

A Proposal to Create The Our Lady of Pity Museum of San Silverio Shrine

*Dedicated to the People of Ponza who settled in America and
to their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.*

By Ralph and Emilio Iodice



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History

During the great wave of Italian immigration to the United States between 1880 and 1920, millions of men, women and children bravely left their hometowns to find a new life in America. Among these were thousands who came from the island of Ponza.



Here they found a place to work, live and start a new beginning for their families.



Some went to various parts of the country like Virginia, West Virginia and Michigan where they worked in coal mines and factories. A few put down roots in California, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.



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The vast majority settled into the South Bronx in New York City. It was in this small part of the Big Apple where the immigrants from Ponza could keep their traditions alive while their children assimilated into the culture and way of life of the New World.



2.30 Immigrant neighborhood

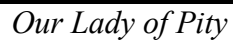
They worked in all fields, especially construction and business. Within a few years, "A Little Ponza," was created extending from East 149th Street to 156th Street, along Morris Avenue, and Park Avenue. Over a thousand families considered "Little Ponza" their home for over three generations.

The Ponzese of New York brought their traditions, food and faith with them. At the start of the twentieth century they toiled to build a church where they could worship and hold the feast of their patron saint, San

Silverio. The parish church was to be the focus of their way of life, just as it had been in the home of their birth in Ponza. It was in that sacred place that they would hold on to their values, and preserve the spirit of family, love and being together to celebrate the past, the present and the future.



The new house of worship was built at the turn of the twentieth century. It was christened Our Lady of Pity. It became the center of the community.



A black and white photograph of a large group of children and two adults posing in front of a building. The children are arranged in several rows, with some sitting on the ground in the front and others standing behind them. Two adults, a man in a light suit and hat, and a woman in a dark dress, stand in the back row. The building has a large doorway and a textured wall.

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The Church was constructed by Italian immigrants and artists. It was designated a national place of worship by the Archdiocese of New York and considered a special place of faith for the growing village of Italians from a small island in the Mediterranean.

The elementary school at Our Lady of Pity, run by Franciscan sisters, became the place of assimilation and introduction to the United States. The dedicated women and lay teachers transformed thousands of children into patriotic Americans while encouraging them to hold on to their faith and way of life and their origins from the Old World. The Franciscan priests were there to be of comfort to their parishioners in good and bad times and to help maintain the precious values that kept this enclave in New York alive.



By the early 1930's, the citizens of "Little Ponza" had established a society to honor San Silverio. They built a statue and an altar in his honor in the lovely church that now was the essence of the community. Every June 20th, they conducted novenas and a feast and a procession just like it was done on the beautiful island of Ponza where they came from.



Thousands of children from the families of Ponza were baptized, educated, received their sacraments and were married in Our Lady of Pity Church. Their loved ones were given the last rights from the priests of the Church and their funerals were held in Our Lady of Pity.



Men and women from Ponza participated in World War I and World War II, Korea and Vietnam.



They fought, sacrificed and, in many cases, died for the United States. Their families prayed for their safe return in Our Lady of Pity. Masses and prayer vigils were held to keep them out of harm's way.



Young men and women gathered at the church before leaving for the front. Many returned in caskets. Their funerals were often held at Our Lady of Pity. They were honored by their neighborhood, families, city and country and their church. For over a century, the core of "Little Ponza" was this beautiful house of worship.

Our Lady of Pity was the heart of the tradition of San Silverio. From that ritual was born a new reality in the life of the Ponzese in America. In the early 1960's San Silverio Shrine was created by a group of courageous and visionary women and men who wanted to permanently maintain the same spirit of community, history, beliefs, and principles as did their parents and grandparents who came from Ponza and worshiped in Our Lady of Pity. Because of the enormous dedication, hard work and love from the American families of Ponza, San Silverio Shrine became the most important place in the New World to preserve and promote

honoring San Silverio and, more importantly, keeping the soul of the traditions of the people of Ponza and the flame of their heritage alive in America.

As the decades past, “Little Ponza” gradually disappeared as the overwhelming urban and social changes of the City propelled families to move to other neighborhoods. This reduced the number of parishioners for the Church and weakened its economic viability. The Archdiocese of New York closed the Church in the 1990s as the descendants of the original immigrants from Ponza left the old tenements and sought areas where they could purchase single family homes and live in residential communities. Despite the migration from “Little Ponza,” families kept the love and memories of Our Lady of Pity in their hearts recalling that it was there that their roots began and it was there that the strong tradition of honoring their patron saint started.



Creation of Our Lady of Pity Museum

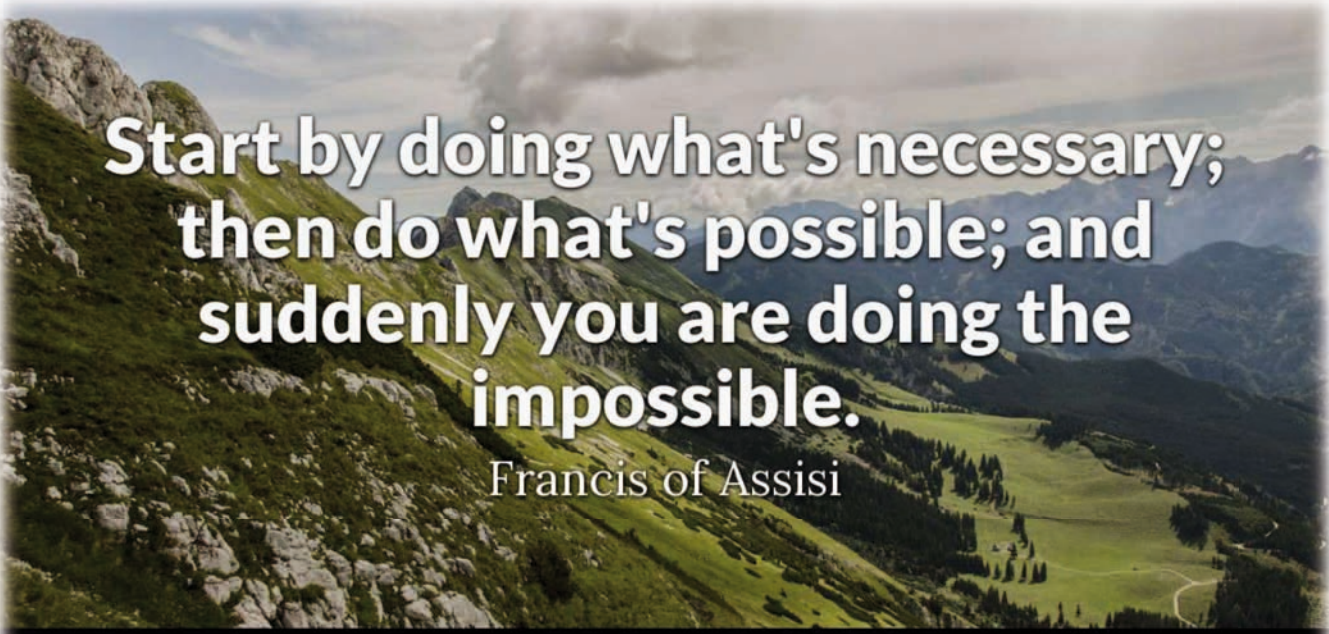
The mission of the Shrine is to honor San Silverio as the patron saint of Ponza and to preserve the traditions, origins and memories of the amazing people who settled in America to make a new and better life for their offspring. Decedents of the immigrants from Ponza have constantly searched for their roots, especially their connections with the famous “Little Ponza” of Morris Avenue in the South Bronx which was served for over 100 years by Our Lady of Pity Church.

The Shrine now has an *important opportunity* to create a special meaning to its mission by establishing a museum that commemorates the Church of Our Lady of Pity as *the center of the families from Ponza who settled in the New World*. The museum would enshrine memorabilia of the church and the community showing how “Little Ponza” began and would be a permanent place to honor the many families who left “The Pearl of the Mediterranean” to come to America. Photos, artifacts and audio visuals would be used to tell the story, preserve memories and spark the curiosity of a new generation as they search for their roots.

This wonderful project should be headed up by a special committee that includes young people who would render ideas, and ways to implement this extraordinary vision that will give a new and stronger significance to the mission and life of San Silverio Shrine.

The Our Lady of Pity Museum, dedicated to the people of Ponza who settled in America, will give a new impetus to the Shrine and make it the focal point of the heirs and decedents of those heroic and marvelous individuals who sailed from a tiny rock in the sea to inhabit a new and strange land and to shape generations of magnificent lives in the true spirit of a miracle of San Silverio.

Viva the Ponzese of Italy and America and Viva San Silverio



**Start by doing what's necessary;
then do what's possible; and
suddenly you are doing the
impossible.**

Francis of Assisi

