Apparitions of the Virgin Mary at PONTASSIEVE

ITALY, 1484

The story of Our Lady of Grace, also called Our Lady of the Rock, was built following a series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary that took place in 1484. In that year Mary appeared five times to two shepherd girls who had asked her for the healing of their dying father. During one of the apparitions the Virgin restored the health of the dying man and, at the same time, asked the two shepherd girls “to make known to the city of Florence, to the Clergy and to the People, that their Heavenly Mother invited everyone to return to read and meditate on the Gospel, receiving the Word of God with the dispositions of mind and heart by which she herself received the Word in the Annunciation”. Moreover Our Lady ordered the young girls and also their miraculously healed father, Giovanni Riviera, to invite the authorities to build a church on the Rock, larger than the primitive Oratory already there. The Virgin Mary herself would say: “Here I desire to be venerated and from here I will bestow graces on whoever will request them properly”.

The apparitions of Our Lady were several – for her messages, the Virgin preferentially turned to Eleota, the older one of the two young Riviera sisters – but the Church commemorates liturgically only five apparitions because they are well documented historically: April 22, July 2, September 21, December 16.

The twovisionaries began immediately to communicate to everyone the desire of the Mother of God, but, although confirmed by the testimony of their healed parent to whom the Virgin had also appeared, they were not listened to sympathetically. The objections to the establishment of the Shrine were however overcome thanks to the so-called “great apparition”. In fact on August 22, 1486 the Virgin, carrying in her arms Baby Jesus, showed herself to all the people gathered in prayer with the young Riviera sisters in front of the Oratory. With a clear voice she confirmed the truthfulness of the messages transmitted by the visionaries and repeated her invitation and her promise to all those present: “Build here a larger church because I desire to be venerated here and from here I will bestow graces on those who, listening to my maternal invitations, will request them in a worthy manner”.

In remembrance of the “great apparition”, the numerous witnesses, after the church was built, wanted to place under the table of the main altar a piece of the rock on which they saw the Virgin Mary sit. Presently the liturgical and spiritual service is entrusted to the care of the Community of the Children of God, an association founded by Father Ireneo Barrecci.