In 1986, an Italian teenager was miraculously healed by the Virgin Mary in Italy.



Sicily, 1986: a fifteen-year-old schoolboy, bedridden with fever, sees a light fill his room, then meets on a rock at the foot of Mount Etna the woman who introduces herself as the Virgin Mary. Thirty-three apparitions later, the Archdiocese of Catania has built a shrine on the spot. A look back at one of Italy's quietest, and most enduring, Marian cases.

A fever, a light, a voice

It all begins on 4 May 1986. Rosario Toscano, a schoolboy born in Catania in 1971 into a well-off family, is bedridden with a high viral fever. According to the account gathered by the Marian encyclopedia Marie de Nazareth, an intense light suddenly appears in his bedroom and a woman's voice urges him to pray for sinners and not to despair of his illness. The teenager asks who is speaking. The voice answers that it will say so "when the time comes."

The next day, the light returns and the voice reveals itself: "I am Mary, the Mother of God, the Immaculate Conception." She then gives him a precise appointment: Sunday 11 May 1986, at the "Borello rock," a rocky outcrop in Belpasso that the boy knows well.

The appointment at the Borello rock

On 11 May, around 4 p.m., Rosario goes there. In his journal he describes a small white cloud rapidly approaching the rock, unfolding "like a flower" and radiating the same light as in his room. A young woman then appears, dressed in white, a white cloak over her shoulders, her head encircled with gold, a veil embroidered with gold, her hands clasped around a rose. She looks less than eighteen years old.

It is here that, in the tradition reported by Catholic sources, the young man's healing takes place: the boy who had been urged not to despair of his illness comes out of this sequence restored to health. The sources we consulted, however, publish no medical file: the healing is told within the visionary's own account and is not backed by an accessible clinical assessment.

Thirty-three apparitions in two years

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The encounters continue until 1 May 1988, the first day of the Marian month. During the thirty-second, the Virgin announces her thirty-third and last apparition "for an indefinite time." That day Rosario notes in his journal a state of mind identical to the previous occasions, together with a form of consolation despite the announced departure.

That same evening, according to the account, he feels a sharp pain in his chest, like a great fire in his heart. The family doctor, called urgently, gives him drops that have no effect on the sensation of heat, which is not painful but brings, he says, an inexpressible pleasure and comfort, similar to what he felt on 19 June 1986, when Mary reportedly showed him her Immaculate Heart. The visionary says he has felt the presence of this fire ever since and receives "interior locutions," a kind of dialogue of inspiration and guidance.

"I will not come back, but I am not abandoning you"

The last reported words, which Rosario says he understood on the evening of 1 May 1988: "I will not come back, but it doesn't mean that I am abandoning you. My heart will always be with you."

The visionary also mentions twelve secret messages entrusted by the Virgin: two concerning him personally and ten about the future of humanity. Their content has not been made public in the sources we were able to consult. The central theme of the public messages remains classic: praying the rosary, conversion, prayer to the angels. One message attributed to the Virgin thus invites people to pray to the angels, who "fight evil."

Messages free of doctrinal error, a benevolent archdiocese

This is what sets Belpasso apart from many controversial cases: the Virgin of Belpasso presents herself under the dogmatic titles of Immaculate Conception and Mother of God, two truths of Catholic faith, and her reported words have, according to Catholic sources, raised no doctrinal objection. The Archdiocese of Catania has accompanied the phenomenon rather than holding it back.

On 1 May 2000, Mgr Luigi Bommarito, then Archbishop of Catania, blessed the statue of the Madonna of the Belpasso rock and consecrated the chapel built, according to the wish attributed to the Virgin, on the site of the apparition. He made it a diocesan Marian shrine and attached the Jubilee indulgence to it. Interviewed by the Italian Catholic monthly *Jesus*, he described Rosario as a balanced, serene boy who does not seek to draw attention to himself. On 11 May 2011, Archbishop Salvatore Gristina declared, during the solemn Mass at the rock, that the Church would study the Virgin's messages in order to understand them better and for the edification of the faithful.

From the rock to the shrine: pilgrims by the thousands

The crowds came quickly. Between 1986 and 1988, an estimated 150,000 pilgrims came to Belpasso. Today, the Shrine of the Madonna of the Rock, on the heights of the town, still hosts a pilgrimage on the first day of every month that gathers, according to Catholic sources, more than 3,000 people.

The file also includes its share of reported atmospheric phenomena: the white cloud of the first apparition, then, on 11 May 1990, a large cross seen in the sky by many people. Mgr Bommarito himself reportedly acknowledged that a cloud above Belpasso had taken on an inexplicable shape, according to an excerpt published by the platform "A Moment with Mary."

Archive file: what the sources say

Summary document compiled by the editorial staff from the sources cited below (no period document is reproduced).

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- 04/05/1986: Rosario Toscano, a schoolboy from Catania born in 1971, is bedridden with a viral fever. First light and first voice in his bedroom.
- 05/05/1986: the voice introduces herself: "Mary, Mother of God, the Immaculate Conception." She sets an appointment at the Borello rock.
- 11/05/1986: first apparition, around 4 p.m., after the arrival of a luminous white cloud.
- 19/06/1986: apparition during which Mary reportedly showed him her Immaculate Heart.
- 01/05/1988: thirty-third and last apparition, announced during the thirty-second. Sensation of a "fire in the heart" that same evening.
- 11/05/1990: a large cross seen in the sky over Belpasso by many people.
- 01/05/2000: blessing of the statue and consecration of the chapel by Mgr Bommarito; diocesan Marian shrine.
- 11/05/2011: Mgr Gristina announces the Church's study of the messages.

A critical eye: what can be said, and what cannot be claimed

First, the Church status of the case must be gauged correctly. According to the sources consulted, Belpasso is a diocesan shrine blessed by the archbishop, which amounts to pastoral recognition. We found no formal declaration of "supernaturality" of the apparitions, and in any case the Church no longer issues one as a general rule: the new Norms of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, published on 17 May 2024, provide for six possible conclusions, from *nihil obstat* ("nothing stands in the way") to a declaration of non-supernaturality, and specify that even a *nihil obstat* expresses no certainty about the supernatural authenticity of the phenomenon.

On the facts, three points call for caution. First: the "lightning-fast healing." A viral fever in a teenager resolves spontaneously within a few days in the vast majority of cases; without a medical file, nothing allows one to tell a natural course from an exceptional event. Second: the main source of the story is the visionary himself, through his journal, relayed by devotional publications. The historian Marc Hallet, author of *Les apparitions de la Vierge et la critique historique*, points out that the overwhelming majority of books on Marian apparitions are written by authors who believe in them on principle, which calls for cross-checking sources. Third: the luminous perceptions and figures seen by a feverish teenager, then in a climate of growing fervor, fall under well-known mechanisms of suggestion, collective expectation and religious interpretation of atmospheric phenomena; the 1990 cross, seen by many witnesses, may stem from the same processes, or from a cloud effect.

On the other hand, the harshest critics have little purchase on one point: no scandal, no request for money, no heterodox message has been reported to date in our sources. The visionary is described as discreet by his own bishops. This is the opposite of many cases marked by conflicts with the hierarchy.

An echo of Beauraing

The number thirty-three is reminiscent of the thirty-three apparitions of Beauraing (Belgium), which occurred in 1932-1933 to five children, before recognition by the Bishop of Namur. Numerical coincidence or repetition of a narrative pattern, the question remains open; it illustrates in any case the symbolic strength of the number thirty-three in the Christian imagination, that of the years of Christ's life according to tradition.

What to remember

At Belpasso: no controversy, a shrine, faithful pilgrims and a visionary who has remained discreet. For believers, one more sign of the Virgin's benevolence; for researchers, a textbook case of the dynamics of modern apparitions: a teenager, an illness, a light, a place, orthodox messages, then the gradual institutionalization of the site by the local Church. As it stands, the file remains a matter of faith, not of proof.

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