

**Bl. Leonella Sgorbati**  
**(Italy/Kenya/Somalia) 1940-2006, Martyr**  
*Assigned at hospitals in Nyeri and Kiambu, Kenya in 1970's.*  
*Midwife and Instructor.*  
*Started Hermann Gmeiner School of Registered Community Nursing*  
*attached to the SOS Children's Village hospital*  
*in Mogadishu, Somalia.<sup>1</sup>*



**Rosa Maria Sgorbati** was born on December 9, 1940, in Rezzanello di Gazzola, Piacenza, Italy, to Carlo Sgorbati and Giovannina Teresa Vigilini. She was the youngest of three children. Her father was a farmer and her mother was a homemaker. Rosa was baptized on the day of her birth at the parish church of San Savio.

Immediately following World War II (1938-1945), her father changed occupations from farming to wholesale fruit and vegetable reseller in Sesto San Giovanni, Milan. Thus, when Rosa was 9 years old, On October 9, 1950, the family moved to that Milanese suburb. Her father died a year later on July 16, 1951.

Rosa was sent to a boarding school of Sisters. She had a singular experience at the school. One day after the director gave her a book and said, "Take this little book and try to read it." The book was the Gospels.

"Sitting in the small chapel of the college, in front of the picture of the crucifixion that was above the altar, she began an increasingly intense dialogue with the Lord..." "...In contact with the Word of Jesus, something great happened to her..." In her diary she wrote, "I felt *INHABITED* on that distant day - April 1952 - ... and you kept me in You, my Lord, or You remained in me. Never again alone... *INHABITED*...."<sup>2</sup> Her family even noticed a difference when she returned home. In her teens she expressed a desire to become a missionary but complied with her mother's request to wait until she was older.

When Rosa was 23 years old, on May 5, 1963, she joined the Institute of the Missionary Sisters of the Consolata and was welcomed by Mother Nazarena Fissore, the Superior General. Her six month postulancy began on May 20, 1963 in Sanfre, Cueno, Italy. She then received the habit, taking the name Sister Leonella. She studied in the novitiate under Sister Paolina Emiliani beginning on November 21, 1963, in Nepi, Viterbo, Italy. Sister Leonella made her first vows the following day on November 22, 1965.<sup>3</sup> She then traveled to England and studied nursing and midwifery. She graduated from the State Enrolled Nursing Program in 1969 and completed the first part of the midwifery course in 1970.<sup>4</sup> The program was intense, alternating between training, study and hospital internships. Since the program was fifty kilometers from her community of sisters, she was only able to return to the community on days of rest. Sister Leonella was noted for her brilliant and lively mind and formidable memory.



In September 1970, Sister Leonella was sent to Kenya where she worked at the Consolata Hospital Mathari in Nyeri and the Nazareth Hospital in Kiambu for 13 years from 1970-1983.

During this time, her duties included serving as a midwife. Also during this time, Sister Leonella made her final religious profession on November 10, 1972 in Nyeri.<sup>15</sup> After additional training, in 1985, she began teaching in a school for nurses adjoining the Nkubu Hospital in Meru, Kenya focusing on the 100 bed maternity ward. She was very solicitous of the young trainees and also took extra time to give lessons to high school graduates.

In 1993, she was chosen by the sisters to represent them at the VII General Chapter of their Institute. She had been working in the African mission for over twenty years and would help plan for the institute's next six years. After the Chapter, from November 1993 to 1999, she then served as the Regional superior of the Consolata Missionary Sisters in Kenya.

At the conclusion of two consecutive three-year periods as Regional Superior, Sister Leonella was asked to be part of the Sabbatical team for the sisters of the African continent. She cared for the house and the sisters who passed by for their rest time from 2000-2005. She was always on the move with her apron on and sleeves rolled up. "All were amazed by her generosity and attentiveness."<sup>5</sup>

After serving 31 years as a missionary in Kenya, in 2001, Sister Leonella traveled to Somalia to investigate the prospects of opening a nursing school in the hospital run by the organization SOS Children's Village. It was the only health facility in all of Mogadishu providing pediatric care free of charge. During this time, Somalia was unstable and dangerous, but the sisters were enthusiastic about running the Center, teaching and preparing future nurses. It was the SOS that had asked the Consolata Missionaries to teach in their school of nursing. Nurses and doctors had not been trained in Somalia for ten years.



Sister Leonella had to find common elements between Christianity and Islam. It was necessary to prove that the scientific notions taught were not against the Koran. Also Muslim authorities had to be assured that she did not proselytize. Sister Leonella did not proselytize, instead, she valued interreligious dialogue.<sup>6</sup> Some fundamentalists were not convinced. This created an exhausting environment in which to work. The sisters' activities were restricted to the sisters' house, SOS hospital and crossing the street that divided the two with an escort.

In 2002, the Hermann Gmeiner School of Registered Community Nursing attached to the SOS Children's Village hospital opened in Mogadishu, Somalia. Sister Leonella was the director and also an instructor. "Sister Leonella fought a long bureaucratic battle to obtain internationally recognized diplomas for her students; she succeeded and the World Health Organization (WHO) issued internationally recognized diplomas to her students."<sup>7</sup>

Following this, Sister Leonella returned to Kenya with three of her students, whom she enrolled at the Medical Training College. Her aim was to have these three students form the nucleus of the future tutors at the school. Getting these students into Kenya, and sorting out the registration and financial difficulties in enrolling them into the college was another struggle, but as soon as Sister saw it through, she headed off to Uganda to scout for hospitals willing to train her other students in operating theater work.<sup>7</sup> They graduated their first class in 2006.

Sister Leonella briefly returned to Italy in 2006 on sabbatical. There, in a television interview, Sister Leonella stated, "I know there is a bullet with my name on it. I don't know when it will arrive, but as long as it does not arrive, I will stay [in Somalia]." Sister Leonella had

difficulty returning to Mogadishu because Islamic courts had taken control of the area. She managed to return to her work at the hospital on September 13, 2006. Reportedly, some fundamentalists thought that the nursing students were being indoctrinated into the Christian religion.<sup>7</sup>

One morning Sister Leonella arose very early to pray and told the sisters they needed to offer many prayers for His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI and for the Church. She had heard on the radio that the Muslim world was in great agitation because of a speech the Holy Father gave in Regensburg, Germany on September 12, 2006.<sup>8</sup> Some were stirring up violence against the Church. Four days after her return to Somalia, Sister Leonella, along with her bodyguard/driver, were killed:

On the fateful day of the 17<sup>th</sup> of September [Sunday], Sister Leonella crossed the road that separates the hospital from the accommodation of the Consolata Sisters. Hiding behind vehicles and kiosks that are found along this road, two gunmen attacked the Sister. The first shot hit her in the thigh, her bodyguard, Mohamed Osman Mahamud, [a Muslim father of four], opened fire on the two gunmen. They fired back killing him and hitting Sister Leonella twice. One of these bullets entered her back and severed an artery causing a severe hemorrhage. Sister Leonella was rushed into the nearby hospital...<sup>7</sup>

The Consolata sisters relate:<sup>9</sup>

“Shortly after, someone excitedly knocked on the door, just enough time to hear the name “Leonella” and Sister Gianna Irene Peano with Sister Marzia rushed to the hospital where she had been transported; Sister Leonella was very pale and suffering. There they found a feverish bustle of nurses and doctors who tried in every possible way to save her with oxygen and transfusions, while the students offered their blood. They approached Sister Leonella, she was wet with sweat, but conscious.

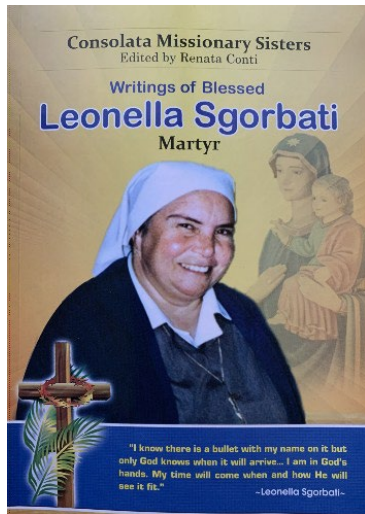
She moved her livid lips and whispered, “I can hardly breathe.” Meanwhile, people flocked to the hospital entrance, the tension and pain were strong and almost palpable. The guards managed to make an opening for Sister Annalisa Costardi, who entered the building. Sister Leonella was asleep, but conscious. Sr. Annalisa, with the other sisters, hastened to communicate the incident to the superior in Italy and Kenya.

Meanwhile, the surgeon called the Flying Doctor’s plane, hoping to be able to transport her to Nairobi [Kenya]. In the midst of all this movement, Sister Leonella lay there, suffering, with too little oxygen for her lungs. She took in the air enough to call Sister Gianna Irene, only a whisper came out, but her sister heard and immediately noticed her and brought her face close to Leonella’s. Sister Gianna Irene recalls: “There was no sign of fear or tension, not even anxiety, but you could see a great peace that meant something important that was close to her heart and with a faint voice she said: “Forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness.”

The United Nations helped move Sister Leonella’s body and evacuate the other Consolata sisters from Somalia to Kenya. Sister Leonella’s funeral was conducted at the Consolata Chapel in Nairobi, Kenya, where she was buried. Her body was exhumed on September 30, 2017, and is now kept in the Flora Hostel Chapel in Nairobi.

On September 23, 2006, 6 days following her martyrdom, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, in an address to the Bishops taking part in the formation update meeting organized by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in the Hall of the Swiss at Castel Gandolfo, stated:

How can we forget the many priests, men and women religious and lay people in mission lands who have sealed with blood their fidelity to Christ and to the Church, in past centuries and in our times? In the last few days, the oblation of Sr. Leonella Sgorbati, a Consolata Missionary barbarically killed in Moga-dishu, Somalia, has been added to the number of these heroic Gospel witnesses. This martyrology, in the past and in our day, adorns the history of the Church. Even in suffering and apprehension, it keeps alive in our souls trust in the glorious flourishing of Christian faith, for as Tertullian says, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.”<sup>10</sup>



Sister Leonella Sgorbati was declared venerable with the promulgation of the decree of martyrdom on November 8, 2017, and beatified on May 26, 2018,<sup>11</sup> both by Pope Francis. Her beatification was celebrated at the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta and Santa Giustina in Piacenza, Italy. Blessed Leonella Sgorbati is the second Italian Consolata Missionary sister working in Africa to be beatified. The first, Blessed Sister Irene Stefani, who was beatified on May 23, 2015, was also a nurse. (Memorial - September 17). Website: <https://missionariedellaconsolata.org/i-nostri-santi-2/>

*One must have so much charity to give one's life.  
We missionaries are devoted to give our lives for the mission*<sup>5</sup>

Prayer for the Intercession of Blessed Leonella Sgorbati:<sup>12</sup>

*Eternal Father, who through your Holy Spirit,  
works in the midst of all peoples, regardless of their culture and their religion,  
look with mercy at humankind,  
often without peace and reluctant to forgive.  
Through the intercession of  
the Blessed Sr. Leonella Sgorbati, "faithful and joyful disciple of the Gospel"  
who bore witness with her blood to her love for you  
and for those mostly in need,  
grant us the favour we are asking and  
give us the joy to see her recognized as a martyr for the faith.  
We ask this through Jesus Christ Our Lord,  
model and origin of every martyrdom. Amen.*

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Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses ([www.ciciams.org](http://www.ciciams.org) / [www.nacn-usa.org](http://www.nacn-usa.org)): *to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls*. May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at [www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka)