

During Holy Week they redoubled their prayers, fasting, and mortification. Finally, on the evening of Good Friday, April 13, 1239, which coincided with the Feast of the Annunciation, while the seven exhausted hermits were saying their night prayers, the Blessed Virgin again appeared to her faithful Servants, surrounded by Angels, bearing a habit, a book, a scroll and palms. As the men gazed at their Heavenly Patroness with rapt devotion, Mary said to them: *"Beloved and elect Servants, I have come to grant your prayers. Here is the habit which I wish you to wear henceforth. It is black that it may always remind you of the keen sorrows which I experienced through my Son's Crucifixion and Death. This scroll bearing the words 'Servants of Mary' indicates the name by which you are to be known. This book contains the Rule of St. Augustine. By following it you will gain these palms in Heaven, if you serve me faithfully on earth!"*

Thus did Mary herself found the new Order of her Servants. Of the Seven founders, six now prepared themselves for the Priesthood. But one, St. Alexis Falconieri, though he had been a brilliant student, insisted on remaining a simple Brother and servant of the others. The new Order of Servants of Mary, or Servite Fathers, expanded marvelously, as the Blessed Virgin inspired many fine young men to join it.

The Seven Holy Founders, after many years of hard work in her service, were rewarded with particularly beautiful deaths. One passed away while at prayer before the altar, meditating on the sufferings of Our Lord. The first leader General, St. Bonfiliius Monaldi, was in the chapel one morning when he heard Mary's sweet voice say to him: *"Good Son, thou hast faithfully listened to and followed the voice of my Son. Come now to receive a hundred times what thou has given and to possess eternal life!"* When another died, a great flame was seen shooting up from his couch toward Heaven. Two more, as tired old men, painfully climbed to their beloved Monte Senario for the last time after long and arduous missionary trips, and passed away at the same moment.

The last to leave this world was the humble Brother, St. Alexis. One day when he was over a hundred years old, knowing his end was near, he paid his last tribute to his Mother in Heaven by reciting a hundred Aves. As he finished, he saw the Child Jesus approach and affectionately crown him with lovely flowers. Then Alexis cried out: *"Kneel, my Brethren, do you not see our loving Lord? He will also crown you if, through true devotion to the Blessed Virgin, you imitate her Immaculate purity and her profound humility."* And thus he went to his reward.

The Order founded by these seven Servants of Mary, whom Pope Leo XIII canonized in 1888, has spread devotion to the Sorrowful Mother. It was they who gave the Church the beautiful Feast of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and to the increase in popularity of the Sorrowful Mother Novena.

* (excerpted from: www.salvemariaregina.info)

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The Seven Holy Founders of the Servites

Feast Day February 12th



Each one separately saw a bright light, and the beautiful Queen of Heaven, accompanied by many Angels.

And Mary said to each of them:

***"Leave the world and retire together into solitude
in order to fight yourselves.***

Live wholly for God.

You will thus experience heavenly consolations.

My protection and assistance will never fail you."

Seven Holy Founders

(based on an account by Raphael Brown)

*In the year of Our Lord 1233, there lived in the thriving city-republic of Florence, Italy seven wealthy, distinguished young businessmen. The youngest of this group of close friends was twenty-seven, and the eldest thirty-five. One was a handsome banker. Another was a scholar. Another was interested in the turbulent politics of the times. Two were married, and one was a widower. All seven were unusually good Catholics. Five years previously they had joined the Confraternity of the *Laudesi* (Praisers) of Our Lady, and they loved to attend together the regular meetings, at which they prayed and sang hymns in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Then, all of a sudden, on the Feast of Mary's Assumption, after having received Holy Communion, while they were meditating and making their thanksgiving after Mass, each of these fine young men simultaneously had an unforgettable mystical experience which drastically changed the whole course of his life: each one separately saw a supernaturally bright light, and in it appeared the beautiful Queen of Heaven, accompanied by many Angels. And Mary said to each of them: *"Leave the world and retire together into solitude in order to fight yourselves. Live wholly for God. You will thus experience heavenly consolations. My protection and assistance will never fail you."*

The lovely vision slowly vanished, leaving seven deeply moved young men in the now-deserted church. They looked at one another in stupefied silence, each wondering whether the other had had the same vision, and not knowing whether to reveal what he had experienced. Finally Bonfiliius Monaldi, the eldest, took the initiative and humbly told his friends what he had seen and heard. Then the six others excitedly declared they had had exactly the same vision. And soon all seven knelt before the altar, and with violently beating hearts, resolved to obey this overwhelming Divine call.

They went at once to consult the worthy spiritual director of Our Lady's Confraternity, Father James of Poggibonsi. Both he and the Bishop of Florence were so impressed by the young men's sincerity and piety that they approved their decision as fulfilling the Will of God. Therefore, during the next three weeks, the seven wealthy businessmen broke the astounding news to their families and friends, who were also inspired by God to acquiesce and cooperate in this extraordinary vocation. It is believed that the two wives entered a Religious Order. The seven young men sold all their personal property and gave the money to the poor.

At last, on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, they bade farewell to all their dear ones, exchanged their rich senatorial robes for coarse gray monk's habits, and with the Bishop's blessing, they left their comfortable homes and went to live in a dilapidated old farmhouse on the outskirts of the town. While Father James served as their chaplain, they elected Monaldi their superior. However, they had no intention of founding a new Religious order.

All they wanted was to live an obscure life of extreme mortification and penance and thereby to purify themselves, out of love for God, as His Mother had advised. They spent their time almost entirely in prayer, meditation, and penitential exercises, striving in every way to devote themselves completely to Jesus Christ through Mary, in whose honor they reserved every Saturday.

In order to practice humility in one of its most humiliating forms, they asked the Bishop for permission to beg their food from door-to-door among the countless fellow citizens who had known them as prosperous merchants. The Bishop granted this permission. As they went through the streets, crowds gathered to watch them. A number of babes-in-arms who had never spoken before suddenly cried out: *"Look at the Servants of Mary!"* This happened several times later, in fact, one five-month-old baby who told his astonished mother to give alms to "the Servants of Mary" grew up to be St. Philip Benzie, one of the most famous Generals of the Order.

As a result of such sensational events, their holy solitude became disturbed. Therefore they decided to move to some isolated spot far from the city. Not knowing where to go, as usual, they turned to Mary for guidance. And in May, 1234, the Blessed Virgin showed them in a vision a lonely tree-covered mountain and said: *"Go to Monte Senario, and live still more austere!"*

During the following years they led such a strict and mortified life on this mountaintop that, once, when a Cardinal visited them, he was so shocked by their austerity that he ordered them to be less cruel to themselves. Having observed that some of the seven hermits kept complete silence for long periods, while others persisted in dwelling in caves and tried to live on nothing but herbs, he strongly advised them to adopt one set rule of community life for all.

Many young men were seeking them out begging to be admitted into their company. But the seven rejected all, because they still humbly refused to consider themselves a new Religious Order. So again they turned to the Blessed Virgin Mary for guidance, and consulted their Bishop.

In February, 1239 they received a sign, a vine that they planted developed green leaves and clusters of ripe fruit. The seven branches represented the seven hermits; the grapes were those who were going to join the Order.

Accepting this plan as the Will of God, the seven holy men decided to reorganize their group on the coming Feast of Easter. They must go forth to spread devotion to Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Sorrowful Mother among the people.