

A Saint in the Family



The village of Chorio (above), birthplace of Saint Gaetano Catanoso (inset). Photos courtesy of Justin Catanoso and the Sisters of St. Veronica of the Holy Face.

Ambassador chats with author Justin Catanoso about his new book, “My Cousin the Saint: A Search for Faith, Family and Miracles,” which profiles his distant cousin, Calabrian saint Padre Gaetano Catanoso.

“As far as I know there are no kings or explorers on the long road leading through my past. But just a few years ago, I learned that there is a saint, newly named by the Vatican, with whom I share both a family name and family connection. He was a poor parish priest, born several years before my grandfather in the same remote Aspromonte village in southern Italy. He was a man of relentless faith and remarkable humility with a tireless desire to serve. He was, I realize, nothing like me.”

So begins Justin Catanoso’s journey in “My Cousin the Saint: A Search for Faith, Family, and Miracles,” a new book released in spring 2008 by the William Morrow division of HarperCollins. Born in Cape May County, New Jersey, Catanoso is a Pulitzer Prize-nominated journalist who teaches writing and editing at Wake Forest University and serves as executive editor of The Business Journal in North Carolina.

Three years ago, Catanoso wrote an article for *Ambassador* magazine detailing a 2005 trip to the Vatican to witness the canonization of his distant cousin, Padre Gaetano Catanoso. The village priest who referred to himself as “the little donkey of Christ” died in 1963. During his long life of service, which spanned two World Wars, he opened schools and orphanages, ran hospital and prison ministries, and in 1934, founded an order of nuns, which is still active today. Padre Gaetano has been credited with performing two healing miracles following his death.

Thus inspired, Justin Catanoso turned a journalist’s eye to his search for his lapsed Catholicism and his quest to learn what it means to be related to a saint. The resulting book documents his journey

back toward faith while forging new and loving ties with long-lost relatives in southern Italy.

Today Catanoso lives with his wife Laurelyn Dossett and their three daughters, Emilia, Rosalie and Sophia, in North Carolina. His parents, Leonard and Connie Catanoso, live in Clermont, New Jersey. More information about the author and the book, including a video shot in Calabria, can be found at www.justincatanoso.com

Catanoso recently shared his experiences with *Ambassador*.

AMB: *Padre Gaetano Catanoso is the first Calabrian saint named by the Vatican in 400 years; the last was St. Francis di Paola, a hermit who died in 1507 and was canonized in 1519. In the book, you discuss the immense display of Calabrian pride you witnessed in response to his sainthood. Could you please describe that, and what his sainthood means today for the people of Calabria?*

JC: On the day of the canonization, October 23, 2005, more than 500 people from the southern reaches of Calabria traveled to Rome by car, bus and train to revel in the elevation of Padre Gaetano Catanoso to sainthood. With the banners they carried, the flags they waved and the cheers they chanted, their pride was immense and palpable that morning in St. Peter’s Square. The good priest was beloved throughout the region during his lifetime, and many older folks distinctly remember his kindness and radiant spirit still.

In the city of Reggio di Calabria and villages such as Chorio, San Lorenzo and Scilla, he is well ➤



A statue of Padre Gaetano Catanoso in Chorio's piazza.

remembered, too. He was and remains a local hero, a point of reference, a role model of Christian charity not only for his faithful followers, but for Calabrian priests, Monsignors and bishops as well.

AMB: *How did you feel about being an Italian-American as a child? How did those feelings evolve later, when you met and came to know your relatives in Reggio, Calabria?*

JC: I had mixed feelings frankly, much like my parents did, both of whom grew up in Philadelphia and South Jersey at a time when Italian immigrants were often reviled and discriminated against. I thought of myself as American first and foremost, and cared little about my Italian heritage. In the 1970s, the popularity of "The Godfather" spawned so many unfair and untrue Italian-American stereotypes. I resented it, as I did the names my cousins and I were often called on the playground or ball fields.

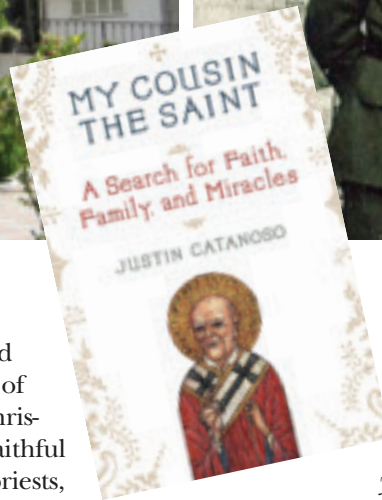
My Italian pride began to emerge, however, during a two-month honeymoon tour of western Europe in 1984. My new wife and I began our travels in London and ended up in Istanbul. But the 10 days we spent in Italy – Venice, Padua, Florence and Rome – changed our lives. I discovered that so much of life that we treasure in America – art, architecture, fashion and food – has flourished in Italy for centuries. I fell in love not only with Michelangelo and Raphael, but with the Italian people as well.

AMB: *How did you first learn that a Catanoso relative in Italy was on track to be named a saint by the Vatican? What was your reaction?*

JC: In spring 2001, my mother mailed me a short article about someone named Gaetano Catanoso who had been beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1997. It said he was one miracle shy of sainthood. I had never heard of him before. The information I read seemed far-fetched, even laughable. A Catanoso a saint? I thought of my cousins and aunts and uncles back in New Jersey. Not a saint in the bunch! Because I had stopped going to Mass years earlier, I couldn't connect with the spiritual elements of the news either. Essentially, I set the article aside and didn't give it much thought – until later.



Tony Catanoso, an American in the U.S. Army, with Aunt Maria Portzia Catanoso in Italy in 1944.



AMB: *In the book, you describe yourself as a lapsed Catholic who, for most of your life, has struggled to find faith and reconcile his beliefs with those of the church. How did this book, and your efforts to know Padre Gaetano, help that process?*

JC: The Catholic Church names saints not so much to arrange miracles, but to serve as role models for how to live a better, kinder, more charitable life. As I became more intrigued by the life of this sanctified relative, I realized the best place I could go to get to know him better at home in North Carolina was in church. That was the start of my pathway back to faith. It's an ongoing journey, but without this saint, it's unlikely I would be on this road today.

AMB: *Your struggle with faith seemed to come to a head in 2004 when your older brother, Alan, was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. At that time, your family had only recently learned of Padre Gaetano. How was that knowledge a help to your family?*

JC: My mother is devoutly Catholic. When my brother Alan was sick, she prayed every morning to our cousin, Blessed Gaetano Catanoso. At that time, he was not yet a saint, but he was already credited with delivering one healing miracle. My mother prayed intently for another. I believe those prayers were a great comfort to her. I believe they were a comfort to my brother as well. I wish I could say I found a similar comfort in such prayers, but I'm afraid I was too demoralized by the dire nature of my brother's condition.

AMB: *Were those prayers answered?*

JC: I have spent a lot of time wondering about that. Just a few months after Alan died, we learned that Pope John Paul II, shortly before his own death, approved Padre Gaetano for sainthood. That event helped my entire family move through our mourning. There were 60 of us from America who made the journey to Rome for the canonization. My parents, my wife and daughters, my sister-in-law and her daughters traveling for the first time without their father, my other brother and sister, plus aunts and uncles and many cousins. It was an extraordinary morning. For three hours, not a word was spoken in English. The only word we clearly understood was Pope Benedict XVI saying our family name – Catanoso, floating

above the crowded square like a prayer. Was all that a gift from St. Gaetano? I like to think so.

AMB: *You spent a year preparing to write this book. Could you tell us a little about your research with your family in America, and how that fits into the story? How did your family's desire to assimilate in the United States contribute to its lack of knowledge about Padre Gaetano?*

JC: A fundamental question for me was trying to understand how Padre Gaetano could rise to such renown in Italy without any of us Catanosos in America knowing he existed. To answer that question, I needed to get to know my paternal grandfather, Carmelo Catanoso, a cousin of Gaetano's who was born in the same remote Aspromonte village of Choio just eight years apart.

Carmelo left Italy in 1903 when he was 16. In long interviews with my father and his brothers and sisters, I learned for the first time the story of my grandfather, who died in 1941, and the first generation of Italian-Americans he raised with his Sicilian wife. The story is both ordinary and extraordinary, shared by millions of other immigrant families like mine. It is a story of fleeing poverty and despair for hope and opportunity in America. It is a story of immigrant children wanting to assimilate as quickly and completely as possible in the shadow of World War II where Italy and Mussolini sided with Germany and Hitler. In Part I of my book, I tell the parallel lives of these two cousins: my grandfather seeking New World prosperity, and his cousin the priest staying behind to relieve Old World misery.

AMB: *You spent a month in Italy during the summer of 2006 conducting additional research. What was it like to conduct interviews with Vatican officials in Rome? What did your research yield?*

JC: As a journalist for more than 25 years, I am accustomed to conducting interviews with politicians, scholars and business leaders. But going inside the Vatican to interview members of the Congregation of the Causes of Saints was in a category all to itself. It was both thrilling and unnerving. As I describe in a chapter in Part III, one of these "saint makers" dispensed facts about the complex canonization process, which I welcomed, but was otherwise dismissive of me personally, temporarily undermining my confidence in the project at the very outset. Two other Vatican officials, though, were enormously kind and helpful. Ultimately, my research shed light on wonderful details regarding how Padre Gaetano's canonization cause began and the role Pope John Paul II played from the very beginning. It also instilled in me a high measure of respect for the centuries-old canonization process.

AMB: *In the early 20th century Calabria was largely rural, plagued by poverty, crime, and the mafia. An earthquake on December 28, 1908 and subsequent war in Europe worsened living conditions. Please describe some of the challenges Padre Gaetano faced as a priest in this environment.*

JC: Try to imagine a place where the best among you – the smartest, most talented and most ambitious – are fleeing by the tens of thousands for America. It is

said that there were more Calabrians living in New York in 1900 than in all of Calabria. Many of those who stayed behind in the remote Italian villages were not only poor, they were illiterate, jobless, bankrupt of hope. If they had any faith, it was often in pagan deities. For decades, Padre Gaetano lived among these people. He said he saw the suffering face of Jesus in every one of them. His heart ached to help them, and he did, opening schools and orphanages, saying Mass and hearing confessions. It was the worst of times, and Padre Gaetano is a saint today because of the courage and faith he displayed in alleviating so much suffering.

AMB: *What were some of the challenges you faced in researching and reporting this story?*

JC: My single-biggest challenge was the language barrier. I have been studying Italian on my own since 2004, and I've learned enough to make a fool of myself when visiting relatives! But in conducting some three dozen interviews in Calabria in 2004, I depended primarily on one brilliant interpreter from Reggio, Germaine Sciriha, to help me understand what I was hearing. Also, there is precious little written in English about the life of Padre Gaetano. I carted home many books and articles about his life, and then called on



Photo by Laurelyn Dossett

In March with family friend Antonio Mafri (left) in Chorio.

five different people in my hometown to turn hundreds of pages of Italian into English. One woman, Serena Volpini Colquhoun, a native Italian living in North Carolina, was indispensable, serving as not only a translator but also as a committed research assistant.

AMB: *One of the central questions you raise in the book is: what does it mean to have a saint in the family? When you started writing this book, what did that mean to you and how, if at all, has that meaning changed today?*

JC: This is the fundamental question in the book, the question that drove more than 300 pages of writing. I would spoil the reader's process of discovery to reveal the answer here! But I won't be completely coy. I was truly uncertain that I would find the answer when I started my reporting more than two years ago. And when I left the Vatican after my first interview, I feared no one would care even if I did find out. But after studying the life of this remarkable sainted relative, and after spending nearly a month with my Calabrian relatives with whom I enjoyed so many extraordinary experiences, I can say with pride that a clear answer emerges by the last page, and I am very happy with it. ▲