incredible figures. It is like having fond memories of old friends, with one difference – I know that they are still with us now.