News

People pray during Eucharistic adoration in the chapel of St. Frances Cabrini Shrine in Upper I

People pray during Eucharistic adoration in the chapel of St. Frances Cabrini Shrine in Upper Manhattan in New York City on March 3, 2024. Mother Cabrini, canonized in 1946, is the patron saint of immigrants. Her remains are encased in a glass casket embedded in the chapel's altar. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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In a neighborhood at the northern tip of Manhattan known for its bodegas, Latin music and vibrant street life, people come to pray directly to Mother Cabrini, the patron saint of immigrants.

At the St. Frances Cabrini Shrine, the saint, enclosed in glass, is dressed in her habit, her pallid face in peaceful repose. Tourists and worshipers trickle in regularly, and a small faith community has grown since the shrine opened in 1959. It hosts tours for school children from the South Bronx and charter buses from the suburbs.

Cabrini, who died in 1917, was declared a saint in the Roman Catholic Church in 1946, the first U.S. citizen to be so honored. Born in 1850, she arrived in New York in 1889 from Italy with sisters from the community she founded, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Portrait of Mother Cabrini

A portrait of St. Frances Cabrini is seen on display at St. Frances Cabrini Shrine in New York City March 3, 2024. Mother Cabrini was declared a saint in 1946. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

She established 67 institutions devoted to uplifting immigrants and the poor in New York, Chicago and Latin America. In crowded immigrant neighborhoods, she established schools which doubled as churches, with students using the pews as desks. Her sisters ministered to Sing Sing inmates and miners, among others.

Life for immigrants has never been easy. As today's migrants find themselves in the crosshairs of the Trump administration's calls for mass deportation, Mother Cabrini's spirit and shrine offers solace and refuge.

In New York City, nearly 40% of residents are foreign born, with more than 400,000 undocumented. The sanctuary city is led by Mayor Eric Adams, whose corruption charges raise questions about whether he will push back against the federal government's crackdowns.

Julie Attaway, the shrine director, said a pastor recently told her that his immigrant community's Spanish Mass attendance has declined since January as immigrants fear coming together.

She said that in these times Cabrini's spirit calls for prayer and championing the cause of immigrants.

"You have to see the guests as real people," said Attaway, shrine director for the past five years. She raised five children in the neighborhood and has been part of the shrine's community for more than 25 years.

> 'These are people who have lost everything. We can't let them lose their faith.'
> —Julie Attaway
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Her goal is to make the communion of saints palpable. The presence of the actual body of Mother Cabrini — except for her heart (preserved in a reliquary at the

Mother Cabrini Spirituality Center in Codogno, Italy) — reinforces that Catholic doctrine.

Pilgrims visit the shrine with all sorts of views on the current immigration debates. They include the undocumented praying for a break or a green card. Some are skeptical that today's immigrants share a respect for the law that their ancestors held.

Attaway wants shrine visitors to experience a sense of the shared humanity and common spiritual bond Catholics share with all migrants.

The shrine's statues and the museum exhibits detail the life of Cabrini, including letters describing her travels across the sea from her native Italy, overcoming a personal water phobia. Intercessory prayer notes, in English, Spanish and French, rest beneath the statues.

Many requests involve immigration. One Argentine woman, Attaway said, prayed intensely at the shrine for a green card, a favor granted. Beyond those fragments of good news, others struggle.

Shortly after Donald Trump's inauguration, a Venezuelan immigrant, who had walked through the jungles of Central America to get to the United States, prayed at the shrine.

He said he was afraid since recently-arrived Venezuelans had lost their protective status. He knew that under an executive order from Trump, immigration officers can search churches.

"Is it safe for me to stay for Mass?" Attaway said the man asked in Spanish.

"That broke my heart," Attaway said. She was unable to guarantee the man's safety.

Julie Attaway at shrine

Julia Attaway, executive director of St. Frances Cabrini Shrine in the Upper Manhattan section of New York City, poses for a photo at the shrine March 3, 2024. She said that Cabrini's spirit calls for prayer and championing the cause of immigrants. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Sometimes immigrants will connect with the community, become active, and then suddenly disappear, not answering texts or phone calls. Attaway does not know where they are, but "that kind of silence isn't usually good."

But the shrine's focus remains spiritual. "What happens here is between Mother Cabrini and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. What we do here facilitates that," Attaway said.

These days, that spiritual concern creates other obligations. The shrine now shares written instructions to lectors and priests celebrating Mass about what to do if U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers enter the building.

The advice is to remain calm and note that the congregation has visitors; abruptly leaving can arouse suspicion. Small cards, now common in immigrant communities throughout the city, describe immigrants' legal rights, including the right to remain silent, in case of a deportation roundup.

Attaway, quoting a saying attributed to Mother Cabrini, said: "A good Christian is a good citizen." Informing people of their rights is a responsibility of citizenship, she said.

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The shrine, and a center next door that provides language and support services for migrants, represent just a slice of Cabrini's legacy.

Hollywood recognized the saint last year with a biopic titled Cabrini. It highlighted the nun's ongoing battles with politicians and prelates who gave short shrift to Italian immigrants. Attaway, who often speaks to groups about Cabrini's life, said that Italian immigrants during that time were often castigated for undercutting the wages of more established groups and blamed for organized crime. It was an era of immigrant and anti-Catholic backlash: Seven years after Cabrini's death, Congress enacted an immigration law which prohibited nearly all legal immigration from Italy.

"What we see today is an echo of what she had in her day," Attaway said.

A prayer for immigrants distributed at the shrine encourages people to see prayer not just as seeking favors, but an appeal for strength to weather difficult times.

It reads: "I ask for courage and hope, the grace to overcome fears and discouragement."

Procession for Mother Cabrini

People participate in a procession for immigrant rights July 13, 2019, in the streets surrounding St. Frances Cabrini Shrine in New York City. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Yet sometimes seeming miracles do happen.

One regular at the shrine, Brazil native Viviane Caixeta, said she was in a coma for nearly two months, and near death, in her home country a decade ago.

After recovering, she came to the U.S. with $200 in her pocket, she said. Having long felt a call to follow the path of Mother Cabrini, she came to New York and experienced what she described as a spiritual encounter with the Italian saint while visiting her statue near the Staten Island ferry in lower Manhattan.

Caixeta said her expertise in coaching Brazilian martial arts helped her gain legal U.S.residency. Once in the U.S., she studied nursing. After Election Day, she said, she felt "you need to move quickly, because things have really changed." Through Mother Cabrini, she said, "God has called me for something." She has been recruited to work as a nurse in Israel this summer.

"Here I feel peace," she said of the shrine.

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Attaway said the shrine is a beacon for those who have next-to-nothing in this world. An immigration surge hit New York in 2022, as buses from Texas dropped off more than 200,000 migrants, many of whom had walked to the U.S. from Central America. Some visited the shrine on Sundays. The migrants had little to ward off New York's winter chill. They would look at donated clothes seeking things they could use. They would ask if anyone had work.

The shrine offers hope to immigrants, Attaway said.

"These are people who have lost everything. We can't let them lose their faith," Attaway said.