

**Venerable Maria Rosa Zorza (Sr. Vitarosa)
(Italy/Congo) 1943-1995, Martyr of Charity**

Members of the Sisters of the Poor, Palazzolo Institute, composed mostly of experienced nurses, and founded in 1869 in Bergamo, Italy. Professional Nursing Training at Istituto Palazzolo, Milan, Italy, ~1969 Cared for sick elderly at Milan nursing home, then at Torre Boldone and then the mentally ill in Varese, Italy.

After 3 written requests, sent to the Tropical Medicine Course in Belgium and the to Kikwit Hospital, Congo, 1982

Returned to Italy for care of ischemia, 1991 and then, at her request, returned to Kingasani, the large mission on the outskirts of Kinshasa, Congo

Thinking sisters simply had serious diarrhea, packed a suitcase full of medicines and drove the 42 kilometers to assist the sisters.

6th sister to die during the 1995 Ebola Outbreak in Belgium Congo



Maria Rosa Zorza (Sr. Vitarosa) (1943-1995) was born on October 9, 1943, in Palosco, Italy, to Angelo Zorza and Maria Merigo. She was the youngest of seven children. Her mother died when she was two years old. She was raised by her maternal grandmother, Faustina. Her father remarried Maria Calegari and to their union was born two more children.

In 1950, when Maria Rosa was 7 years old, the family moved to Bettole di Cavenago where her father worked as an agricultural expert and farmer. Her father was industrious in his work and very religious. Every evening he gathered the whole family to pray the Holy Rosary. At an early age, she felt called to religious life. When she was seventeen, in 1960, the family returned to Palosco. Maria Rosa worked doing house work and also in an umbrella handle making factory.

Maria Rosa began dating a young man named Giuseppe and their relationship lasted two years. Determining that they were not meant to be married, Giuseppe entered religious life, and Maria Rosa began in search of her calling.

Maria Rosa met the Poverelle Sisters of the Palazzolo Institute in Palosco. In order to determine if she was called to their mission and charism, she began working in the psychiatric hospital in Varese where the sisters also worked. This experience confirmed her calling to work with the poor and the sick. Maria Rosa entered the Congregation of the Sisters of the Poor on September 1, 1966, at the age of 22. She took the name Sister Vitarosa. She professed temporary vow on March 25, 1969, in the chapel of the Mother House in Bergamo. She was sent to via Palazzolo in Milan where she studied professional nursing, specializing in geriatrics. She encountered some fatigue while in her studies and wrote a childhood friend who had also become a Poverelle Sister, "But I want to become a nurse at all costs, to go on a mission to treat sick children."

Sister Vitarosa served the sick elderly at the Milan nursing home, then at Torre Boldone and then the mentally ill in Varese. During her childhood, she had been accustomed to move with her family so she readily adapted to her various assignments. However, she continued to have the desire to serve in the missions and wrote the Mother General expressing her availability three times. In 1981, her request was accepted, and she was sent to the tropical disease course and instructed to learn French.

October 20, 1982, at the age of 39, Sister Vitarosa was sent to Kikwit to work in the civil hospital. She tried to bring joy to the malnourished and sick children, mothers, sick people of all ages and conditions and hospital collaborators. In her letters to the Mother General, she expressed concern about the political situation in Zaire: great poverty, injustice, oppression and internal wars. In addition to her work in the hospital, she would bring food and comfort to the inmates in the local jail.

In 1991, at age 48, she returned to Italy for care of an ischemia. She wished to return to Zaire and was, therefore, sent to Kingasani, the large mission on the outskirts of Kinshasa. She was concerned about the frequent looting and riots but entrusted herself to God.

She was 51 year old when the Ebola epidemic hit. Thinking that they simply had serious diarrhea, with the permission of the Provincial Superior Sister Annelvira, she packed a suitcase full of medicines and drove the 42 kilometers to assist the sisters. Sister Vitarosa assisted the Provincial Superior in the care of the first four deceased sisters. When asked if she was afraid, Sister Vitarosa responded, *"Afraid of what?"* She would then sing along in the Kinshasa language, *"If in the church Jesus Christ calls you, accept to serve Him with all your heart."*

Both sisters contracted Ebola and were quarantined in a small house on May 19, 1995. In the afternoon they both received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Sister Vitarosa did not seem sick like the others, and she took precautions while quarantined. After Sister Annelvira died on May 23, Sister Vitarosa said to the doctor from Atlanta who treated her, "Now it's my turn." She died on the night of May 28, 1995, at the age of 51 in Kikwit, Kwilu, Zaire.

Servant of God Sister Vitarosa Zorza was declared venerable with the decree of heroic virtue on March 17, 2001, by Pope Francis.

*"Afraid of what?"
"If in the church Jesus Christ calls you,
accept to serve Him with all your heart."*

*"I felt that life is a gift from God, that everything that surrounds us is made by Him with love and that every person was also a sign of God's love. I understood that the Lord has a particular project for each person: it is the task of each of us to know this project and carry it out according to the gifts we are filled with.
But what was my project?"*



**Martyrs of Charity - Nurse Victims of the Ebola Epidemic,
Democratic Republic of the Congo/Zaire (Italy) - 1995**

*Died of the Ebola virus contracted while caring for victims of the hemorrhagic fever
in Kikwit, Kwilu, Democratic Republic of Congo.*

*Members of the Sisters of the Poor, Palazzolo Institute, composed
mostly of experienced nurses, and founded in 1869 in Bergamo, Italy.*

In 1995, a very aggressive virus that causes a terrible hemorrhagic fever, Ebola, ravaged Zaire, taking the lives of six nurses, missionary sisters from the Congregation of Sister of the Poor, Palazzolo Institute between April 25 and May 28, 1995. The religious sisters contracted the disease in the hospital wards and operating room while providing nursing care to those infected by the virus. The terrible Ebola virus killed them, along with thousands of people in Africa. In Kikwit, it affected 220 people and 176 died. The Bishop of Bergamo, Msgr. Francesco Beschi, described these nurses as "martyrs of charity," stating, "There is no greater love than giving

one's life like Jesus." They gave their lives to serve the sick and poor in the turbulent country known as the Belgian Congo (1908-1960), Democratic Republic of the Congo (1960-1971), Zaire (1971-1997) and again DRC (1997 to the present).



In May 1995, after caring for victims of Ebola, as they began to succumb to the deadly effects of the virus, the Sisters faxed the Mother General in Bergamo, Italy:

We understand your trepidation, but we are totally in God's hands. No evacuation can be done. It is very hard for you and for us to accept this separation from the sisters. Painful events have overwhelmed us but the life of the Congregation must continue: the situation is quite dramatic, especially inside. But it is necessary to remain calm. In Kinshasa there are no outbreaks and all the roads towards the interior are blocked.¹

The United States of American Center for Disease Control and Prevention recorded the outbreak in a 1998 Emerging Infectious Disease letter.²

At the request of the Congregation, on April 28, 2013, Bishop Edouard Mununu, Bishop of Kikwit, initiated the Cause for Canonization of the six religious Sisters by opening the diocesan inquiry to ascertain their heroic virtues. Eight years later, Sister Floralba, Sister Clarangela, and Sister Dinarosa were declared venerable on February 20, 2021. And the next month, on March 17, 2021, Sister Danielangela, Sister Annelvira, and Sister Vitarosa were also declared venerable, all with the decree of heroic virtue³ promulgated by Pope Francis.

The remains of the six nurses, missionary, religious sisters, at the express request of the Bishop of Kikwit Monsignor Edouard Mununu, rest in front of the Cathedral of Kikwit.

Reference:

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