

# **Father Francis**

The Story of a Missionary



by

Susan Berard-Goldberg



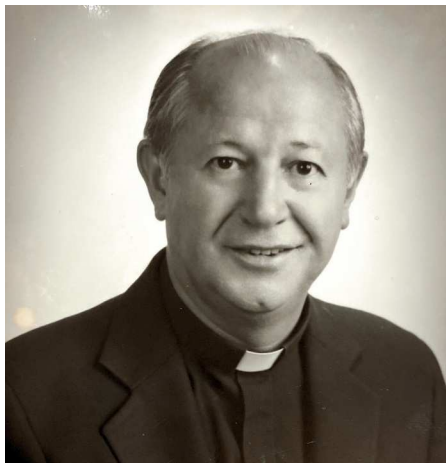
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Father Francis Emile Signorelli, S.X.



# Dedication

This book is dedicated to Father Francis E. Signorelli, S.X., for his love of God and his fellow man, as exemplified by his life's work as a Xaverian priest and missionary. It is an ever-lasting gift to have been part of your journey...SBG.



Fr. Francis, at right, with brother, Rino, and sister, Laura.

# Prologue

There are common threads of humanity that run within each of us. The question is, what makes an individual cross these common threads and become different? Exceptional? What makes an individual stand out in this sea of humanity?

Such individuals are described as being gentle in mannerisms, benevolent, self-sacrificing—one who cares more for the welfare of others than himself. It is a rarity for sure, not unlike the nova star that bursts forth majestically and unexpectedly in the galaxy, that this individual is born and brought to earth for good. This would be a man or woman—one of complexity—who appears to have a sense of what their destiny is

from the beginning and embraces this with all  
that is in them. We might ask, is it perhaps  
because their destiny has been sealed by the  
hand of God?

Just perhaps....

## The New Baby

The year was 1932 in Marolles, Oise, France, a very small town where, on September 5, a male baby would be delivered of Guiseppa Signorelli and her husband, Christoforo “Bapista” Signorelli. The infant boy was joyously welcomed by his parents and three young siblings. Two sisters were named Natalina and Laura. The brother was Ottorino (called Rino for short). Another male child that was born between Rino and the new baby had died at a very young age. The new baby would be named Francis.

Francis Emile was the only Signorelli offspring born in France. The Signorelli family originated

in Italy. But times were hard and it became apparent before Francis was born that Christoforo would soon be in need of a good job. An Italian man from Bergamo, Italy, had opened a button factory in France and promised Christoforo employment. Thus, the Signorelli family moved with the high hopes of obtaining a better life. The birth of Francis Emile on September 5, 1932, was viewed as a gift from God and a sign of better things to come.

Young Francis was the center of attention. His siblings loved him and, as he grew, he never lacked playmates for fun activities.

The Signorellis settled into a nondescript house adjacent to the walls of the small button factory.

It was just outside of the town's center. The town of Marolles, Oise, was very small. It consisted of the old Roman Catholic Church, a small town hall, and a few homes. A small canal ran close to the Signorelli residence. The children would toss small pebbles into the canal while skipping and singing. When the children returned home, a hot, hearty soup would be waiting for them. In the evening before bedtime the family would gather for prayer—often the Rosary was recited. Where family was nurtured and cherished, faith was at the heart of the home. Every Sunday, Guiseppa would lead her brood like little ducklings to the old church for Mass. Often Christoforo would remain behind to prepare a

much-anticipated Sunday meal of *Polenta E*  
*Osei*—a family favorite.



# War

But Francis, now now a mere six years old, would find his time in France cut short. A world war was about to explode. Word began to spread throughout Europe of the encroaching German movement. Fears mounted as an exodus of people swept through various parts of Europe.

In the late evening, when the children were in bed, Christoforo and Guiseppa would sit quietly at the kitchen table and discuss the news of war and which options might serve their family best. In the end, they decided to return to Italy.

Christoforo quickly uprooted the family and made plans to travel back to Italy by train as

soon as possible. The train they took was musty and crowded. The air was filled with fright and uncertainty. Francis was scared as he clung to his siblings. He could not begin to grasp the situation, but knew deep inside that it wasn't good.

Christoforo had prepared the older children that they had no place to call their own in Italy. Thus, he had made arrangements with various family members, as well as old friends, to take in the children. The family would have to be split up until a place could be found for them to live together.

As the family exited the train, they went in separate directions. Francis was scared.

Soldiers in German uniforms were everywhere. They walked hurriedly, their tall, black leather boots slapping the ground loudly. The soldiers' eyes glanced suspiciously, seemingly without their heads turning. Were they looking for someone special or was something sinister about to happen? Unbeknown to young Francis, his family's beloved homeland, Italy, had sided with Germany.

In the weeks to come, Francis would be well taken care of, but his heart was broken. He missed his parents and siblings so very much. It would be a while before the whole family could be reunited.

At long last, Christoforo and Guiseppa found a

place for their family in Brembata, Bergamo, Italy, where Christoforo was able to find work in a factory. It was spring of 1940. Brembata was a small town near the river Brembo. The two-family dwelling was along the river bank by a small bridge. Young Francis and his brother spent countless hours there. Francis especially loved to fish there. He would tie a fork on the end of a stick and stand at the very edge of the water. He would search the clear water for fish swimming by the stones and rocks. With one swift stab Francis would pierce the fish with his fork fishing rod. He would repeat this for hours on end until he caught a few fish. Then he would race home with his catch for his mother to cook for dinner.

Francis's delight in bringing fish home for dinner was insurmountable—only, perhaps, later matched by catching baby birds to be prepared with his family's beloved *Polenta E Osei*, a dish of roasted baby birds served over cornmeal mush. Polenta, the cornmeal base, was a mainstay at this time in Northern Italy. Food was not plentiful in many parts of Europe.

The war was taking its toll on people and their way of life, the economy, and in some aspects, their religion. Jobs were hard to come by.

Wages were small. Territory was ruled with an iron hand. People were petrified to speak up to the Germans and the Fascists supporting their cause. It was by no means a favorable time for Italy.

Nevertheless, like many Italians, Christoforo and Guiseppa made the most of what they had and approached life with hope. They felt a certain level of comfort in Brembata, in the province of Bergamo, Lombardy, where they had grown up. It was also near Dalmina.

Christoforo had found work in a large factory in Dalmina. It produced large firearms among other things. Christoforo was happy to find a job. He would ride his bike there no matter the weather. He never complained about anything.

Christoforo was called “Baptista” by everyone who knew him. So, from here on, he will be referred to as such.

# Baptista

Baptista was a man of average height with a strong, solid build. His eyes were dark and deep, his skin the dark olive of Mediterranean-born people. His strong, supple hands could easily chop large wooden logs but just as easily sew a few stitches on a child's shoe. He was a man of few words, but his love and devotion to his family shone forth in everything he did.

Baptista also possessed a devilish sense of humor, which young Francis would eventually inherit. Baptista reveled in making up stories that his young offspring would swallow hook, line and sinker. One such story involved how babies were born. He told his daughters that babies were born under the cabbages in the

cabbage patch. Laura, the second-to-oldest, was in charge of watering the cabbages. She and her older sister were also in charge of babysitting the younger ones. Laura soon tired of both tasks. So one day she decided to stop watering the cabbages. “No more babies for this family!” she decided. The cabbages did not flourish and Baptista never knew why!



## **Guiseppea Signorelli**

Francis's mother, Guiseppea (née Signorelli) Signorelli was the wit of the family. She came to the marriage with the same maiden name as her married last name. This was quite common at the time in Italy. Though she was a fun-loving, humorous woman, Guiseppea was a rock of faith. She would build the foundation of religion in her family. Guiseppea was born into a common Italian family of this time on April 27, 1895, in Telgate, Bergamo. Their home was rustic. A number of family members would sleep in the same, small room. Most of the food was homegrown. The mainstays of their diet were vegetables, fruits, grains and small birds, when available. Clothes were basic, hand sewn, and

few. Shoes, likewise, were few to be had. In fact, Guiseppa wore shoes for the first time on her wedding day, but her feet hurt so badly she had to remove them!

Francis's mother was a strongly built woman with darker skin coloring. Her eyes were warm and bright with a flicker of devilishness in them. She loved to make others laugh but her true joy was her family. Guiseppa adored her husband and children and was devoted to their care. A great part of that care was instilling in all of them an underlying faith in her beloved Catholicism. She saw to it that her brood attended Mass every holy day and Sunday. She prayed the rosary with them, and encouraged each child to say their own prayers. Her

devotion paid off. Her children honored their religion by practicing their faith. The second oldest child, Laura (the cabbage patch caretaker), would become a nun and spend her lifetime devoted to Christ and His Mother through her works of faith. And young Francis Emile, well, that is an amazing story unto itself.

## **The Start of Service**

As typical a young boy as he was, Francis's greatest joy was to play priest, saying Mass while the children played their games and rough-housed. When Francis finally reached the appropriate age he jumped at the chance to be an altar boy. What a glorious day it was for him when he stepped on the altar to serve for the very first time. He had never felt such a rush of emotion. He truly sensed the presence of God, and, when he looked up at the statue of the Blessed Mother, he sensed she was smiling at him. Even then he knew in his heart of hearts that this was what he wanted.

Francis waited anxiously each week to serve

Mass. The pastor became very fond of him, as did the other church members. They could sense the pride he took in serving. In time, the church set up a youth center for the children of the town. Francis spent much time there. He would watch movies there on Sundays, and it was there that his love of soccer developed. This would be a game he would play for the remainder of his adult life. In fact, he played so well that others would encourage him to try it professionally. But Francis had other ideas.

The young priest who was in charge of the youth center became a friend and mentor to the boy. His faith, kindness, and leadership engaged the youngsters positively. He noticed young Francis—his even temperament,

consideration, and kindness toward the others, and his love of the Church. The priest was impressed. There was something different about Francis—something not usual in one so young. He wanted to be certain Francis stayed on the right path.

When the occasion arose, the young priest spoke with Francis. He told him about a religious order not far from there. It was a Catholic missionary group of clergy started by Father Guido Conforti. It was called the Xaverian Missionaries, after St. Francis Xavier. The young priest encouraged Francis to learn more about it. The seed had been planted.

## **Grammar School 1938-1945**

During this time, Francis Emile attended grammar school in Brembata. It was a Catholic school attended by many of the town's youngsters. Francis loved sports, particularly soccer. Nevertheless, unlike the other boys, he displayed a shyness and sensitivity.

Francis was kind to everyone and wasn't fearful of demonstrating his overwhelming love of God and the Blessed Mother. The pastor noted this in Francis and took him under wing. Francis came to look at the pastor as another father figure. He would do chores for him at the rectory such as raking and planting. On occasion, the pastor would send Francis to the

nuns' home to get hosts for Mass. He had a reason behind these chores. He, too, saw great potential in Francis, and didn't want him to go astray as youngsters sometimes do. In the back of his mind he thought that just maybe Francis would consider the priesthood one day.

Under the pastor's guidance, Francis flourished. He loved his time at the church. At one point, the Sacristan, a priest who takes care of the Sacristy, was called into service. Francis jumped at the chance to learn all he could from the Sacristan. He set up the altar, the bells to signal Mass; and checked the lights and other such things to be certain all was in working order. Once, when carrying a huge ladder to check some lights, the ladder became too



heavy and fell onto a pew. The noise could be heard from miles away—or so Francis thought. He was horrified. He thought for sure that he would be chastised and dismissed from his duties. But Francis had nothing to worry about. The door to this sacred world had been opened to him and the key put into his pocket. Francis was safe.

## The War Escalates

Young Francis was safe within his home and church, but outside of these confines the war was escalating. Though the Signorelli family had settled in Brembata, those in the village could still hear bombings in areas nearby.

Francis and his siblings would hear the bombs, and then the sirens. Fear permeated their nights. Soon, fear and anxiety were common every night. On one such evening, young Francis awoke in a panic-stricken state. He cried out loudly for his parents, but no one came. In his panic, he ran through the house, and then out onto the porch. There he found his family silently watching flames shoot up over Milan as the bombs exploded. A shiver went

through the group as the explosions continued.

Muted voices could he heard far off, then silence. How could anyone possibly relax, let alone sleep, in the midst of such horror?

Young Francis would forever recall those nights. And one very important aspect of this time also remained with him. That would be the sense of serenity he would feel as he prayed the Hail Mary. It was something he would utilize many times later, during his time in the Amazon and elsewhere.

This faith in God and His Mother served the Signorelli family well. They trusted in God and his plans. At times it almost seemed that the hand of God rested on family members and

blessed them. One such occasion involved Francis's father. Baptista woke one morning for work but he did not feel well so he decided not to go to the factory. This was highly unusual because, as previously mentioned, Baptista always went to work, no matter the weather or if he was feeling under the weather. On that day he felt poor enough to stay home. During that day the factory in Dalmine where he worked was bombed. The warning alarm in the factory had malfunctioned and never went off. Many workers were killed. When the news reached the Signorelli family all fell to their knees in gratitude to God, who had spared their beloved husband and father. Baptista was so grateful, but also crushed over the deaths of his fellow

laborers. This would not be the final time God intervened in the fate of the Signorelli family.

On another occasion, the family—specifically young Francis—would be positively touched by God’s hand. Francis frequently served early Mass—5:30 A.M., to be exact. He was always prompt and anxious to serve. On a particular morning the pastor took Francis aside immediately after Mass. He told Francis in an anxious, hushed voice to go right away to the Sacristan’s house, and to tell him not to give the keys to the bell tower to the German soldiers who were to arrive momentarily. Francis had no idea that the pastor had received a message that the Germans would take the keys, open the bell tower, and use machine guns to shoot

Allies destined to arrive shortly.

Without hesitation, Francis ran off to the Sacristan's house—just minutes before the German soldiers arrived. He delivered the message to the Sacristan and started back, but not before he encountered several German soldiers carrying big machine guns walking up to the Sacristan's house. It would appear that Divine intervention had indeed been at work once more. Francis left the Sacristan's house in the nick of time. He was not hurt and he had played a significant role in saving a number of lives that day.

Francis continued to serve the 5:30 A.M. daily Mass. He would often be stopped by German

soldiers because the curfew set by the Germans had not ended. Francis was well aware of the danger involved, but his fear took a backseat to serving Mass. God appeared to have his own plan and it seemed that young Francis Emile Signorelli was to have a major role in it.

## **More Divine Intervention...A Major Step**

One day, while Francis would be performing his duties at the church, a Xaverian missionary who was stationed in China came by. He was visiting Italy and looking for donations. He spotted young Francis working — so adorable, so diligent, so holy. He walked up to Francis and looked down at his innocent, adorable face. His deep, dark eyes were so earnest-looking, and as he smiled two dimples erupted on each side of his chin. He looked like a cherub.

The missionary asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Without hesitation, Francis replied, “A missionary!” The young priest smiled



and went on his way, but he could not forget that young boy.

Exactly one month later, the same Missionary showed up at the Signorelli home. Francis was 11 years old at the time. The missionary spoke at length to Baptista and Guiseppa. Then he went to Francis and spoke with him. He reminded Francis of the conversation they had had one month prior. He then asked if Francis might still wish to be a Xaverian Missionary. Francis said, “Yes!” without hesitation. Of course, Francis’s parents would have the final say. They would give their consent.

Francis would have to leave almost immediately. He would have to gather his

bedding and mattress, which were not supplied.

A horse-pulled farm wagon was brought into service, loaded up, and off it went with Francis and the missionary in tow. Francis's destined journey was about to begin.

## **Pedrengo, Italy**

Francis would soon arrive at the Minor Seminary of Xaverians in Pedrengo, Italy, near Venice. It was August 1, 1945. To state that Francis was green behind the ears would certainly be an understatement, but he wasn't naive. He knew he had made the correct decision to go with the Missionary. He was excited and willing to learn all he could. However, that would come later on. In the present, Francis was allowed the benefit of time, being such a young boy. He was allowed to absorb the atmosphere and observe the young seminarians. The head of the seminary was a wonderfully kind, grandfatherly type who

formed an almost immediate attachment to Francis.

Francis's excitement would soon turn to focus as seminary life became more a part of his existence. Francis inherited a rigorous caseload. Little time was left for extra activities and socializing. In fact, the young seminarians were only allowed to make home visits for three weeks during the summer. For Francis this was difficult because his family was so close-knit. Francis missed his parents, especially, but he never questioned or doubted what he truly wanted. He was determined to succeed.

While at Seminary Francis studied all the usual high school studies, but in addition undertook a

heavy caseload of Latin, Greek, and Church history. Francis threw himself into his studies and never looked back.

## **Guisseppa and the Novitiate**

Francis would be entering the Novitiate soon, but just before this new chapter was about to begin, Francis received word from home that his beloved mother, Guisseppa, was critically ill and not expected to live. A pall fell over Francis. He was granted permission to travel back home. His heart was heavy with sorrow. He so loved this amazing mother who had given him life and nurtured him in faith.

Francis arrived in Bergamo and immediately went to his parents' home. As he walked into the small house a chill permeated the air. He walked towards his mother's dimly lit room. There on the bed was Guisseppa, his mom. Her

face was terribly pale and she had so little energy that she could barely lift her head.

Guisseppa's sister and Francis's aunt, Sister Illuminata Signorelli, was there by her bedside. When Guisseppa spotted Francis her eyes lit up and she threw up her arms as if to embrace him. Francis choked on his tears as he went to her, bent down and cradled her face in his hands. The love between them was palpable. She asked so many questions of Francis, most of them involving his studies and life at the Seminary. With each response, Guisseppa's heart increasingly swelled with pride in her son.

Where had the little blond boy with the dimples and mischievous smile gone? She was now

looking at a very handsome young man with deep, dark eyes not unlike her Christoforo, and a smile that could melt the heart.

In the course of the visit, Sister Illuminata carelessly asked Guiseppa, “If God had told you that you will get well if Francis leaves the Seminary and doesn’t become a priest, what would you say?”

Without hesitation, Guiseppa firmly replied, “I would choose to die right now as long as Francis continues and becomes a priest.” Her response would stay with Francis for the remainder of his life. He would note later on that he didn’t continue his road to the priesthood because of his Mom’s response, but it would



often become a reinforcement on his journey, which at times could be difficult and daunting.

Guisseppa passed on not long after that visit.

Francis returned to the Seminary but would be leaving not long after for the Novitiate. It was summer and a tremendously difficult time for Francis emotionally. His beloved mother was gone. For a long, long period he had been immersed in his studies and seminarian activities. His nerves were frayed and his emotions raw.

## **The Novitiate, 1952**

Francis left the Minor Seminary and entered the Novitiate at St. Pietro in Vincoli, Ravenna, on September 12, 1952. He would be part of the group of seminarians gathered here for the next step in becoming Xaverian priests and missionaries. The physical surroundings of the Novitiate ranged from the beautiful to the unusual. The Novitiate House itself sat in the middle of a vast sugar beet field. The owner of the property raised these beets to produce great amounts of sugar. A small body of water, the River Romco, ran through the property's edge. Off on another side was a large forest of pine trees. If one reached the end of this forest one would find the Adriatic Sea. In the absolute

quiet of the night one could hear the crashing of waves against the shoreline and rocks.

The setting was idyllic in so many ways. Francis spent countless hours walking the grounds and beyond, reciting the Rosary and attempting to work through his grief over the loss of his mother. Nights were the most difficult. He would be exhausted from his studies and other duties, as well as the ever-present grief he felt. Nights were frequently sleepless. Yet, Francis found the stamina to persevere in his work.

Two young Xaverian priests were in charge of the Novitiates. Before summer's end they told the group that they would be going on a short

vacation nearby. Francis's heart sank. Having an adventure and fun were the last things on his mind. His nerves were frayed and his emotions raw. His heart was full of sorrow. He did not want to go. He couldn't go. It took every bit of his courage to go to the priests in charge. He poured his heart out to them, and they understood. They gave Francis permission to stay in the House. Soon, the others left and Francis was alone. He spent time walking, praying, and asking God for peace of mind. One morning, Francis awoke feeling different. Something had taken place. It was as if he sensed things were about to change. But how? What?

Upon dressing and eating breakfast, Francis stepped outside into the bright sun. The sky was a beautiful robin's egg blue. A few huge, white, puffy clouds hung in the sky like marshmallows on the top of a cup of hot chocolate.

Francis stopped to breathe in the clean, fresh air. And then, in an instant, he was running wildly through the pine tree forest. The wind roared behind him trying to catch up. Suddenly, he stopped. He had reached the water's edge. Automatically he looked up at the sky, fell on his knees, and began to sob. For how long he was there he didn't know. His sobs were unrelenting, loud and powerful. Uncontrollable. When they

stopped, he felt cleansed and he knew with certainty that his sobs were heard past the clouds and into Heaven above where his beloved mother was. A wave of peacefulness enveloped him. For now, Francis knew he belonged to God. All was well.

When the others returned from their trip, they found a relaxed, peaceful Francis. Francis threw himself into his studies and other activities with gusto and purpose. Before he knew it, the Novitiate would be coming to an end. Francis Emile Signorelli would be one step closer to becoming a missionary priest.

That August, Francis would receive his cassock from Cardinal Patrick of Venice, Italy: the future Pope John XXIII.

# Learning English

In November, 1952, Francis was on his way to Petersham, New Hampshire, in the New England region of the United States. Here he was to stay and learn English under the tutelage of Father Bob Malloney, S.X., the first American Xaverian Missionary. It would be a short stay, for the following year Francis would be going to Holliston, Massachusetts. He would be staying at the Xaverian Fatima Shrine in this small, quaint town. However, most of his time was spent at the Marist Center in Framingham, MA. There, he would study philosophy and theology.

Unfortunately, the center closed before Francis could complete his studies. So, he was sent to

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to complete his studies before ordination. He would now and forever after be known as Father Francis E. Signorelli, S.X., Catholic priest, Xaverian priest and missionary—the role God had given him at birth.

Francis's heart was full of gratitude to God for carrying him so far. He now excitedly, but nervously, anticipated celebrating his first Mass as chief celebrant. He recalled the wonderful pastor from Brembata, Father Spada, who was so nurturing and loving to all. Francis was now granted a much-needed vacation so he immediately chose to go to Brembata to see Father Spada. When Father Spada received the



news of Father Francis's plans he was overjoyed.

On July 12, 1959, Father Francis Signorelli would say his first Mass in front of his father, brother and sisters. One seat was empty, however. His mother, Guiseppa, was not there, but he knew in his heart that she had seen it all. He praised God for this day.

At the conclusion of the Mass, everyone was invited to Father Spada's residence where a wonderful dinner was served, along with a reception to greet the newly-ordained Father Signorelli. A huge crowd attended along with the Signorelli family. It was a glorious day for everyone.

## **Holliston, A Second Time**

After this visit to Italy, Francis would find himself headed back to the small New England town of Holliston, MA, at the Xaverian's Fatima Shrine. He would spend nine years there under the leadership of Father Oddo Galeazzi. Fr.

Galeazzi was a fine man. However, the Shrine property was not what one might expect. The grounds were rough and not particularly well-kept, and the buildings were older and needed much work. The priests' house was nondescript cement block building. Only the basic necessities were to be had.

There was no Calvary or Rosary Walk as there would be in the future, but the priests and Fr.

Galeazzi were grateful to have this lovely piece of land, and they knew the value of patience. They knew that in God's time more good things would come. Little did Francis know he would play a major role in the development of the Shrine in Holliston.

To begin with, Francis was not afraid to work hard. In fact, he relished it, and his school days at Brembata Grammar School had prepared him well. He could hoe, rake, dig, and plant with the best of them. When cement blocks were initially laid on the grounds, Francis would spend countless hours on his knees cutting the grass between the blocks to make things more attractive. Francis never shied away from any task. Father Galeazzi watched Francis carefully.

He admired his strong work ethic and pleasant personality. He also noted that Francis had much expertise in dealing with finances. The Shrine was in desperate need of funds to grow. So, Father Galeazzi asked Francis to be the Shrine treasurer. This position would include fund raising. Francis accepted the position, but not without some trepidation. Balancing the books was one thing, but fund raising was another. Despite his love of people, Francis was still a very shy man. He was comfortable with his role as a pastor, but asking strangers for money was an entirely different issue.

Of course, a driver's license and a vehicle were necessary. The vehicle came as an older

pickup truck. There were no cell phones to make emergency calls or GPS to give directions. Many of the roads he would be traveling were in poor condition and lacked good lighting. Francis would be doing most of the fund raising in the evening. Francis would be alone in the pickup traveling to distances north and south, east and west of Holliston. He would be given a list of private residences, funeral homes, doctor's residences, restaurants, etc. He would knock on doors, introduce himself, and ask for a donation. It took all his strength and courage to do this.

On these excursions he would sometimes face getting lost, vehicle breakdowns, and

embarrassing donation refusals, among other things. On one such occasion, when the truck broke down, Francis was forced to walk an unfamiliar, unlit road after 11 o'clock at night. All of the houses were dark but one. Father Francis gingerly walked up to the door and knocked. A man answered—a man who would become a regular contributor to the Xaverians, and a trusted friend.

Little did Father Francis know that he would one day look back on this period with the fondest of memories. It would be time when he would raise thousands of dollars for the small Shrine in Holliston. And along with the contributions would come numerous friendships lasting to the

present.

An extended benefit would come in the form of groups of women in various Massachusetts towns who would organize fund raisers. They became known as The Fatima League. Under Father Francis's guidance and watchful eyes the League banquets developed on a yearly basis. These banquets were held at well-known clubs such as The Monticello in Framingham, MA. At any given banquet, 800-1,000 League members and friends would fill the establishment. Famous entertainers would perform and much money was made for the Shrine and for the Xaverian Fathers. Once again, Father Francis Signorelli's genuineness

and love of people won the trust and hearts of many. “God is good!” would become Father’s mantra.



## **Back to Wisconsin**

At the end of the year, 1968, Fr. Francis received word that he would be heading back to Wisconsin for a second time. This time, however, he would wear the title of “Rector.” In addition, he would be in charge of theology and philosophy. Fr. Francis accepted this task with relish. He was excited to be working with the young students—to share with them his knowledge and experiences.

His kind manner and astounding sense of humor would facilitate his interactions with the students. He was always approachable and sincere. His charges would thrive under his tutelage. Francis strove to make the teachings

come alive. Whenever the occasion arose, Francis would encourage the use of drama and music to make Biblical events “more realistic.” Such an example would be the exploring of the Last Supper. A long table was set in the way one imagined it might be at that time. On that evening, all students were asked to wear their best. Even the housekeeper would dress in her very best outfit—befitting such an occasion. Fr. Francis would be the Christ figure. The group would then re-enact the parts of those who were present at the original Last Supper. Wine and bread were offered representing the body and blood of Christ.

Francis touched many young minds here, but he was always aware of keeping balance and

positivity with the young men. He was a caring teacher and father to them. As often as possible he organized soccer games. He adored soccer and was outstanding at it. Many individuals in the past had encouraged him to become professional, but always his first love was to serve God.

The students loved to play soccer with Father Francis. They also attended plays and shows. And every Sunday, Francis relieved the housekeeper and cooked meals himself for the students. Just one more way to be part of the group. Francis would leave this position feeling fulfilled in having accomplished what he had set out to do.

## Brazil

It was November of 1974. Fr. Francis Signorelli, S.X., learned he was being sent to Brazil. In his heart of hearts he was apprehensive, but he also felt a feeling of exhilaration. He was a priest, but also a missionary, and he was eager to serve God's people wherever they might be. At the time he didn't know it, but later in his life he would state that his time in the Amazon was the most defining time for him as a priest and missionary—a time when he would totally identify with the teachings and philosophy of the Xaverian founder, St. Guido Conforti. It was here that Fr. Francis learned to totally accept and love those who were so poverty stricken and oppressed by the well-to-do.

Francis arrived in what would be his new “missionary” home. Almost immediately he was able to engage with the people. His easygoing manner and personable and kindly ways made it easy for the people there to accept him as one of their own. He soon found himself performing an ongoing succession of baptisms, weddings, funerals, and every other kind of customary and religious activity. Fr. Francis immersed himself in everyday life with the natives. This frequently required a very good sense of humor, much patience, tact, and fortitude.

The villagers were so fond of him that they never failed to share whatever they had with



Fr. Francis and friends enjoy some local wildlife in Brazil.

him, including their meals. Most often, such meals would consist mainly of rice, and more times than not, the family's rice bowl would be teeming with ants. Francis would never embarrass or insult anyone so he would simply scoop away the ants as best he could and continue eating.

Several of Father's experiences were more shocking than humorous. One such experience involved a wedding ceremony. Father was to perform the wedding in a very remote village. Such a village would have a makeshift church where numerous religious ceremonies would be performed, frequently in one day. The bride and groom arrived in native finery. A large crowd

accompanied them. The vows were exchange and a blessing given. Just as the couple turned around to leave, another group entered carrying a corpse for a funeral. The bride gasped, and fainted. The wedding group was stunned. And Fr. Francis? All in a day's work for him, and certainly not the worst of his experiences.

Snakes were common visitors. They could be found lolling around on his bike's handlebars, or laying on top of the bed netting along with bloodthirsty mosquitoes and other harbingers of disease. Rats were everywhere. Sleep could be very limited due to these conditions.

Nevertheless, when daylight made its



appearance, Fr. Francis placed any fears he had with God and went to serve the people with love and respect. Yet danger continued to present itself in many forms.

In one instance, Francis was to perform a number of baptism in a remote region. The poor peasant parents of the babies had selected one powerful landowner to be the godfather for their children. In exchange for such an honor, all the parents would receive is a Baptismal robe for their children and a few insignificant gifts.

Fr. Francis set up a meeting to discuss this arrangement. He knew that this landowner had a longstanding reputation for arrogance and

abusiveness with the peasants. He was known to harass and threaten them, take over their land, and force them to leave. So the meeting was set to talk with this future godfather, but the meeting never took place because the landowner never appeared.

Father Francis could not tolerate this behavior any longer. He eventually caught up with the landowner and emphatically refused to allow him to be godfather. The landowner was filled with fury! How dare this missionary priest treat him like this? He glared at Fr. Francis and left him with these words, “Watch out that something doesn’t happen to you!”

Undaunted by this threat, France called upon the Bishop in charge of the area and told him about this ongoing situation, as well as others. The Bishop saw how upset Francis was. He immediately relayed the information to the Governor in charge of that area. The landowner was denied his visa to Italy and was forced to leave the country. The power of Francis's faith and perseverance had won out.

Ants in his food, having to share a two-seater outhouse, and finding snakes on his bike had not deterred the Father—and an abusive landlord was not going to either! But not all such nuisances occurred in the poor native villages. At one point, Father Francis was asked to visit

and inspect a Xaverian Missionary House in Burundi. The local Bishop there needed to go to Rome and asked Francis to help out. The Bishop insisted that Francis be given his suite while the Bishop was away. Francis was very appreciative, thinking he would get a much-needed night's sleep.

Francis accepted, and went to Burundi. He spent a long day meeting with the Xaverians there and inspecting the premises. He finally retired after an exhausting day, only to be repeatedly awakened by horrendous itching. Finally, totally exhausted and frustrated, Francis got out of bed and put the lamp on. To his horror, the bed was teeming with ants. Again!

Ants! With utter exhaustion Fr. Francis ripped the sheets off the bed, went outside and shook them. He then put the sheets back on the bed and fell asleep.

Challenges would continue to arise for Francis throughout his nine years in the Amazon, but he met each challenge with dedication to his duties as a priest and a support system for the people. He would travel to unknown territory in the blistering heat, in the torrential downpours, and the blackness of night. Terrain would change in the blink of an eye. Often he would become lost. But Francis never truly feared because he knew he had God with him every step of the way.

## Italy, 1983

In the summer of 1983, Father Francis Signorelli, S.X., learned he was being reassigned to Nemi, Rome, Italy, where he would hold the position of Vicar General at the Xaverian General Chapter there. His role would include attending assemblies, consulting, and speaking to concerns. He would reside in the General Quarters in Viale Vaticano. From the terrace of his new residence he could often see the Pope walking and saying the rosary in the Vatican Garden, or as the Pope was taking off in his private helicopter. Francis would wave to him and the Pope would wave back. Quite a change from the Amazon!

In time, Francis would not only become acquainted with the Pope, but on several occasions he had the great privilege of co-celebrating Mass with him in his private chapel in the Vatican Quarters. Miracles never ceased for the once-little boy who played priest in his family's farmyard.

At the end of six years, Francis would be called back to the States. It was October, 1989.

Francis had been given a full year sabbatical.

He would spend that time in San Jose,

California, studying advanced courses in

philosophy and theology at Santa Clara

University. Francis loved the area and enjoyed

long walks there; but things could change in the

blink of an eye.

One Sunday, while saying Mass, Francis became gravely ill. Sharp pain stabbed him in the abdomen and lower back. His first thought was that he was having a heart attack. He was rushed to the hospital where it was determined he was *not* having a heart attack; it was a gall bladder attack that would require surgery. After the surgery was performed Father Francis would have to face recuperation. His studies would have to be put on hold. During his recuperative period, Francis meditated and prayed. He especially loved saying the Rosary. His devotion to the Blessed Mother and Catholic faith grew greater and greater. Francis



would return at a later date to complete his studies at Santa Clara University.

## **Holliston, Again!**

It was May, 1991. To his great surprise, Francis would be heading back to the town of Holliston, Massachusetts. He was delighted, and ready to reconnect with the many friends he had made there. When Francis arrived in Holliston he felt as if he had come home again. He knew the area well and became reacquainted with a multitude of individuals from the various Fatima Leagues he had established. In addition, he witnessed much growth at the Shrine itself. The growth would continue during this stay.

Many new projects were undertaken on the grounds, and Francis jumped right in to help out. No outdoor chore was too small or too big.

He loved cutting, clearing, planting , and weeding. He took great pride in all of his work—pastoral and otherwise. There was the addition of beautiful statues, bushes and flowers. An unusual Rosary walk was added, with huge boulders representing each bead. Each bead boulder was donated by a family or individual in memory of someone. An outdoor altar with statues representing the appearance of the Blessed Mother in Fatima, Portugal, was beautifully constructed, and an anchor that had been on a Navy ship skippered by JFK was donated by the Kennedy family.

The reputation of this peaceful, holy place had spread widely. The congeniality of the Xaverian

Fathers and the emerging beauty of the grounds drew visitors from far and wide.

## New Jersey

It was a wonderful time for Father Francis, but he would be moving on when 1993 rolled around. His journey would take him to Wayne, New Jersey, where this time he would be the Provincial Superior. Francis would be confident in his new position. The other priests there were his confrères. They shared his deep devotion to Christ, the Blessed Mother, and to Guido Maria Conforti and missionary work. In his daily interaction with the others, Francis was able to share his experience and wisdom—always peppered with his humor!

At this time Francis had the opportunity, as well, to visit the other Xaverian communities in North

and South America: Brazil, Mexico and Columbia. These visits were important to the Xaverian ministry as a whole. Ideas, events, and progress would be learned and passed along to all Xaverians.

Francis thoroughly enjoyed these assignments. He would look back on this period as being one of positivity and self-growth. As seven years in New Jersey came to a close, Francis would be leaving once again.

## Déjà Vu

Francis would be going back still one more time to Holliston, MA—a fated destiny, perhaps, or just a miraculous coincidence? Father Francis, Signorelli, S.X., was delighted.

By now, the Lady of Fatima Xaverian Missionary Shrine had grown and changed by leaps and bounds. The beautiful walking grounds with lovely trees, bushes and statues became a much-visited place for many. There were many yearly events to look forward to. At Christmas, the grounds sparkled and glowed with heavenly religious displays and lights. Stations of the Cross set along one pathway were followed by the faithful, particularly on

Good Friday when a lengthy procession would be led by the Fathers. Barbecues, seasonal fairs, and religious programs were growing, as were rumors of miracles having taken place when one prayed there.

Father Francis would eventually lead the Shrine as Rector and Shrine Director for many years thereafter. His love for the Fatima Shrine and what it represented were tangible. People came to know him as a devoted, kind, and loving man—a man who was always approachable and brought comfort no matter the issue or sin. He continues to this day to be a much-loved figure there.



So, what does make a holy man , a loving man —one who lives to think of and serve others, one who has such faith and devotion to God and his fellow man, one who leaves all he knows to go to the unknown, one that gives up his own self-serving practices and desires to help others? Is it a God-given mandate on the day of conception or birth? Perhaps it is this, and more, that which only happens on a rare occasion like that Nova star that bursts into the galaxy.

In the case of Father Francis E. Signorelli, S.X., one thing is certain—St. Guido Conforti, founder of the Xaverian Missionaries, would be proud to call him one of his own.

## The Order of Xaverians Now

To begin with, the founder of the Xaverian Order is now *Saint* Guido Maria Conforti, S.X. He was canonized on Sunday, October 23, 2011, by Pope Benedict XVI. St. Guido would be amazed to learn that the Xaverian Missionaries can now be found in locations all over the world. These missionary sites include: Bangladesh, Brazil, Burundi, China, Colombia, Chad, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Great Britain, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mozambique, Mexico, the Philippines, Spain, Sierra Leone, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States.

In addition, there is now a female branch of the

Xaverians known as the “Missionaries of Mary.”

This dedicated group of women serve people in various ways regardless of race, culture, economics, or religion. They are a magnificent group of women. In the United States currently (2020) there are three Xaverian Centers:

Holliston, MA; Wayne, NJ; and Franklin, Wisconsin.

And what are the Xaverians at Holliston’s Fatima Shrine like now? Father Francis’s confrères at the Shrine comprise a group of highly intelligent, spirited and personable individuals. They are as diverse as their interests are varied.

## **Father Rocco Puopolo, S.X.**

Father Rocco is the current Shrine Director and Rector. In addition to his numerous pastoral duties he heads fund raising events, an Advisory Planning Board, and a yearly fund raising banquet. Father Rocco leads a Pax Christi group at the Shrine focusing on nonviolence and peace throughout the world. He provides timely topics, along with material related to the subject. He assigns presentations to group members followed by discussion. Father Rocco initiated a movement known as G.Y.M. (Global Youth Mission). The focus is to teach about the community priesthood and mission service.

In addition to all of these endeavors, Father Rocco has beautiful singing voice. He loves to sing and has written original verse to share at special services. He is a surprisingly accomplished cook and artist. He paints beautifully and is also known to create crafts using different composition. As a Xaverian Missionary, Father spent 12 years in Sierra Leone. While there, Father Rocco was wounded by gunshot, but continued his work with zeal and devotion to the people.

### **Father Carl Chudy, S.X.**

Father Carl came to the Xaverians with a background in the Military. He served 13 years in the Philippines, a time he recalls with great

fondness.

Currently, Fr. Carl directs the ever-evolving interfaith ministry which he initiated. All religious denominations and secular people are welcome to take part. The group leaders are Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and other faiths. This council explores commonalities and differences between religions.

Father Carl is also working toward completion of his PhD in interfaith dialog. As a true Xaverian he continues to work toward “...making all God’s children one family”, as said by St. Guido.

## **Father Adolph Menedez, S.X.**

Father Adolph is the consummate scholar and teacher within the group. As a missionary, he served in Japan and Mexico, areas he grew to love, along with their people. For a number of years, Fr. Adolph was a professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at University of Illinois. He excelled in this position and was a much trusted member of the faculty and student body. In fact, Father Adolph counseled students at the University and provided spiritual advice. He has, and continues to, provide workshops on various aspects of the Bible and its religious applications. His workshops are well-attended and in demand.

Father Adolph can be a quiet, contemplative soul—always the great thinker, but underneath that scholarly persona is a remarkably quick wit and terrific sense of humor.

### **Father Tony Lalli, S.X.**

Father Tony did his missionary work in Brazil where he provided his people with every kind of pastoral service. He was devoted to the people in every aspect of their lives and needs.

Fr. Tony is well known for his homilies on the Blessed Mother. In fact, he is considered by his confrères to be an expert on Her. He speaks from his heart when delivering sermons. His love for the Blessed Mother and his ministry



shines forth from his being. He can be a quiet, soft-spoken, unassuming man, but don't let this fool you. Fr. Tony is kind and friendly. He loves and enjoys being with people. This is so very often illustrated in his humorous (sometimes hilarious) stories—always accompanied by a twinkle in his eye.

### **Pietro Rossini, S.X.**

Pietro is the youngest and newest arrival at the Shrine in Holliston. Pietro hails from Italy with an established background in Catholic theology and the Xaverian Experience. He has completed his theological studies and is expected to be ordained within the next few years.

Currently, Pietro is at the Holliston location pursuing advanced studies in communication and journalism. In addition to full time studies and assisting in religious duties, Pietro writes a blog on timely religious and human issues. Pietro's gregarious smile, and thoughtful mannerisms attest to his love of God and His people. Pietro will undoubtedly make an amazing addition to the Xaverian Missionary order.

**We salute each of these priests and their work then and now.**

# An Evolving Mission

When the Xaverian Missionaries were established, missionary work was something done by priests, brothers and sisters. But today, this work goes beyond the ordained. By virtue of Baptism, all Catholics are missionaries. Today, 50% of people who go on Mission are laity!

We used to think of Mission as a one-way street. We brought the Church to people. Now, Mission is Mutual. We learn from the groups we minister to, discovering the Spirit of God among the people and bringing that learning back to our congregations. We stand with our brothers and sisters throughout the world as they

witness the faith, often in the face of persecution.

Missionary work takes many forms today. Promoting issues of social justice and peace. Stewardship of the environment, and working for fair and equitable governance. Missionaries put themselves in uncomfortable and even dangerous situations, but we can rely on each other. As you pray for our fellow churches around the world, they are praying for you, too. We come together across borders and cultures to create a wider world of faith and service. "We are all in this together" is our new credo.



Father Francis with his fellow Xaverian  
Seminarians in Italy.

# Epilogue

St. Guido Maria Conforti, founder of the Xaverians, and Father Francis E. Signorelli, S.X., Xaverian priest and missionary...a look at the commonalities in their lives.

- Both St. Guido and Fr. Francis were the youngest in their families.
- Both would leave their families to live with others at a young age.
- From the very youngest of ages, both exhibited even temperament, good self-control, an amazing compassion for others, and a voracious appetite for learning.
- For both, the Mass and Eucharist was

the highlight of any day.

- Both displayed a deep devotion to, and love of, Christ and His Blessed Mother.
- Both had a fixation on birds and their nests. St. Guido loved to climb trees to get birds' nests, while young Francis captured small birds to help feed his family.
- Both developed a deep desire to serve and help the poor.
- Both men, it would appear, were gifts to this world from God







# A rare soul,

destined to serve God, and his fellow man.



A baby is born in France, just prior to World War II, and only God knows what is planned for him. Follow Francis Signorelli on his path of peace and service as a Xaverian Missionary priest.