



The Craco Society

October / Ottobre 2024

DISCOVER. SHARE. PRESERVE. | SCOPRIRE. CONDIVIDERE. CONSERVARE.



123rd Feast of San Vincenzo in New York

This is the 123rd year Cracotans will be gathering to celebrate the feast of San Vincenzo Martire di Craco in New York City.

We are extremely fortunate to have the support for this special Mass from the Shrine Church of the Most Precious Blood, the site of the first feast in New York in 1901.

Since 1792 the people of Craco celebrated on the fourth Sunday in October honoring their martyred protector. Regardless of famine, disease, banditry, war, or other calamities this is an unbroken string connecting us to our ancestors and relatives in Italy. The continuum stretches through centuries and thousands of miles in distance.

After the Mass we are planning a feast day luncheon at DaNico Ristorante, 164 Mulberry Street. Please let us know if you anticipate attending so we can make arrangements. For those unable to attend please consider making a donation honoring this long standing tradition and supporting the Most Precious Blood Church that is the home for the San Vincenzo relic in New York. Gifts can be sent to:

The Craco Society
San Vincenzo Feast
14 Earl Road
East Sandwich, MA 02537

Or made by PayPal to our account at:
memberservices@theCracoSociety.org

VIVA SAN VINCENZO!

Since 1792 the feast of San Vincenzo has been celebrated.

ITALIANS' GAY CELEBRATION.

Fireworks and Illuminations in Honor of St. Vincenzo Martyr.

The church edifice of the Church of the Precious Blood, at Canal and Baxter Streets, which is being reconstructed, and is now about half built, was gay last night with many colored lanterns and fluttering Italian flags, surmounted by the Stars and Stripes. In front of the church fireworks of many hues were set off, and the neighborhood of Mulberry Bend was kept ablaze until a late hour. Two thousand Italians, young and old, who are members of Father Berardini's parish surrounded the church and quietly enjoyed the spectacle, their faces lighted up by the flare of the fireworks and swinging lanterns.

The occasion was the celebration by the Societe Militaire d' St. Vincenzo Martyr of the natal day of its patron saint. The celebration began Saturday evening and was continued last night. The Italian Rifle Guard of New York assisted in commemorating the occasion. The members of both societies attended vespers last evening as a preliminary. They were in full uniform and carried their rifles. Later in the evening a salute of twenty-one guns was fired, and many wheels of red, blue, and yellow fire were touched off. The band of twenty-four pieces of the Societe d' St. Vincenzo was seated on a raised platform in front of the church, and played many airs, both grave and gay.

The Martyrdom of San Vincenzo

Among the feast days for saints in the Roman Catholic Church there is one not mentioned in the Universal Calendar but which is of importance to the small hill top town of Craco in the province of Matera, Basilicata Region, Italy. This is the feast of San Vincenzo, Martire di Craco which is celebrated on the fourth Sunday of October.

After the Roman Emperor Aurelian died, Diocletian succeeded him and selected Massmiliano (Maximianus in Latin and Maximilian in English) to rule over part of the empire. In 286AD while Maximilian was on his way to Gaul (France) to quell a revolt of the Bagauds, a peasantry of Belgium, he stopped at the village of Otteduro (which today bears the name of Martigny, Valais, Switzerland) to rest his army.

There he was joined by the Theban Legion, which was summoned by Diocletian to re-enforce the militia. The Theban Legion was recruited in Egypt which was then under Roman rule. They camped near Agauno, at the foot of a mountain, which has a pass called Great St. Bernard, connecting Italy and Switzerland.

“San Vincenzo was among those who were slaughtered and given the status of martyr for his faith.”

The Theban Legion was made up of 6,000 Christian legionnaires. San Maurizio was an officer in command of the Legion and San Vincenzo was among the soldiers in the legion. While camped there, Maximilian issued an order for the entire army to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods for the success of the expedition.

The Theban Legion refused to obey Maximilian’s order on the grounds that it was a religious and not a military command. Because of this refusal Maximilian ordered they be decimated, that is, every tenth man would be put to death. The troops filed into ranks and every tenth man was put to the sword. As a result of this slaughter, 600 men were killed.

Maximilian grieved at the useless loss of so many legionnaires and sent a very complaisant message asking the remaining soldiers to sacrifice to the gods. But they replied, “We are soldiers, but we are also servants of the true God. We owe you military service and obedience; but we cannot renounce Him who is our creator and Master. We have taken an oath to God before we took one to you; you can place no confidence in our second oath if we violate the first. We have arms in our hands, but we do not resist, because we would rather die innocent than live in shame.”

Maximilian, amazed at this bold reply, again issued orders for every tenth man to be killed and yet even after this second slaughter the Legionnaires remained constant. Finally, realizing that any threat or punishment of his was useless, he

ordered the complete extermination of the Theban Legion at the encampment. San Vincenzo was among those who were slaughtered and given the status of martyr for his faith.

SAN VINCENZO COMES TO CRACO

The connection of Craco and San Vincenzo started on February 6, 1769 when a reliquary with small bones of San Vincenzo was sent from Rome to Craco. Then in 1792, Fr. Prospero, a Franciscan from the Friary in Craco, while in Rome, and wishing to return with a relic, obtained from Pope Pius VI, through the Sacred Congregation of Rites, the full relic of a Roman soldier and a glorious martyr, Vincenzo – a name signifying “winner” or “conqueror.”

The “sacred body with a flask of blood” of San Vincenzo Martire was exhumed at the cemetery of St. Ciriaca in Rome. (This is now part of the Campo Verano municipal cemetery in the San Lorenzo section of the city). Fr. Prospero enclosed the precious relic in an artistic crystal-sided wood casket. Inside the casket the bones were covered in a waxen body, dressed as a Roman soldier and set in a reclining position.

Stopping at various places during the course of its journey, the remains were carried from Rome to Craco where it was received with great pomp and honor. The devotion of the faithful in the Region rendered great honor to the soldier martyr, San Vincenzo. In large measure, this was due to many miracles reportedly performed by the Saint on the multitudes that sought his help.

The clergy and the people of Craco decided to choose San Vincenzo as their protector of the town. The religious and civil festival of San Vincenzo was fixed for the fourth Sunday of October to coincide with an important annual fair which takes place after the harvest and continues to be celebrated to this day. ■



Bone relic of San Vincenzo Martire brought to Craco in 1769, now at the Shrine Church of the Most Precious Blood.

San Vincenzo's Victory

Over the years much has emerged about San Vincenzo Martire di Craco that fills in details about his legend and makes connections to us today. The initial story about him and his cohorts in the Theban Legion were disputed for centuries. However, the existence of the Theban Legion is now accepted and the remaining controversy surrounds the extent of the decimation of the Legion after they refused to make sacrifice to the Roman Emperor. The original legend holds that all 6,600 members of the Legion were executed. Historians now believe the decimation that took place did not wipe out the entire Legion. The Legion was brought from Egypt because the Romans needed soldiers to fill in their ranks as they battled in Gaul (now France) and they would not have wanted to waste all that manpower.

After the two decimations of the Legion took place and the soldiers were not swayed to make a sacrifice, probably one more decimation took place killing all the leaders of the Theban Legion. The remaining cohort of soldiers were then dispersed to other Roman units. Regardless of the extent of the number of Theban soldiers killed we know that San Vincenzo was one of those who was martyred in 286AD at the order of [Emperor Maximilianus](#).

Prior to this event, in 249AD, a Roman widow, named Ciriaca, who had become a Christian, sheltered many in her home including San Lorenzo (St. Lawrence). St. Lawrence is attributed to having cured her of severe head pains. In 249 she donated a field in Rome on Via Tiburtina that became the graveyard named after her. (The catacombs of Santa Ciriaca are now within the municipal cemetery of [Campo Verano](#) in Rome's San Lorenzo District). It was in the catacombs there that San Vincenzo's remains were interred until 1792 when they were brought to Craco.

But the Theban Legion would make another historic visit to the Roman stage that played out with a much different outcome than their martyrdom. A complicated series of events and turmoil followed the decimations that took place in 286AD with various factions contending for the position of Roman Emperor. The Roman Senate, unhappy with Maximianus' rule forced him to renounce his imperial position in favor of his son. Perhaps hedging his bets, Maximianus then had his youngest daughter Fausta, marry Constantine, one of the contenders for Emperor. Afterwards, Maximianus returned to Gaul (where he had ordered the destruction of the Theban Legion) and began hatching schemes against his son-in-law Constantine in an attempt to regain his imperial position. In a confrontation with Constantine, Maximianus' soldiers surrendered him to his rival but Constantine generously pardoned him. Soon after, Maximianus returned to scheming against his son-in-law, and finally was compelled to take his own life in 310AD by "falling on his sword," an ironic ending to someone who put the Theban troops to the sword two decades before.

As the factions contending for control of the Empire, Constantine and his brother-in-law Marcus Aurelius Maxentius, the son of Maximianus, were battling in warfare

for control. Maximianus was drowned in the Tiber River during the engagement with Constantine at the Milvian Bridge. His body was taken from the river, decapitated, and his head was paraded through the streets of Rome, another ironic connection to the decimation of the Theban Legion by his father. Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312AD gave him total control of the Western Roman Empire. When he issued the Edict of Milan, making Christianity officially recognized in the Roman Empire he paved the way for Christianity to become the dominant religion throughout Europe in the ensuing centuries. Participating in the victory at the Milvian Bridge was a reconstituted Theban Legion. In the years after the decimation of the Legion by Maximianus the remnants remained in the service of the Romans. It was probably no coincidence they chose to join Constantine in the struggle for control of the Empire over Maximianus' son, who they knew was responsible for the death of their predecessors.

Commemorating the victory, the Arch of Constantine was erected, outside the Colosseum in Rome. On the Arch is recognition of the role of the Theban Legion with images of the soldiers. The Thebans were an auxiliary unit in the Roman Army. Although they are usually thought of as infantry they were actually specialists - archers. We know they were Berbers from North Africa, serving the Egyptian Pharaohs for generations in their role as proficient and accomplished archers. In the Roman Army they were a valuable commodity that fit the strategy and tactics supporting the Roman Legions at a time when extra manpower was needed. Constantine's Arch gives us an insight into their specialty and dress. Visible is the unique way they placed arrows in their head dress making them more quickly accessible during battle. It is ironic that the descendants of the Theban Legion end up defeating the pagans who had massacred their ancestors and contributed to Constantine opening the world to Christianity.



Theban archer as on Constantine's Arch, Rome.

Theban Soldier on Constantine's Arch

Today, a continuing and active connection to that era exists. The Sacred Military Constantinian Order of Saint George, traces their origin to Emperor Constantine who founded the Order following the miraculous appearance of the Cross at Saxa Rubra. The Constantinian Order has been considered one of the most ancient among the Orders of Knighthood. The Order undertakes many good deeds and support for charitable endeavors. Among them is their participation with a delegation at the annual San Vincenzo Mass. They, along with the relic, and the story of San Vincenzo serve to remind us of the meaning of the events seventeen hundred years ago that are celebrated by Crachesi every year on the fourth Sunday in October.

VIVA SAN VINCENZO!

San Vincenzo in Craco

Craco's connection to San Vincenzo starts with the former Franciscan monastery of St. Peter, (the Observant Order of Friars Minor, O.F.M.) that was in the town. In 1769 a reliquary with bone fragments of San Vincenzo was sent from the Roman Curia to the head of the friary, M. Rev. Francesco Antonio. Following that, Fr. Prospero of the friary obtained permission to bring "a great relic of a glorious martyr and warrior named Vincenzo to his town and convent." The relic, accompanied by a bull by Francesco Saverio Passari, Archbishop of Larissa, assistant Papal and domestic Prelate of the Pope, written on April 18, 1792, attested to the authenticity of the relic. It mentions, "sacred body with flask of blood of San Vincenzo Martyr exhumed at the cemetery of St. Ciriaca, ennobled by vestments of gold and silver ... and placed in a purple wooden casket decorated with gold and a crystal pane at the front." The friars arrived with the relic of San Vincenzo's body and its case in Craco on May 9th at the Chapel of the Madonna della Stella. From there, "the holy body which was then carried in procession to the church of the Convent where there is a continuous flow of citizens and foreigners..." The Bishop of Tricarico designated the fourth Sunday of October as the feast day and that was certified by a letter from the Pope on September 8.

Attached to the convent was a chapel with a large alcove dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption. The benefactor of the alcove allowed it to be redesigned so it could accommodate the relic of San Vincenzo in the center along with the other saints. On April 4, 1793 the relic of San Vincenzo was installed in the chapel at the Friary and remained in that alcove until 1983 when an earthquake destroyed a portion of the chapel.

The townspeople also created a statute of San Vincenzo in an upright position showing him as a Roman Legionnaire. It was used for the feast celebrating San Vincenzo which had a specific format. It began nine days before the fourth Sunday in October with the recitation of solemn afternoon novenas. On one of the evenings a small procession took the statue from the Convent and walked around the "Cross" (La Croce), located at the entrance to the town. On Friday evening, after the novena, the statue of the saint was brought into the Chiesa Madre [San Nicola] located in the heart of the old town. On Saturday evening, before the novena, the statue was carried in procession back to the Convent. All celebrations culminated on Sunday with the Mass at the monastery and the procession that crossed the entire town. In the evening, in front of the Palazzo Riginone there were bright fireworks.

The devotion to the saint also included the formation of Confraternity of San Vincenzo, which lasted into the early 1900s. The confraternity members wore a white tunic with a

turquoise color cape and belt. This group took part in the Mass, processions and upon request at funerals. Coming at the end of the growing season, the feast also played a role in helping the town prepare for winter. On the Saturday before feast day a fair was held, a tradition that has lasted since the 1700s. It was visited by people from neighboring towns of Salandra, Ferrandina, Montalbano and Pisticci. The fair stretched from the entrance of Craco Vecchio to the other end of the town, at the drinking trough. On that day, people made major purchases of animals, foodstuffs: dried beans, "winter" apples, and dried peppers that would be used to season salami. This occasion allowed people to purchase provisions for the long winter that awaited the rural population.

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St. Peter's Friary—Above is a 1930 view of the monastery on a postcard showing the chapel that housed the San Vincenzo relic. It is the round shaped structure on the side of the building in the center of the image. Started on April 3, 1620 by a Friar named Robert, the Bishop of Tricarico, the structure was completed ten years later. It bore the name of St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles, and was entrusted to the care of Franciscan Friars until the Italian Government suppressed it in 1866.

San Vincenzo Relic—Below is the relic as it was displayed for years in the small chapel in the Sant'Angelo section of Craco Vecchio.



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San Vincenzo in Craco *continued from page 4*



In 2022, after the restoration of the Madonna della Stella Chapel, the relic of San Vincenzo was moved from the Sant' Angelo chapel and placed in a special position in the altar. Returned after 200 years to the original location when it arrived in Craco in 1792, it marks a glorious moment in the history of San Vincenzo. The love of the people of Craco for their protettore, San Vincenzo has prevailed for over 200 years. Through all types of hardships, wars, famines, economic, and natural disasters, the Crachesi have continued their care and devotion for their cherished relic. ■



Shown left is the San Vincenzo relic in its new home in the restored Madonna della Stella Chapel. To the right is the upright processional statue which was also recently restored.

San Vincenzo in New York

With immigration to America at the turn of the 20th century, the Crachesi brought the devotion of their patron saint with them. They formed a mutual aid society that was called the Società San Vincenzo Martire di Craco and made arrangements with St. Joachim's Church on Roosevelt St., Manhattan, NY to display a statue of San Vincenzo there. Pasquale Marrese, a tailor from Craco who had a shop at 23 Spring St. in Manhattan and his staff created a statue sewing the clothing on it from a woodcut image of the relic in Craco. Meanwhile, the 1769 bone relic from Craco was sent to America so the Crachesi here would have a part of the patron saint with them.

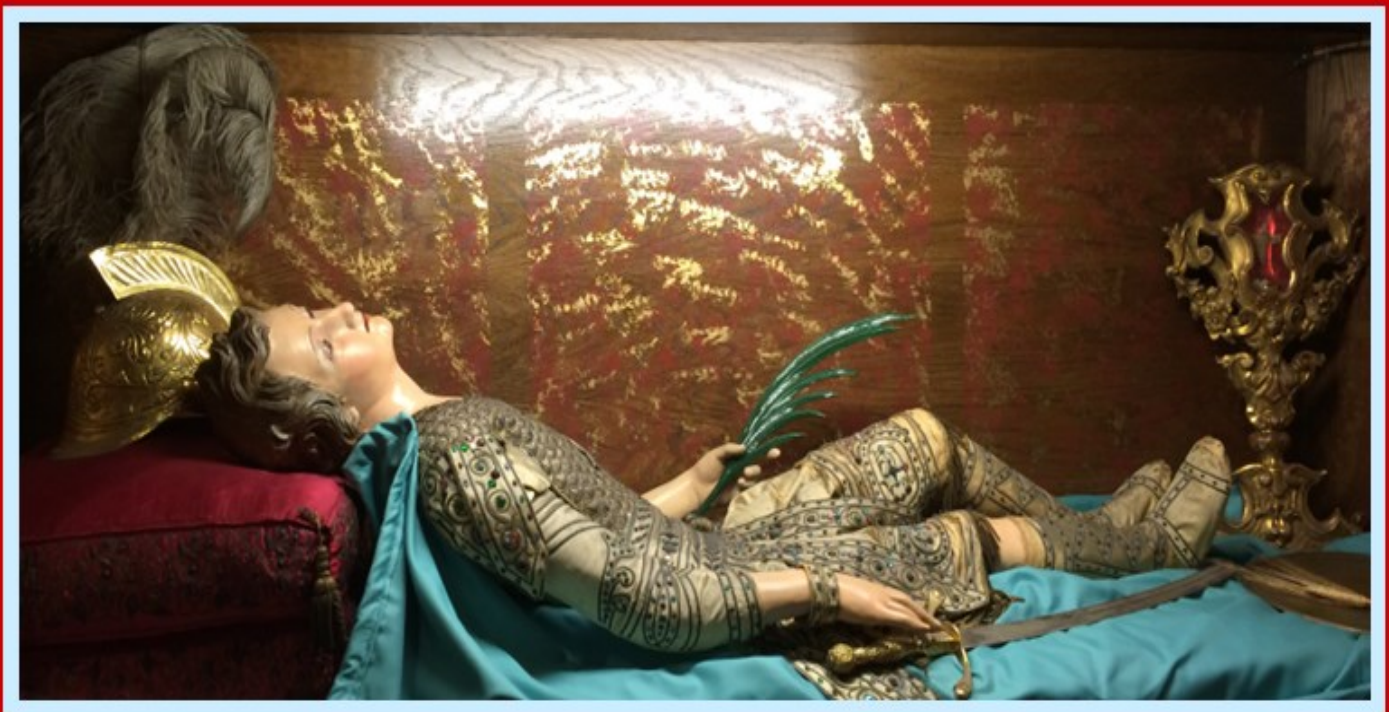
The New York Times recorded the first feast celebrated in 1901 on a bandstand erected outside the Church of the Most Precious Blood while it was undergoing reconstruction. The Società San Vincenzo Martire di Craco maintained the traditional feast until WWII when the procession was curtailed but maintained the feast day celebrations there. In 1957 when St. Joachim's was closed the statue was relocated to the nearby Church of St. Joseph. In 2015, when St. Joseph's Church closed, the statue was moved to the Shrine Church of the Most Precious Blood. In the display case with the statue is the reliquary with bone fragments of San Vincenzo Martire that was brought from Craco in 1901. This is the only primary relic that is permanently on display at the Most Precious Blood Church.



Società San Vincenzo Martire di Craco publication

The Craco Society
invites you to join us in celebrating the 123rd Feast of

SAN VINCENZO MARTIRE DI CRACO



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2024

Mass at 11:30 AM

Most Precious Blood Church, 113 Baxter Street, Manhattan NY