

Bl. Maria Domenica Brun Barbantini
(Italy) 1789-1868¹

Foundress, Sister Ministers of the Infirm of St. Camillian
(Camillian Sisters)



Maria Domenica Brun was born on January 17, 1789, in Lucca, Italy to Pietro Brun and Joan Granucci. Her father was a native of Lucerne, Switzerland, and served in the Swiss Guards stationed in Lucca. Her mother was from the small town of Pariana in the province of Lucca. Though they were not rich, since the salaries of the Swiss Guard were not high, they were privileged to live in a quarter in the Ducal Palace.

Maria Domenica had a great love for the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is also reported that during the consecration at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at Chiesa di Miracoli, Maria saw the Precious Blood overflowing from the chalice elevated by the priest. This incident she only revealed to her confessor. Other than that, she had an ordinary childhood. Unfortunately, her teen years were marked by tragedy. She lost her father and three siblings in a short time period.

Maria Domenica's mother was now left to care for the family.

Three years after her father's death Maria Domenica suffered a psychological crisis. She recovered presumably due to the firm education she received during her childhood and with the help of her mother's patience and guidance. At the age of fifteen she adopted an austere lifestyle, devoted to study and forgoing the pleasures of youth. As she grew into an attractive woman, she had plenty of suitors and admirers. At the age of eighteen, Salvatore Barbantini, a young man, of Lucca, who had inherited a fabric store from his father, proposed to Maria Domenica. He was not rich but they could live comfortably. Her mother was not happy about his prospects, desiring for her daughter a more secure position. For four years, mother and daughter disagreed until eventually her mother capitulated. Domenica and Salvatore were married on April 22, 1811, in the cathedral of St. Martin in Lucca.

Tragedy soon struck when suddenly, five months after their wedding, Salvatore died leaving Domenica alone and with child. As a 22-year-old widow, she faced the raising of her child without his father. On February 14, 1812, Lorenzo Pietro Barbantini was born. Though still grieving the loss of her husband and now perpetually wearing a simple black dress, Maria Domenica lived to provide for her son. She provided him an exceptional religious and secular education such that at age four he was able to answer questions about the Holy Scriptures, and at age seven he wrote correctly in Latin and knew some French. During this time, she also devoted her time to the care of poor and sick women. She assisted them at night in their homes. Tragedy again struck the life of Maria Domenica when Lorenzo Pietro died at the age of eight from a sudden serious illness. She was yet again grief stricken.

Instead of closing upon herself in grief, Maria Domenica dedicated her time to the care of the poor and lonely sick, the abandoned and the dying. Now, in both the day and night, she walked the narrow and dark streets of Lucca, sometimes with her lantern-lit to go to the bedsides

of the most serious and lonely infirmed. She was not stopped by a hurricane, arriving at a home with her clothes soaked. Disregarding her needs, she provided assistance, caring about “Jesus, present in the sick body of that sick person.”² Some people were cruel and attempted to thwart her efforts such as the time a person put soap on the steps that Maria Domenica had to climb to arrive at a sick person’s home. This caused her to slip and fall. She was not intimidated by unknown ill-intentioned people who would at times pursue her at night. Some nights she worked through the night caring for others to the point of exhaustion. She used the little money she had to care for the sick, to help alleviate some of their misery.

Some miraculous events occurred through her intercession.

“One day she put on the body of a poor pregnant woman, who seemed about to die, a flower taken from the altar on which the Blessed Sacrament was exposed. The woman gave birth to twins and recovered her health.

Another sick woman could not feed her newborn. Maria Domenica prayed to the Blessed Virgin venerated at the altar of a church familiar to her. At the end of the prayer, Brun Barbantini ran to the woman, told her to pray to Our Lady and to take the baby to her breast. The woman obeyed and, to her surprise, could feed her baby.”²

Realizing that she could not deal on her own with all the sick in Lucca, Maria Domenica formed a group of women who committed themselves to care for the sick poor. In 1819, they were called the “Pious Union of the Sisters of Charity” and were placed under the patronage of Our Lady of Sorrows. Archbishop Sardi officially approved the Pious Union, and Monsignor Del Prete became their confessor and spiritual father, helping them write basic rules. Monsignor Del Prete also directed to Maria Domenica two women who wanted to “leave the world,” live together in community and devote themselves to prayer and the apostolate. He encouraged Maria Domenica to purchase a home where the two postulants could live. This she did and it became the foundation of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales.

After establishing these first two foundations, the clergy of Lucca entrusted Maria Domenica with the establishment of a “Monastery of the Visitation” for the education of youth. She was docile to the requests of the clergy and sensitive to the needs of the Church. However, this third endeavor took six years to accomplish and still exists today in Lucca.

Maria Domenica then returned to her original vocation and established a religious Congregation of Oblate Nursing Sisters to serve Christ in the sick and suffering. On January 23, 1829, the first community of Oblate Nursing Sisters was established to perform authentic charity “at the bedside of the sick and dying, in poor dwellings, where even the dying lay alone and abandoned.”² She taught the sisters to serve the sick, even at the risk of one’s own life. In the rule she wrote, “They will serve Our Lord Jesus Christ in the persons of the sick with generosity and purity of intention, always ready to lay down their lives for love of Christ who died on a cross for us.”²

The Rules and the Institute were approved by Monsignor Domenico Stefanelli, Archbishop of Lucca on August 5, 1841. Eleven years later, the Holy Father conferred upon them the name: “Congregation of the Ministers of the Infirmed.” Maria Domenica entrusted the institute to the protection and guidance of Our Lady of Sorrows whom she referred to as “Our Superior.” “Just as the Mother of Jesus assisted her crucified Son and shared His pain, torment and abandonment, so Maria Domenica invited her daughters to live “compassion” alongside the sick and suffering of every age.”²

Fortuitously, Maria Domenica met members of the Camillians founded by St. Camillus de Lellis. Fr. Antonio Scalabrini saw the similarity in the charisms of both founders. On March 23, 1852, His Holiness Pope Pius IX conferred on the institute the *Decretum Laudis*, the pontifical document through which he granted the daughters of Maria Domenica the name of “Ministers of the Sick” and officially decreed the spiritual communion between the Order of Camillian religious and the Congregation of Maria Domenica. Three years later, in August 1855, the daughters wore the red cross of St. Camillus when they responded to the cholera epidemic claiming victims throughout Tuscany.

As seems to occur with many founders, Maria Domenica experienced accusations, backbiting and perhaps envy. There was a misunderstanding between her and Archbishop Giulio Arrigoni, who was an intelligent and open person. She approached these trials with the armor of HUMILITY, by praying for, forgiving and loving her persecutors.

Maria Domenica fell seriously ill in 1866 but was cured through the intercession of St. Camillus de Lellis. Realizing her strength was diminishing, she made efforts to leave everything in order. Her prayer life intensified. This was a time in which a united Italy was taking shape and in which an anti-clerical and hostile wave to religious congregations was rising. Afflicted by an undiagnosed illness, her face swelled and she was weakened by illness. Mother Maria Domenica Brun Barbantini died on May 22, 1868, leaving the Institute with a small number of sisters, strong in spirit and generous in the service to the sick.

Maria Domenica Brun Barbantini was declared venerable by the promulgation of the decree of heroic virtue on March 26, 1994. She was beatified by His Holiness Pope St. John Paul II on May 17, 1995⁴ in Rome, Italy. (Memorial - May 22).



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