

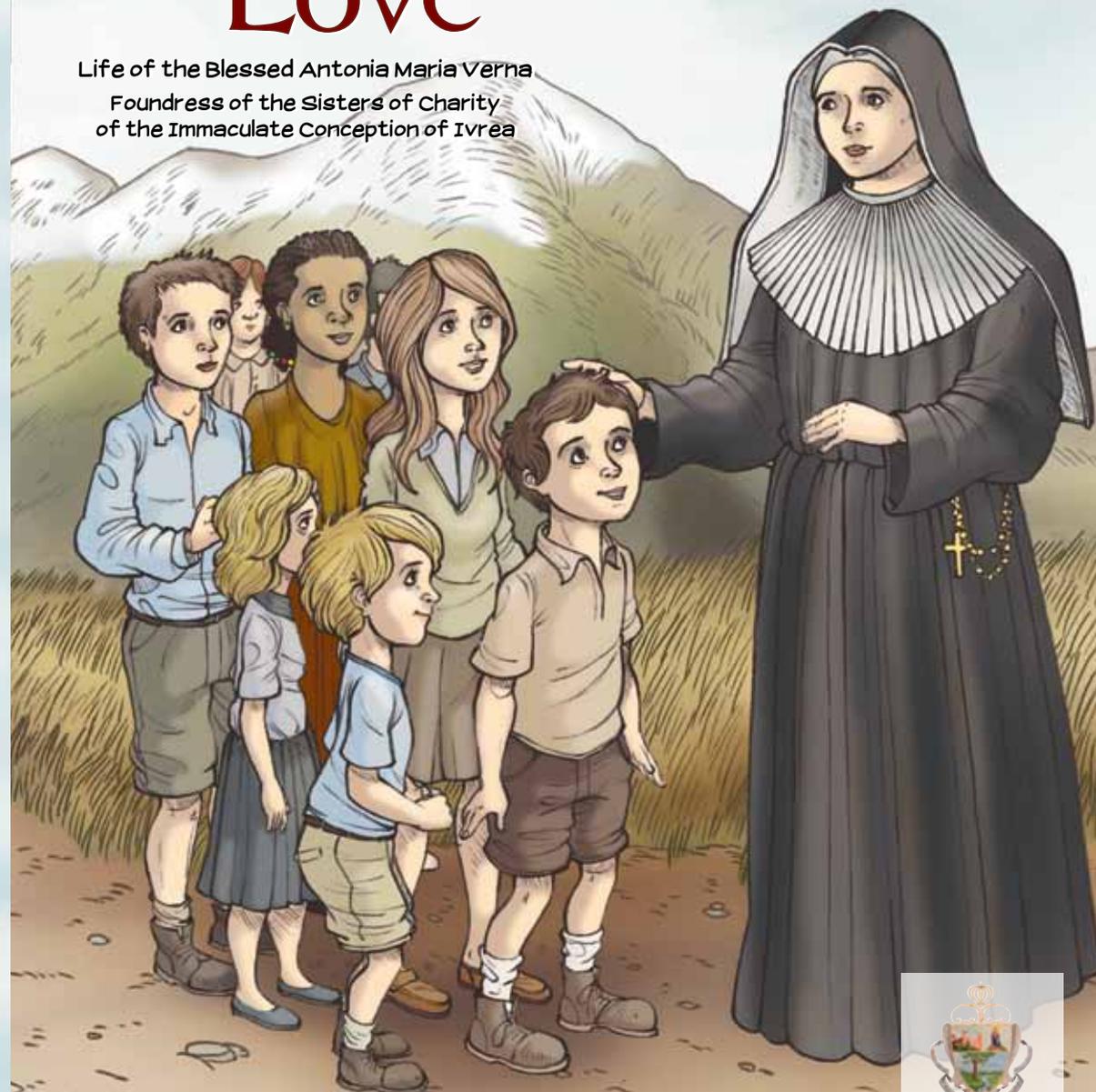
# Free to Love



The life in comics of Antonia Maria Verna tells the simple story of a soul, of a woman who understood that the knowledge and the culture are fundamental for self protection from being crushed. She fought against physical and moral poverty with the only arms of Faith, an unshakable Faith in the Immaculate Mary, Mother of Jesus and our Mother, inexhaustible font of graces and hope. Hers was an experience of life still current, the life of a woman that was not afraid to love.

# Free to Love

Life of the Blessed Antonia Maria Verna  
Foundress of the Sisters of Charity  
of the Immaculate Conception of Ivrea



TAV editrice

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Project  
Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception of Ivrea  
Lapsilunae - Tau Editrice

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## PRESENTATION OF THE COMIC BOOK

*Free to Love* is the story of a woman, daughter of farmers, the blessed Antonia Maria Verna, who, since her early childhood, felt a singular call from God for a twofold mission of charity: to educate the children by teaching them not only catechism, but also to read and to write in times during which school instruction was considered a luxury only for the rich; and to assist the elderly as well as the sick even in their residence. Her preference was for the poorest and -as she used to say in her simplicity- always "a gratis" (for free). Antonia Maria Verna started her mission very young, when she attended catechism in the parish to prepare herself for First Communion. As she returned home, she gathered small friends, who played around the farm house in which she lived, and shared with them what she had just learned; later on, when she had learned how to read and write, she organized for them a small rudimentary school, and she even found the time to dedicate herself to the sick, thus conquering the affection and the esteem of the neighbourhood people.

At a certain point, faithful to the vow of chastity, that she had made in front of the Immaculate Mary when she was fifteen, she left her family, and she transferred to Rivarolo, where she fully carried out her vocation of charity. To be equal to the task of her mission, she did not hesitate to walk twelve kilometres per day to a town close by, so that she could attend school. Although she was already thirty, she sat next to elementary students to learn the art of teaching from her educators.

Antonia Maria was convinced that freedom from ignorance could provide the human being with new dignity and hope for a future founded on solid human and Christian values.

Certainly, an institution born spontaneously without any economical income, based only on the trust in the divine Providence and in the generosity of town people, never lacked difficulties; but Antonia, certain that this was the road which she was called to follow, sustained by a granitic faith, found in prayer the strength to go on and overcome any obstacle.

Thus, she established a community of sisters who, by placing at the centre Jesus and the Virgin Mary under the title of the Immaculate, offered themselves generously at the service of the poor.

This comic book – edited with texts written in Italian, Spanish, English and Swahili - presents synthetically the essential stages of this extraordinary adventure of charity with sober and effective style, supported by fascinating images, capable of impressing deeply the sensitivity of the youth. The simple and intense dialogues among the characters of the story reveal the intuition of Antonia Maria, her open heart, her charisma, her intense spirituality and her firmness and constancy in reaching the goal, her humble and simple self-giving, her capacity to be as a kernel of grain ground and transformed in bread... in a white host as the Immaculate Mary.

The drawings made by a firm, agile and very expressive hand, reveal the soul of the protagonist. Even the details and the colours create harmony and give a particular touch of beauty to the text.

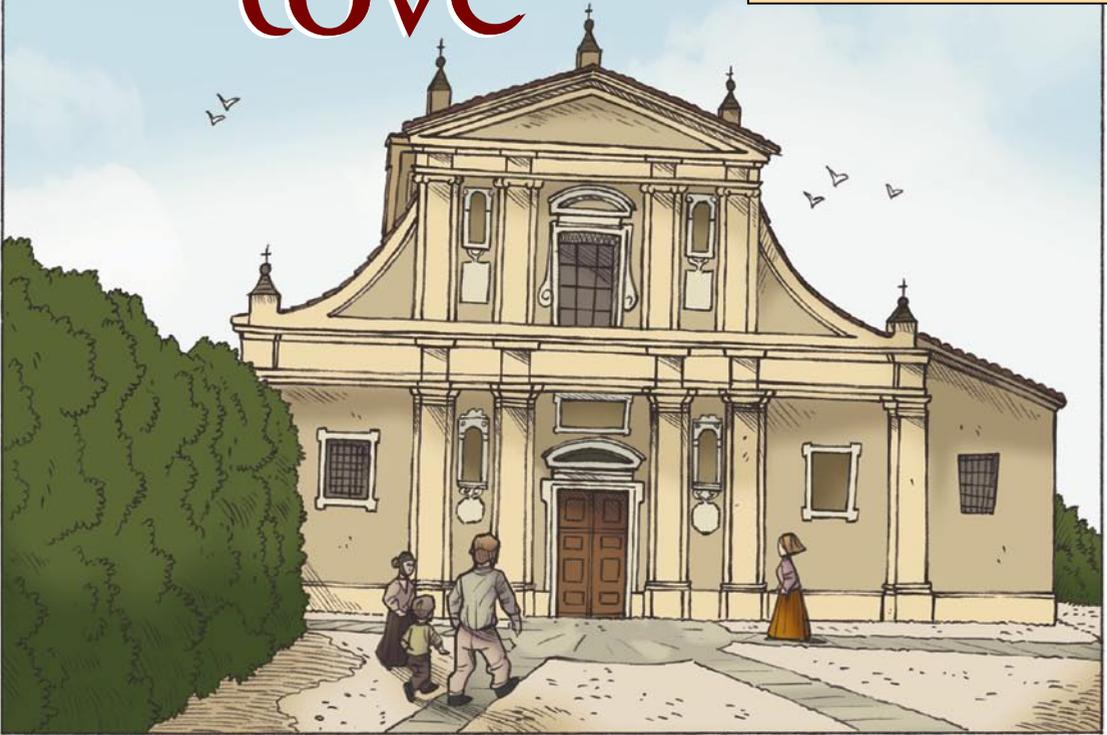
The texts are written by Father Luigi Mezzadri of the Fathers of the Mission. The drawings of Andrea Lucci

May these pages arise a spontaneous desire in the heart of those who read them: to make known to a more ample public the fascinating person of the Blessed Antonia Maria Verna, as well as to generate in many young hearts the desire to follow her luminous example.

Angelo Montonati

# Free to love

In Rivarolo Canavese, a bright and ancient village at the foot of the Alps, there is St. Francis Church, built during the time of the Saint, who, it is believed, came here.



When a saint visits a place, something remains forever in the peoples' hearts. At that time, St. Francis brought consolation to the poor...



In the beginning of the nineteenth century, his charity was carried on by his followers, the friars. In front of the convent there was a long line of poor people...



Don't push me... I was here before you...

Be calm brothers, we will give to you the little that we have ...



On the other side of the town square, in front of a bookshop, a little girl was looking at the books displayed at the show window

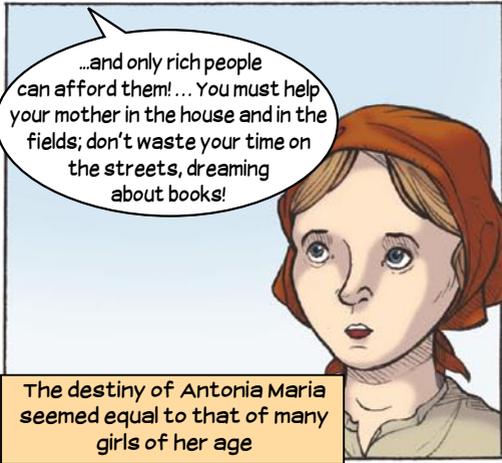


Go to the soup kitchen to take a piece of bread. The books are not for you!

But I just want to learn how to read.



There is no hope for you. You are just a girl, the books are expensive...



...and only rich people can afford them! ... You must help your mother in the house and in the fields; don't waste your time on the streets, dreaming about books!

The destiny of Antonia Maria seemed equal to that of many girls of her age

She was born in Pasquaro,  
near Rivarolo,  
in the province of Turin,  
on June 12, 1773.  
Her family was  
very poor.



When she was born, she brought a  
spark of joy to everyone...



Have you washed your  
hands? Antonia, pay  
attention to your wild  
brother!

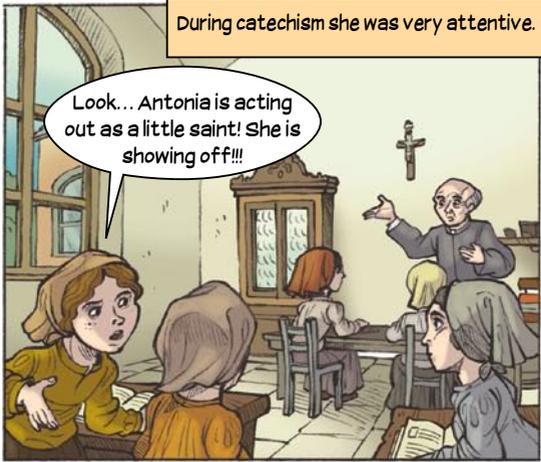


The house was small. In fact, they lived  
together in one room, but there was a  
great harmony. They lacked many things,  
but not love.



Antonia was good and  
obedient. She learned how  
to pray in front of the  
statue of the Blessed  
Mother that they had in  
their house...





During catechism she was very attentive.

Look... Antonia is acting out as a little saint! She is showing off!!!



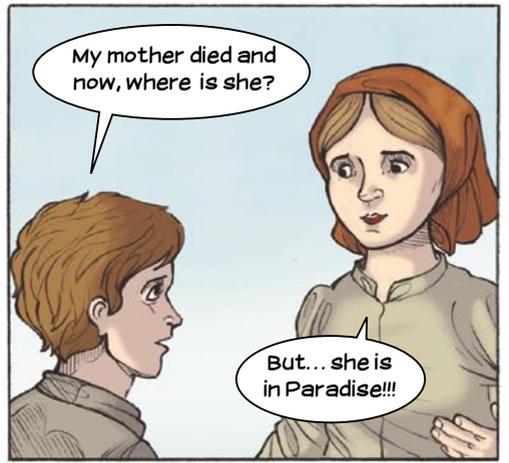
When she came back home, she gathered a group of children and taught them catechism

John, tell me: Who is God?

God is LOVE



I asked John, but I'm happy that all of you have learned this very well



My mother died and now, where is she?

But... she is in Paradise!!!



Antonia, is it true that the saints go to Heaven?

Yes... of course!



...Then, will you bring me to Heaven with you?

Her parents strongly desired to find a husband for her, also because she was really beautiful...



When I grow up, I want to have a lot of children.

...How many?



I would like to have five.....six



But Antonia Maria's wish was different. She was not against marriage, which is a sacrament, but she felt the vocation to be free from every kind of human bonds.



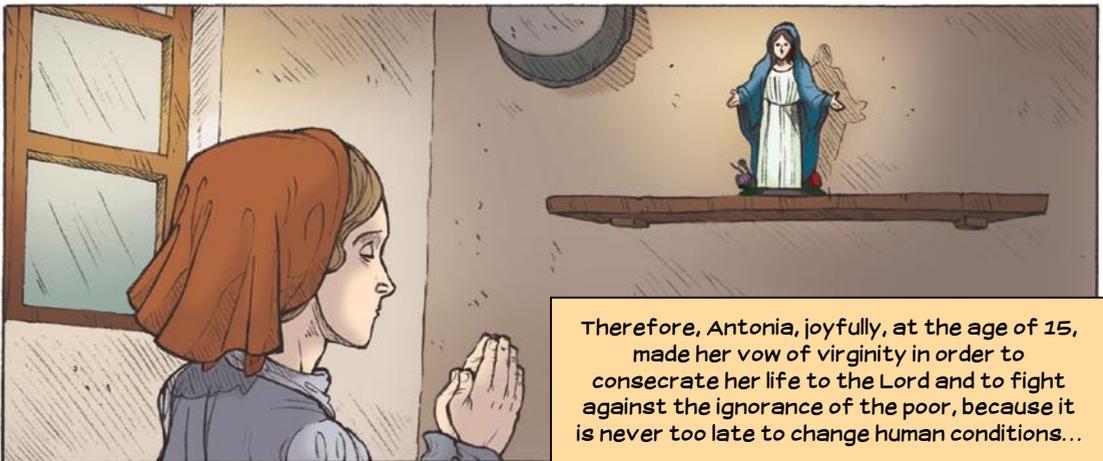
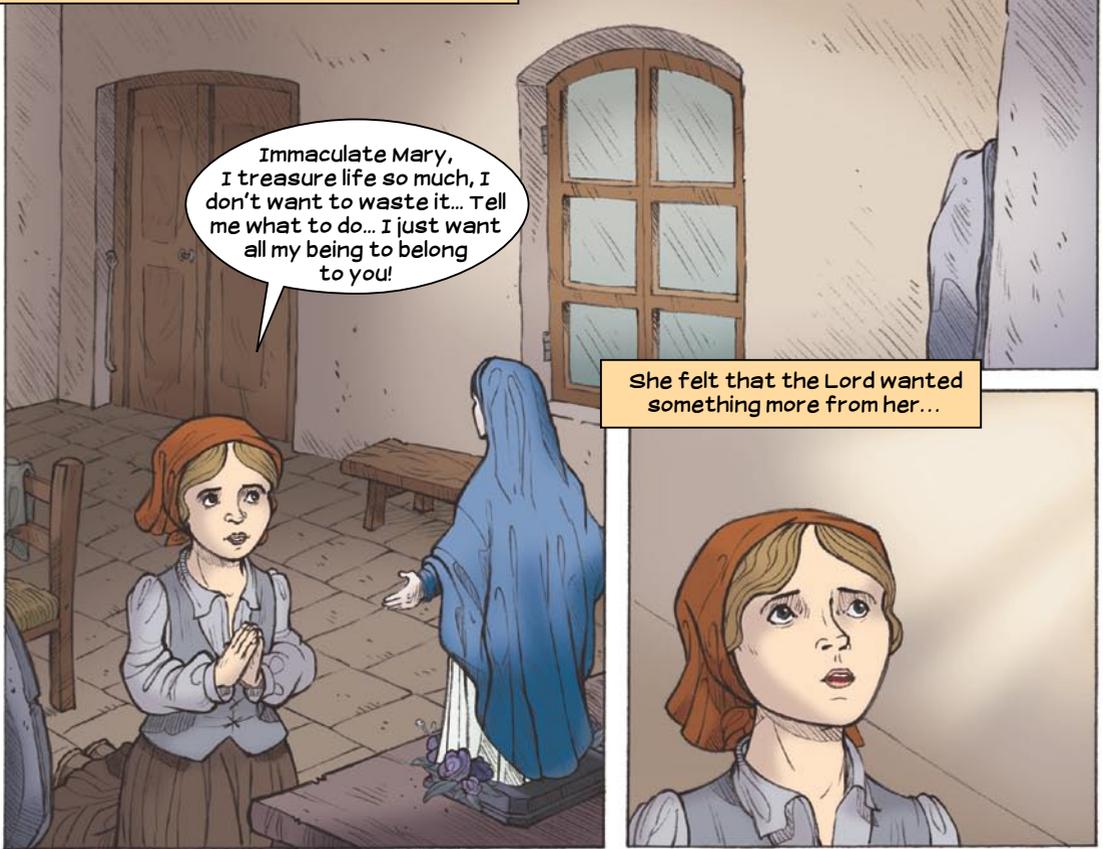
I would like to have many more... but not my own... I want to have a lot of children and teach them catechism, play with them and become their teacher... When they grow up, children who don't know how to read are treated as animals used just for hard work and I do not want that... every person has dignity!



Antonia knew that she could not only count on her friends, but also on the strong and constant friendship of the Virgin Mary...

Immaculate Mary, I treasure life so much, I don't want to waste it... Tell me what to do... I just want all my being to belong to you!

She felt that the Lord wanted something more from her...



Therefore, Antonia, joyfully, at the age of 15, made her vow of virginity in order to consecrate her life to the Lord and to fight against the ignorance of the poor, because it is never too late to change human conditions...

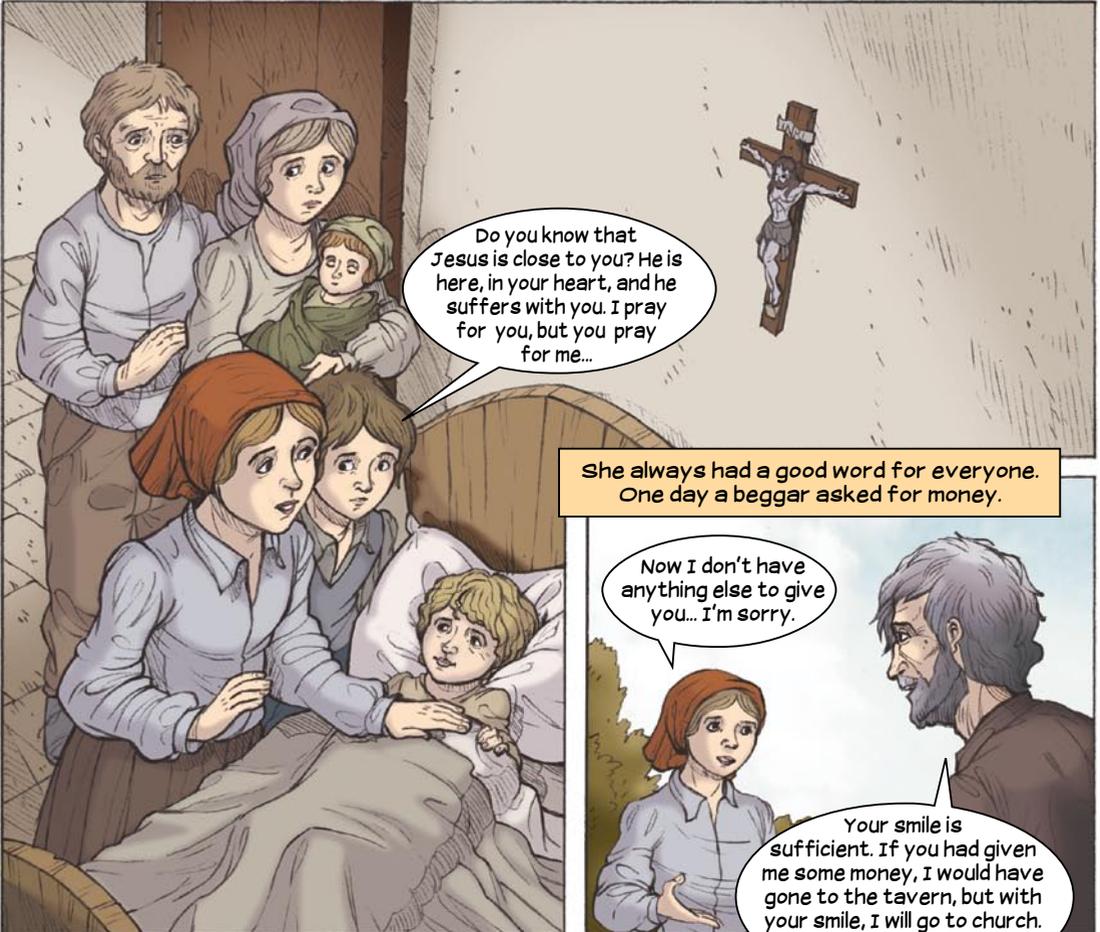
Her work was simple and very effective. Through her bright look, she communicated the truth of faith.



Antonia Maria, why are you always so peaceful? When I'm angry, it's sufficient to look at you, and heaven smiles at me

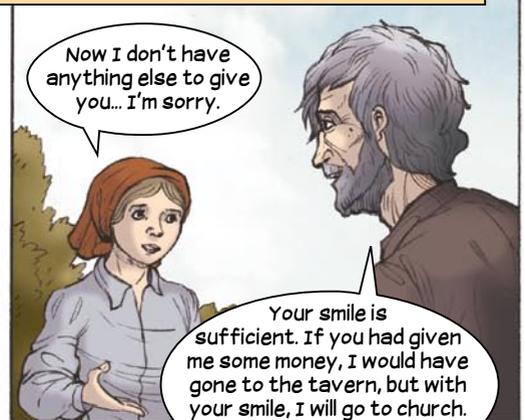


Antonia Maria, come to my house... My brother is very ill. He suffers a lot. Why does God allow the sufferings of innocent people?



Do you know that Jesus is close to you? He is here, in your heart, and he suffers with you. I pray for you, but you pray for me...

She always had a good word for everyone. One day a beggar asked for money.



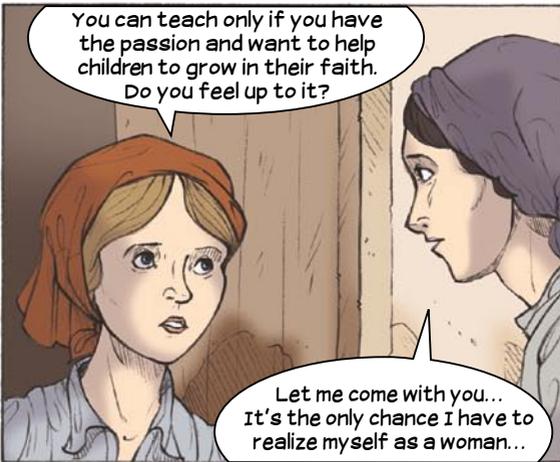
Now I don't have anything else to give you... I'm sorry.

Your smile is sufficient. If you had given me some money, I would have gone to the tavern, but with your smile, I will go to church.

Compelled by the need to be more free to dedicate herself to others, she decided to live alone. One of her friend told her...



She gathered some girls who shared with her the same passion for a life spent for others.



With them she started to teach catechism...

In order to be more prepared, Antonia went back to school...



Everyday she walked for 12 kilometers....



... Even if it was snowing, she was always present at school...



Soon, the first problems arose...

How can we run a school without a penny?

Don't worry. The divine Providence and Saint Joseph will help us!



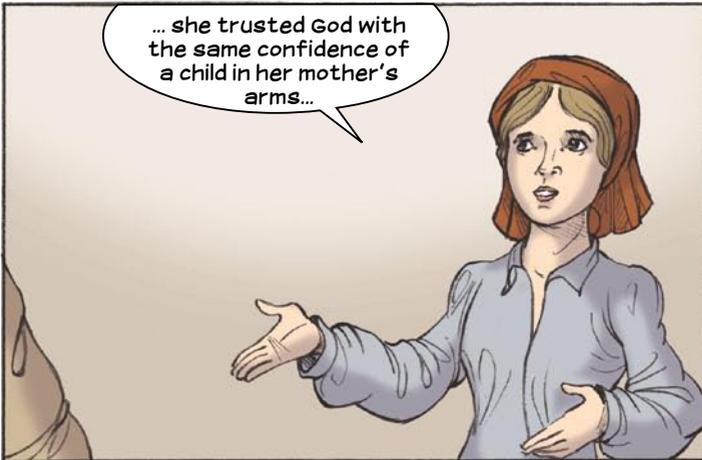
We should request some compensation for our work...



The Immaculate received everything for free and she gave everything freely



... she trusted God with the same confidence of a child in her mother's arms...

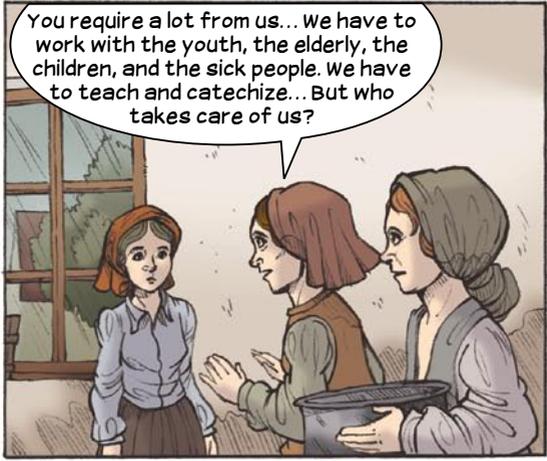


She gave everything "FREELY"





Do you know that today we have almost nothing to cook?



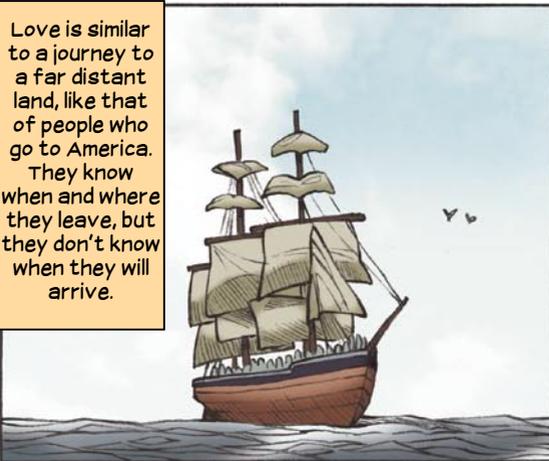
You require a lot from us... We have to work with the youth, the elderly, the children, and the sick people. We have to teach and catechize... But who takes care of us?



It's clear... It is the Immaculate Mary. She said yes to God unconditionally!

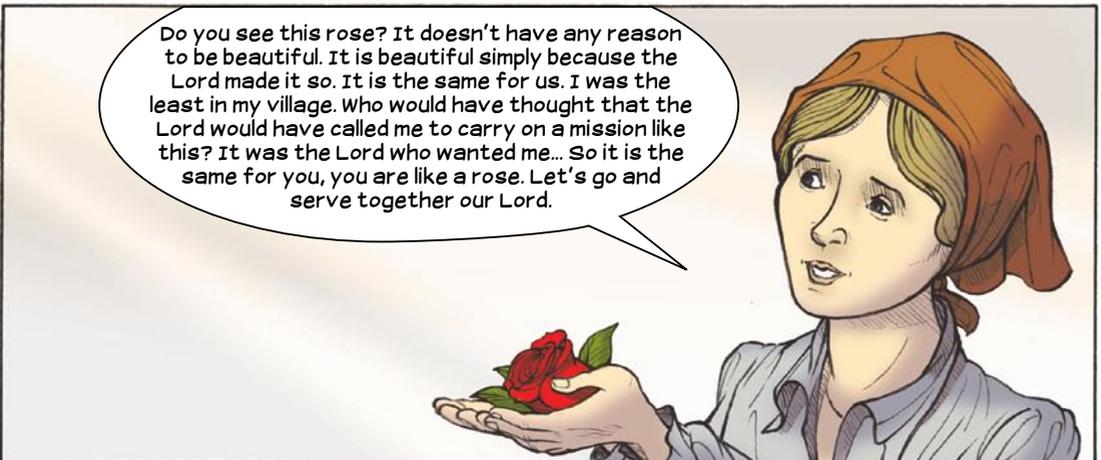
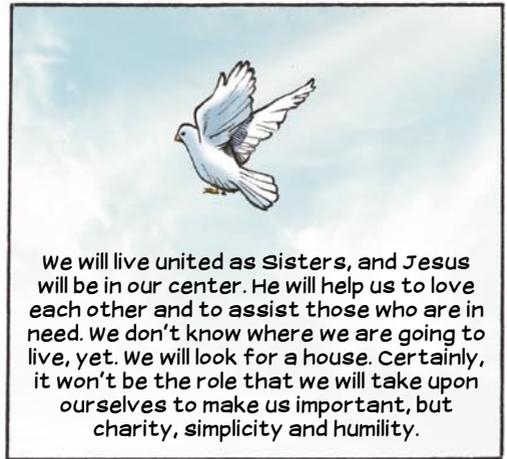


Love is similar to a journey to a far distant land, like that of people who go to America. They know when and where they leave, but they don't know when they will arrive.



The difference is that we are led by the conviction that God's promises will be fulfilled.





June 10, 1828 was a day inundated by the sun...



We have left our parents, our houses, a future with our own children, so that we could be free to serve the Lord... Today, June 10, 1828, we confirm the offering of our lives by the profession of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. These make us free for God and allow us to be servants of the poorest.

The community started by performing humble but true miracles of charity...



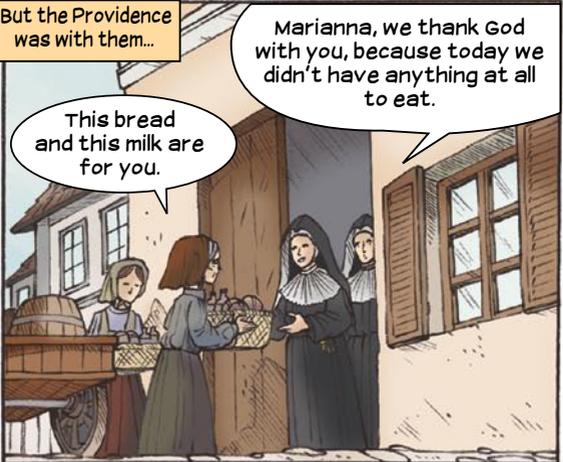
In order to give a piece of bread to the poor, the Sisters often remained with an empty bread bin...



But the Providence was with them...

Marianna, we thank God with you, because today we didn't have anything at all to eat.

This bread and this milk are for you.



Also in autumn, after the harvest...

Some fruits of our harvest... They will be good for you...

God bless you and your family for your generosity; we will share them with the poor!



It always happens in God's works: after the sunshine comes a storm...



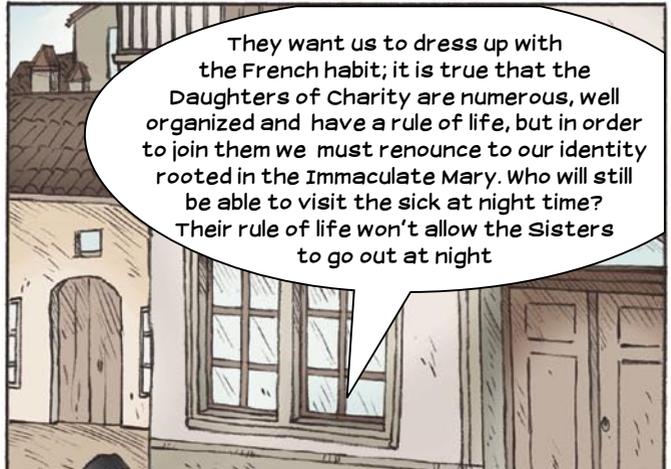
Alone we cannot afford anything... Finally, we have a house, but we have to pay for it. We work well with the Sisters of Montanaro. Why don't we join them definitely?



Other young women join Mother Antonia, and her group grows. The community begins her ministry in hospitals, and with the arrival of Father Durando it quickly expands in number and the union with the Sisters of Montanaro and the French Daughters of Charity is quite inevitable



They want us to dress up with the French habit; it is true that the Daughters of Charity are numerous, well organized and have a rule of life, but in order to join them we must renounce to our identity rooted in the Immaculate Mary. Who will still be able to visit the sick at night time? Their rule of life won't allow the Sisters to go out at night





Who will take care of the elderly who are lonely, if we have the permission to visit just the women?

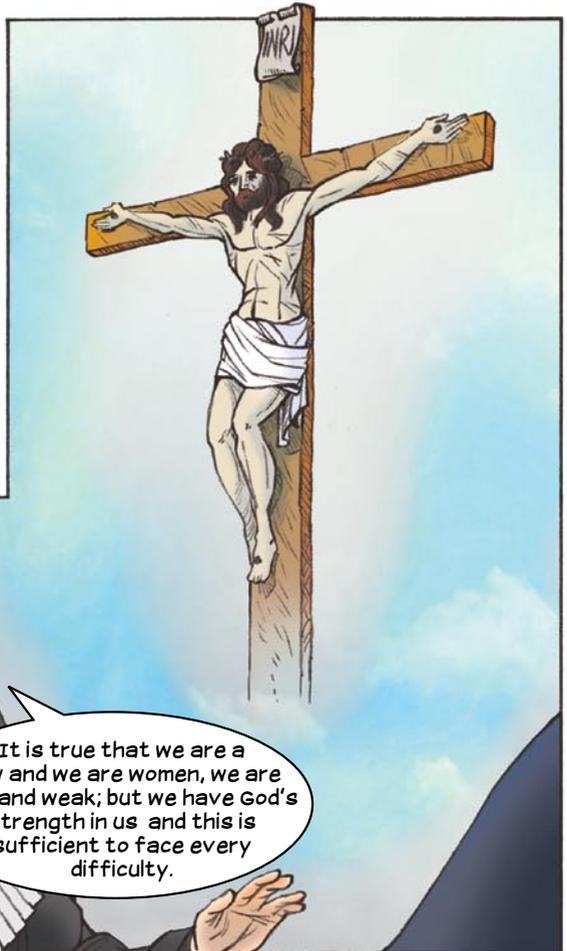
"How can we be available to teach and catechize everyone, rich and poor? What can we do? To join the Daughters of Charity could be useful and it would not be risky; but we would be unfaithful to the project that God entrusted to us".



Why do we want to lose our freedom?...



What are we going to do if everyone, except the four of us, will join the Daughters of Charity?



Many followers of Mother Antonia left her



A glance among each other is sufficient...

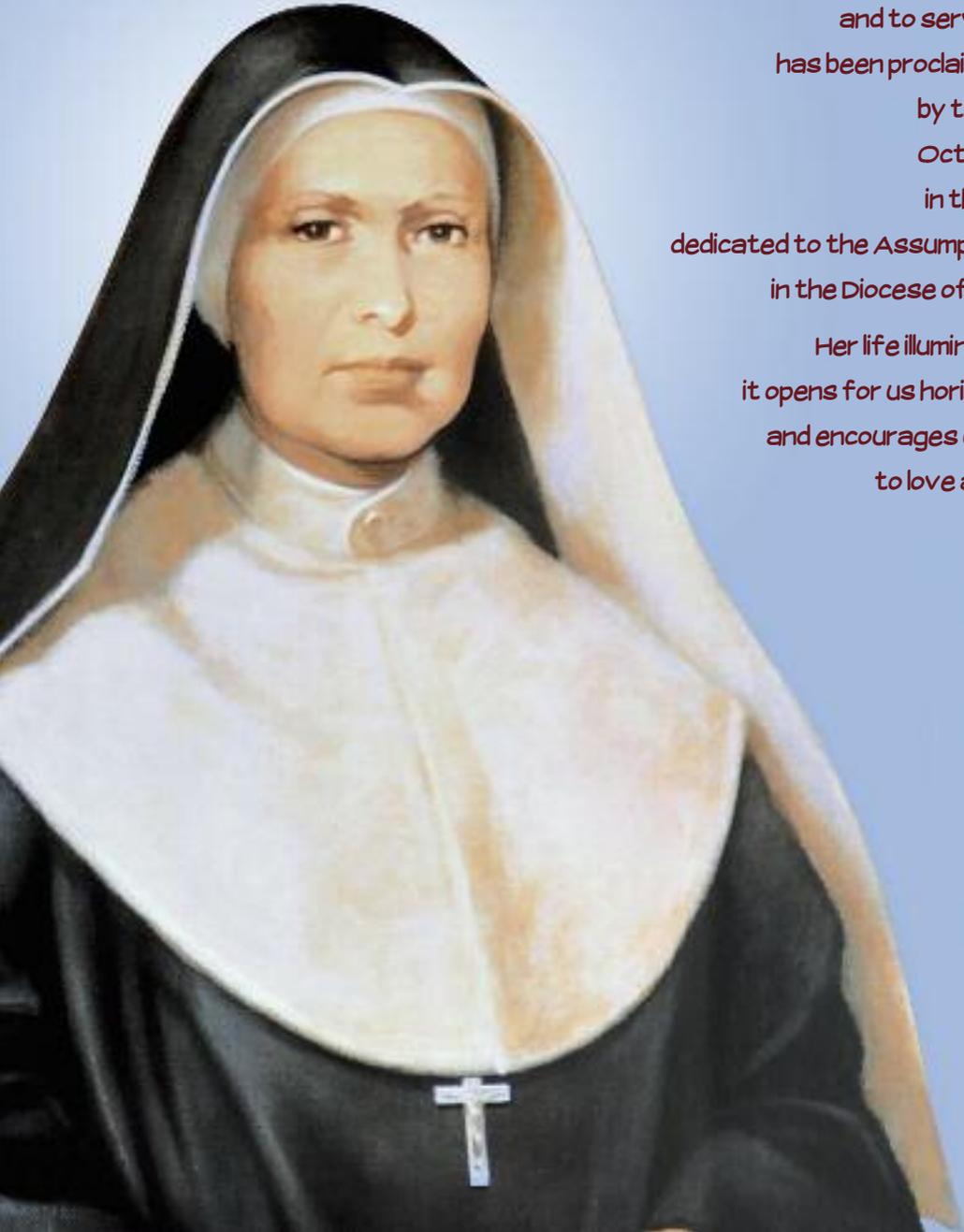




**we want to be free to love and serve!**

**Antonia Maria Verna  
died in Rivarolo Canavese on Christmas day, 1838,  
happy to have opened  
to women who were free the horizons of charity**





Antonia Maria Verna, a sister of charity,  
free to say yes to the Lord  
and to serve everyone,  
has been proclaimed Blessed  
by the Church on  
October 2, 2011  
in the Cathedral  
dedicated to the Assumption of Mary  
in the Diocese of Ivrea, Italy.

Her life illumines also ours;  
it opens for us horizons of hope  
and encourages us to be free  
to love and to serve.

# The journey continues...

The horizons of charity opened by Mother Antonia have found continuity in the journey of life of many sisters who, like her, have tried to respond to the needs of humanity.



It is for us a commitment,  
a legacy  
to continue to be like the prolific  
kernel of grain  
in the furrow of the Church,  
in order to become  
an ear of wheat and then a  
Host with Jesus  
for the hunger of children,  
youth, elders, sick, poor  
and for all those in need.  
Heirs of the charity of  
Mother Antonia,  
We follow with courage  
the path of self-giving,  
whose boundaries are infinite.





The Immaculate Mary, who said yes without conditions, teaches us to depart to go to the Middle East: Turkey, Lebanon and Israel, sharing cultures and respecting different faiths because love is the commandment of Jesus, and then.... Libya, Argentina, Pennsylvania, Tanzania, Kenya and, at last, Albania and Mexico in order to bring the Gospel of hope and of joy even in our Cross.

The charism, spirituality and the mission of the Congregation of Mother Antonia are shared both by the associations of the Missionaries of Charity, who are lay women consecrated to God with the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and by the Lay Vernians, who are called to be the evangelical leaven of the simple and humble charity of the Foundress.

The Immaculate Mary illumines our path, she who is free in her gift, liberal in her charity, wrapped by the beauty of God, who saves the world.

Do we want to be free and beautiful together with her?

Let us follow in her footsteps...

We too...

You too...



# Maria Antonia nelle parole dei bambini

Mother Antonia, mother of mine,  
You have been exemplary.  
Out of love you have given to the poor  
What he needed.  
You did not want anything for yourself.  
Free giving has been your motto.  
Now, you have gratitude in return.  
You sowed goodness  
And now you harvest love.  
Thank you from everyone!

Dominga and Micaela  
Fifth grade  
Scuola Carmine, Bari, Italy

Write here a poem  
to Mother Antonia



Write an inspiring thought  
that has touched you about  
Mother Antonia





Write a letter to Mother Antonia

## TO MOTHER ANTONIA

Of you  
I knew only the name  
But now that I have read your life,  
My life, which I believed to be colorful,  
Seems only  
To be a picture drawn in pencil.

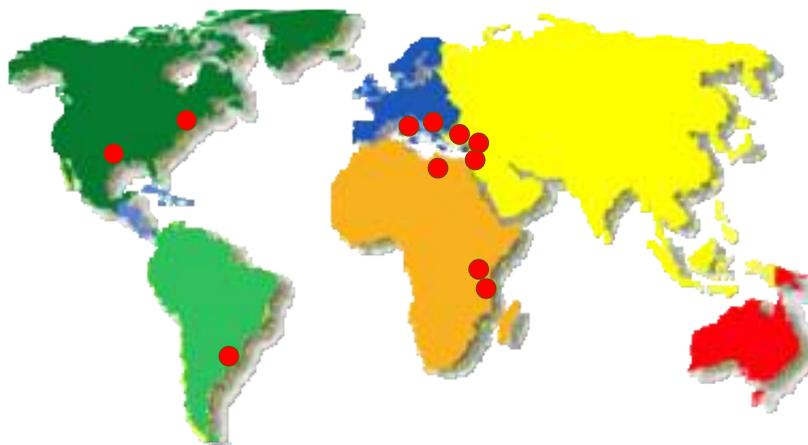
Yes,  
Your life is more beautiful,  
But surprise!  
As a child you were not a scoundrel,  
Instead, of Jesus  
You were the spouse.

Now  
I feel you very close to me,  
I will carry you in my heart.  
Do you know why?  
Because I too am a girl  
Like the children  
To whom you have always given  
A lot of love.

Federica Infante  
10 years old, Gorga (Salerno)



# La presenza nel mondo delle Suore della beata Antonia Maria Verna



Inspired by the mystery of the Immaculate Mary, the Sisters of Mother Antonia live in the spirit of self giving at the side of the poorest in eleven countries of the world.

- In Italy the communities work in schools, parishes, as well as in charity and social activities;
- in Albania, they work with people in villages and young girls;
- in Turkey, they collaborate in the formation of the children and of the youth with the attitude of great respect for the religious diversities;
- in Lebanon, they work in a school which is gratuitous for everybody;
- in Israel, with a strong educational commitment, they offer their service to Christian and Muslim families;
- in Libya they live at the bedside of the sick;
- in Tanzania and Kenya they work in schools and dispensaries among the people of villages and in parishes;
- in Argentina they work in schools, in activities of evangelization and among slum dwellers;
- in Mexico they are present in various fields of evangelization;
- in Pennsylvania (USA) they are engaged in the field of education following the Montessori method and in the parish catechesis at different levels.

Our journey continues ... gratuitously!

## **Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception of Ivrea**

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