

Bl. Aurelia Mercede Stefani (Sr. Irene)

(Italy/Kenya) 1891-1930

Consolata Missionary Sister

Served as a nurse in British military hospitals tending both wounded soldiers and civilians during World War I.

Assisted at Red Cross at hospitals in Tanzania

After the war returned to Kenya, Our Lady of Divine Providence Mission and cared for the sick and assisted women in labor.

Nicknamed Nyaatha (Merciful Mother)



Aurelia Jacoba Mercede Stefani was born on August 22, 1891, in Anfo, Brescia, Italy to Giovanni Stefani and Annunziata Massari. At her baptism, she was called Aurelia Giacomina Mercede. Aurelia was the fifth of twelve children. She grew up in a pious family and was known for charity at an early age helping the sick, elderly, poor and taking on the hardest jobs. When her mother died at an early age she became the educator and catechist for her brothers and sisters. And although she had expressed to her parents a desire to serve as a missionary when she was thirteen, this wish would not be fulfilled until she was twenty.

In 1910, Blessed Giuseppe Allamano founded a religious institute for women missionaries in Turin, Italy, the Consolata Missionary Sisters.

Prior to this, the Consolata Institute for Foreign Missions only included priests and coadjutor brothers. Aurelia joined the Consolata Missionary Sisters in 1911. After a year postulancy, on January 28, 1912, she took on the religious habit, taking the religious name Sister Irene.

Completing the Novitiate, she made her religious profession on January 29, 1914, and, at the end of that year, left for Kenya.

During the First World War (1914-1918), Sister Irene served as a nurse in British military hospitals tending both wounded soldiers and civilians. In 1916, she was appointed to assist the Red Cross and served in a variety of settings, including hospitals in Lindi and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. She washed, medicated and bandaged sores and wounds. She handed out medicine and food, feeding the most serious and the weak with a disconcerting delicacy. Her personal charity was able to sweeten the hearts of unscrupulous doctors, cruel overseers and incredulous Muslims. She learned various languages and was able to speak to the Africans about Jesus, to encourage and console them. She prepared many for Baptism, and over three thousand baptisms were administered to those in danger of death. She was called “a nun’s angel.”¹

After the war, Sister Irene returned to Nyeri, Kenya, helping to promote native vocations. Later in Gikondi(1920-1930) at Our Lady of Divine Providence Mission, she taught in local schools and taught catechism to parishioners. She invited anyone she met to school and catechism. She took care of the sick, assisted women in labor, and saved abandoned children. She also served as the local superior of her community for eight years.² She instructed the young sisters, teaching them missionary work. She also took the time to correspond with African “children” who had moved away to cities of Kenya such as Mombasa and Nairobi.

Sister Irene was fondly called “Nyaatha” which, in the Kikuyu language means, “a woman of compassion, mercy, goodness: or “Merciful Mother.” She burned with a desire to make Jesus and the Gospels known. When a fellow teacher, Julius Ngare, incited some students to challenge her work as a teacher, she still cared for him when he was sick. In fact, he died in her arm and that is how she contracted the bubonic plague which would subsequently take her life.

During a course on spiritual exercises on September 14, 1930, with the consent of her superior, she received permission to offer her life for the local bishop and for the missions. She made this offering of her life on October 17, 1930. Nine days later, on Sunday October 26, she was seized by shivers. She died on October 31, 1930, at Gikondi, Mukurweini, Nyeri, at the age of 39.

She was declared venerable with the promulgation of the decree on heroic virtues on April 2, 2011³ by Pope Benedict XVI. The beatification miracle^{4 5} is described as follows:

The event that took place, on January 10, 1989, in the village of Nipepe, in Mozambique, was examined as a possible miracle to obtain her beatification. Around 6 in the morning, during the celebration of Mass, shots were heard, a sign of the armed struggle between the two contending factions during the civil war; the church was then besieged.

In the church there were the people who took part in the Mass, but also the catechists and the animators of the parish with their families. They were joined by other people, who hoped to take refuge in the building so as not to be killed. For three and a half days, under threat of death, about two hundred and seventy people were barricaded, including many children.

As the hours went by, thirst arose; moreover, in Mozambique, winter is the warm season. At that point, the head of the catechists, Bernard Bwanaissa, granted permission to drink from the baptismal font, given the emergency. The source was actually a basin, the capacity of which could reach a maximum of 12 liters, but there were certainly less, since baptisms had been administered two days earlier. Plus, the bowl was full of cracks.

One of the missionaries then invited us to pray asking for the intercession of Sister Irene: in those days, in fact, he was reading her biography. The water was not only sufficient to quench everyone's thirst, but it continued to flow for several days, until, between the afternoon of January 12 and the following morning, the besieged were able to return to their homes.¹

Servant of God Irene Stefani was declared venerable with the promulgation of the decree of heroic virtue on April 2, 2011, by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. She was then beatified on May 23, 2015⁶ by Pope Francis.

A 3-day beatification ceremony was held on the grounds of Dedan Kimathi University in Nyeri, Kenya, and presided over by Tanzanian Polycarp Cardinal Pengo⁷ and John Cardinal Njue. Website: <https://missionariedellaconsolata.org/i-nostri-santi-2/> (Memorial - October 31).



Sister Irene Stefani

Note: This biography is particularly for nursing students and nurses desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI words to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients. I hope the biographies and references will help you with your Nursing History courses. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka

References:

- 1) Gianpiero Pettiti. (13 May 2018). Santi Beati E Testimoni. Blessed Irene (Aurelia Jacoba Mercede) Stefani. Accessed 16 April 2022. <http://santiebeati.it/dettaglio/92401>
- 2) Brother Silas Henderson, SDS. Aleteia. Accessed 16 April 2022. <https://aleteia.org/daily-prayer/tuesday-october-31/>
- 3) Charles G. Braganza. Hagiography Circle: An Online Resource on Contemporary Hagiography. News 2014. Accessed 16 April 2022. http://newsaints.faithweb.com/news_archives_2014.htm
- 4) "Blessed Irene Stefani". CatholicSaints.Info. 1 July 2016. Web. 16 April 2022. <<https://catholicsaints.info/blessed-irene-stefani/>>
- 5) Elvis Nyakangi (15 Oct 2022). Miracles performed by Sister Irene Stefani: Aurelia Mercede Stefani beatification in Nyeri, Kenya. Accessed 16 April 2022. <https://kenyayote.com/miracles-performed-by-sister-irene-stefani-aurelia-mercede-stefani-beatification-in-nyeri-kenya/>
- 6) Consolata Missionary Sisters (23 May 2015). Beatification of Sr. Irene Stefani. Accessed 16 April 2022. <http://consolatasisters.org/beatification-of-sr-irene-stefani/>
- 7) Hagiography Circle: An Online Resource on Contemporary Hagiography. Saints of 2015. Accessed 16 April 2022. <http://newsaints.faithweb.com/2015.htm>

Note: This biography is particularly for nursing students and nurses desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI words to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients. I hope the biographies and references will help you with your Nursing History courses. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka