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The Shrine of the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary of Pompeii in Italy. A portrait of Bartolo Longo, founder of the shrine, is seen on a banner above the entrance. (Wikimedia Commons/Dina Benedetto Ferrandina)

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When pilgrims gather in St. Peter's Square on Oct. 19 to witness the canonization of Blessed Bartolo Longo, along with six other blesseds, they will see not just the elevation of a new saint, but a story of a radical conversion.

Longo was a lawyer once drawn into the darkness of satanism who became one of the most luminous lay apostles of the modern church.

Born in Latiano, Italy, in 1841, Longo seemed destined for worldly success. He studied law at the University of Naples, where intellectual fashions of the time — positivism, rationalism and spiritualism — led him far from the faith of his youth.

He immersed himself in the occult, even serving for a time as a self-styled satanic priest. Yet, as Fr. Salvatore Sorrentino, director of the historical "Bartolo Longo" archive in Pompeii and author of a book about the future saint, told OSV News: "The most surprising thing that emerges from his writings is, first of all, his boundless love for the Virgin Mary. Bartolo Longo can be considered, in every sense, a Marian mystic."

It was that love that became the seed of his redemption. Though estranged from the sacraments, he never entirely abandoned the daily recitation of the rosary, a habit from his school years with the Piarist Fathers.

"Through that small door," Sorrentino said, "Mary triumphed over his heart and brought him back to Christ."



Blessed Bartolo Longo, depicted in an undated painting (CNS/Courtesy of the Pontifical Shrine of the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary of Pompeii)

The turning point came on May 29, 1865 — exactly one year after he had turned toward spiritism. "Oh my God, ever patient, ever kind ... on that very same day, May 29, when I had rejected you to embrace the serpent, you willed that the triumph of your mother should take place in me," Sorrentino said, quoting Longo's words to his Dominican spiritual director.

"From that moment," said Sorrentino, "his life became entirely oriented to the Gospel and to charity."

In 1872, Longo heard within his heart what he called a divine whisper: "If you are looking for salvation, propagate the rosary. It is Mary's promise: Whoever propagates the rosary will be saved." Obeying that call, he vowed not to leave the region until he had planted there the devotion to the Virgin of the Rosary. From that promise rose the Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii and, around it, an entire city reborn.

"Blessed Bartolo Longo was not only the founder of a sanctuary," Pompeii Archbishop Tommaso Caputo, pontifical delegate for the shrine, told OSV News.

"He was the founder of a new city — a city born of faith," the archbishop said.

Indeed, Longo laid the groundwork for a living community: postal and telegraph offices, running water, a train station, an observatory. He built not merely monuments, but infrastructure.

Pompeii was destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius 79 years after Christ was born, a disaster that buried the Roman city under thick layers of volcanic ash and pumice, killing thousands of residents. It was Longo's efforts that really made it rise from the ashes.

In 1885, Longo married Countess Mariana di Fusco, a widow who shared his deep Marian devotion and passion for the poor. Together they managed the sanctuary's charitable works, combining prayer with service. Their marriage, lived in chastity by mutual decision, was a sign that holiness can flourish even in ordinary lay life.

"Longo has lived all his existence rooted in the Gospel," Caputo said. "He is the pure expression of the 'church in outgoing mission' that Pope Francis spoke about. He loved the poor, cared for abandoned children, for prisoners' sons and daughters, for the orphans; he spread the holy rosary, bore witness to faith, became an instrument of charity, and sowed hope in the world."

In 1887, he founded an orphanage for girls; in 1892, an institute for the sons of prisoners; in 1922, another for the daughters of prisoners. His understanding of charity was deeply theological, not merely philanthropic.

"Christian social works," Sorrentino said, "are not born of natural philanthropy but from the love of God poured into the believer's heart through the Holy Spirit. God accomplishes his works of love when he finds open hearts in which to pour his grace."

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That conviction continues to animate the shrine today. "The social works of the sanctuary continue in the path traced by the founder," Caputo said. "Times change, and so do responses to social need, but the inspiration remains the same: the example of Bartolo Longo. The shrine has always been, since its foundation, what Pope Francis called a 'field hospital' for the poor."

Sorrentino said that the power of Longo's works was built on obedience. "Longo was always obedient — to civil authorities, when it was for the good of people, and to the church, even when obedience required painful humility. His life is a testimony that true freedom is born from obedience to God."

That obedience bore astonishing fruit. By the time of his death in 1926, Longo had transformed what was ashes in literal meaning into a spiritual and social oasis.

When Pope Benedict XVI visited Pompeii in 2008, he summed up the miracle: "Who could have thought that a Marian shrine of worldwide importance would have come into being here, beside the ruins of ancient Pompeii, as well as so many social practices aimed to express the Gospel in concrete service to those most in difficulty? Wherever God arrives, the desert blooms!"

The devotion to Our Lady of Pompeii has spread worldwide. "There is no continent that does not venerate the Virgin of the Rosary of Pompeii," Caputo told OSV News. "Now, the canonization will make even more familiar the one who was called the 'Apostle of the Rosary' and the 'Lawyer of the Madonna.' "

The timing of the canonization, he added, carries deep meaning. "The canonization of Longo is celebrated in the heart of the ordinary Jubilee, and I believe this is part of a divine design. The Jubilee is the time of forgiveness — indeed, the time to ask for forgiveness."

Longo was not born a saint, the archbishop of Pompeii told OSV News, but "his conversion was total. He dedicated himself entirely to religion and charity."