

--THE SPIRITUAL DREAM  
of the  
ST. FRANCIS FOUNDATION  
and  
VILLA SERENA  
by  
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## INTRODUCTION

Coming to the United States almost fifty-four years ago, I settled first in Alliance, Ohio, but after almost nine months in this great adopted country, needing work, I moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. However, I returned to Ohio June twenty-eight, 1916, and established myself permanently in Cleveland, Ohio, where most of my life developed, and I raised my family.

I always felt a certain spiritual inclination, so much so that, going downtown, I would stop occasionally at the Philip's Religious store to buy some books or to admire the clerical vestments, and one day I happened to purchase a copy of the biography of Padre Pio. This book made an extraordinary impression on me, awakening an intense desire to go and see this living Crucifix at the Convent of San Giovanni Rotondo on the Gargano, about thirty-five or forty kilometers from the city of Foggia. Encouraged by my sons, I boarded the ship Vulcania on July 21, 1954, leaving America for the first time. The ship stopped ten hours at Lisbon, giving me the welcome opportunity to visit the magnificent Sanctuary of Fatima. The second stop was at Palermo, Sicily, where I landed August fourth in order to visit with my relatives and friends. Two

weeks afterwards, accompanied by two nephews, I was on my way to San Giovanni Rotondo where our driver was able to accommodate us at the hotel Maria delle Grazie, the largest and best in comfort and food. Naturally, I was extremely happy to realize my long-cherished dream and, by good fortune, I met a Capucin Friar who, learning the purpose of my long trip, encouraged me much and introduced me to the Saintly Padre Pio. My emotions were so intense that tears were flowing on my cheeks which Padre Pio touched understandingly, saying softly, "Here, one must not cry." I knelt at his feet and with his left hand he blessed me with the following words, "May you be blessed together with all your dear ones." I kissed his wounded hand and he left the room. Thus, my dream and my Mission had come true, and the reader must know that from then on, every night before retiring and each morning I repeat the following prayer: "Jesus, I beseech Thy infinite mercy in behalf of Padre Pio. Thou inflicted the wounds of Thy Crucifixion on his body. May my prayer alleviate his suffering."

I must add that during my stay there I witnessed some miracles that were mentioned in my previous book "It Is Never Too Late", or the true story of an immigrant.

## CHAPTER I

On September twenty-sixth I boarded the steamship, Independence of the American Sport Line, saying goodbye to Messina, among the tears of my relatives and friends, leaving again my native country, perhaps for the last time. The ocean kept calm and clear so that the liner arrived in New York, October the fifth, about noon, and the blast of her horn was answered by the welcoming sound of the sirens of other ships as to say "Welcome to you, Independence, and to all the passengers and citizens you bring aboard." Our ships started unloading its cargo first because, as we heard over the loudspeaker, the line officials did not want to land the passengers on empty stomachs, and we remained on board to enjoy a good lunch. Immediately afterward the landing started and presently, by the grace of God, we were on dry land, and soon afterward I entered the Cathedral of New York to give thanks to God for His help and protection during my journey.

## CHAPTER II

Before relating the events leading to the Francisca Foundation, I wish to advise the reader that from my childhood I have loved Religion

more than anything else in the world. I happened to read the life of the “Poor of Assisi” being particularly impressed by his renouncing the wealth of his merchant father in order to embrace voluntary poverty and faith.

Following my visit to Padre Pio I experienced a great change in my soul. I felt that if my prayers and my charity had been the greatest inspiration of my life, I should still multiply them.

Before going to Italy, each Friday I had been going to the Convent of the Carmelites, on Fairmount Boulevard at Lee Road, to pray in their chapel. Upon my return I solemnly swore in that same chapel that as long as I live and can walk I would dedicate my time to charity, and I would never forget my promise. It was there in fact that I would open my heart to our Lord and, with fervent prayers, derive comfort for my tears and sorrows, inspiration for my ideals. To this day, after thirteen years, I still keep my promise and my weekly visits.

### CHAPTER III

During the second World War I was at home with four of my sons while three were serving, two in Italy and one in the Pacific. One may well

imagine that I had greater reasons to go to the Convent for my prayers, to implore God for the safe return of my sons. Moreover, while they were away, I myself suffered much, not for loss of life, but financially and in family upheavals.

But God never deserts His followers! Working hard, I had purchased a property at 13913 Kinsman Road, a good location to open a grocery store as soon as my sons would return from war. It is still there, followed by two other stores, which form the Alesci's Food Corporation. Thus, we also have the satisfaction of giving honest and well rewarded work to many family men and women who, respected by the management, are happy in their employment.

#### CHAPTER IV

Often man is led into temptation and this happened to me, seeming that I was never to know happiness in life. It started when I was forced to leave Sicily and my wife of more than two years, to come to America after a heavy loss caused by the failure of a firm of citrus fruits. It was to be eight years before we could be reunited. Ten years afterward my dear wife died, not long after the birth of my eighth child, a daughter. But I do not wish to recall these

tragedies even though I shall never be able to erase the anguishes of a bitter and mysterious life.

One day when my heart was overflowing with sadness and I was overwhelmed by despair, I thought of ending it all by killing myself with my automobile. But my guardian angel gradually convinced me that I should pray instead. So, I went to the faithful chapel and I began to pray intensely, and as I was doing so, I felt that I was saved; after some time of fervent prayers I left, depositing my alm in sign of gratitude. I walked toward my car to go to the store we have on Mayfield Road, but as I was about to turn the key of the ignition I heard a voice so distinct that it seemed to come from the automobile roof, saying in Italian “Do not despair Frank, this is your life.” It is easy to relate a fact like this, but not so to believe it, so I got out of the car to look all around me from top to bottom, and not seeing anyone I thought I had imagined things. Again, I tried to start the engine, but the same voice clearly repeated “Frank, this is your life.” The reader must believe, in the name of the God that I adore, this is the absolute truth. Then I understood; it was the voice of Padre Pio. Padre Pio was praying for me as I was praying for him.



When I reached the store I thought I was walking on air, and this feeling remained for a long time. Still mystified by the happening I confessed it to my dear friend Father McCue of John Carroll University and he said that not only did he believe me but he felt that I should consider myself lucky to receive that divine revelation.

## CHAPTER V

Fearing that people would not believe what was happening to me I was keeping it to myself, thinking that probably my own sons would think I was out of my mind. In the meantime, I felt increasingly attracted to prayer and charity, happier to give than to receive. As I already mentioned in the first chapter of my mysterious life, I am sure that the reader will agree that I cannot help thinking that the happenings related in Chapter Four, and what will follow suggest the word "mystery." Be as it may, about a year afterward one morning as I was arising, all at once my eyes became heavy and I felt in a state of sudden lethargy. I cannot say how long I remained in that condition, but during that time I saw myself in a location either on Green Road or Richmond Road where I was constructing an immense building. I was circulating among the

workers; bricklayers, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, etc., all working hard, while I was feeling happy each minute gazing at the building quickly growing in size before my eyes. Some friends and acquaintances were passing by, stopping to ask if I were erecting the building and WHY. "My dear friends" I answered, "I am doing this because many people need it." I finally woke up feeling a different person, while a pressing command, an inner voice, was urging "Get up and begin." Half an hour after my breakfast I was already knocking at the first door in quest of help and charity. This was the beginning of the Saint Francis Foundation, in April 1956, exactly a year after I heard a Divine voice telling me "This is your life."

After that second message my mind was set on that great undertaking, with a heavenly determination to make it the sole purpose of my remaining life. I was not able to think of anything else regardless of where I happened to be. God had enlightened me, and I made a solemn vow to sacrifice myself to the utmost, sure that with Divine help I would be able to realize my dream regardless of the discouraging remarks of some people, and the obstacles to conquer.

## CHAPTER VI

I felt that I needed some practical information and my first step was to visit my attorney, Leonard Blum, to whom I had related what happened. He listened attentively and his first question was whether I expected to deal in salaries. "No," I answered, "I intend to work for charity." In that case then, he said, "you must call your project a Foundation," to which I answered that I already had a name; The Saint Francis Foundation. I was given a paper that had to be signed by three persons; it was the application for a State Charter which, sent to Columbus with a twenty-five dollar fee, would legitimate the undertaking. In less than two weeks the Charter came back and having accomplished this first step I felt I also had acquired the first tool for my work.

## CHAPTER VII

But I understood the necessity of also seeking the guidance of a religious person and being a friend of Father Edward McCue whom I already mentioned, I went to see him and when he heard of what had happened, that I had the Charter in my hands, he looked at me mystified. "Frank,"

he said, "I am sorry to tell you that regardless of your dedication, you will never be able to accomplish so much. Undertakings of that importance require years of toil and much money, and you must realize that you are not young anymore." "Father McCue," I answered, "You are a good friend, but do not speak or think of my giving up this beautiful idea because I have made a solemn vow to God to carry it through. Rather please help me to get in touch with the right person at the Chancery office of the Diocese." He mentioned a monsignor with whom I could make an appointment and thanking him for the information I departed.

## CHAPTER VIII

Some days passed before I could make an appointment with the Office, but I was finally able to meet the person who would talk to me. He greeted me courteously enough, however, when I finished my story, I thought he was looking at me reproachfully. He asked me if I were really sure of my intentions. "Of course, I am sure," I replied. "God has revealed to me and I believe in His supreme command."

"I am not interested in how you feel," he said. "My opinion is that you must desist."

“This I will never, never do,” was my retort.

“You are an obstinate man,” he commented.

“Yes, I am and exactly for the reasons I mentioned.”

He said, “Still I don’t think Cleveland needs your Foundation.”

“Monsignor, you are mistaken; I had to earn a living going from house to house and I have seen countless persons who need help and shelter, conditions you cannot observe from your office.”

He said, “Well, if you know so much, and since you already have the Charter from Columbus, why did you come to me?”

“First, because I believe in my religion, secondly, because we will have to mail circulars soliciting charitable contributions, I wanted to inform the Bishop’s office that the money will be used for this glorious undertaking of The Saint Francis Foundation.”

“I see that you really are stubborn.” He then added.

“Yes, I am,” I repeated.

After about a half an hour of consultation he dismissed me saying, “In that case, may God bless you!”

## CHAPTER IX

Incidentally, I must relate here that during my trip to Italy, I bought a biography of St. Francis at a Catholic bookstore in Messina, and I appreciated it so much that when I returned home I had it beautifully bound. Someone could disapprove my spending fifteen dollars in a binding, but if they could only experience the sentiments I have for St. Francis then they would agree with me. Anyway, I consider this book one of my most precious possessions.

I loaned it to a priest and when he returned it, he admitted that after reading many biographies of St. Francis he never found one so complete. No wonder then that my enthusiasm for this universal saint became uncontrollable in my heart.

From this book of more than five hundred pages I derived my conviction to become a religious missionary and a follower of “The Poor

of Assisi,” as I already mentioned in my already published book “It Is Never Too Late.” In fact, I could even go further back in my life to find the origin of my love for St. Francis. That is from about ten years of age when I learned something of him in school.

## CHAPTER X

I must mention to my readers that, in order to follow the very steps of St. Francis I wanted to begin with twelve members, so that I needed seven men besides myself and four women. It might seem impossible to believe that this was one of the most difficult undertaking of my enterprise. When I would explain my vision to the Foundation many reacted coldly and with indifference, and I am sure that when my back was turned they called me a madman. However, I happened to meet my good friend, Bill Passalacqua, a builder and contractor, to whom I told my ideas. Luckily, he was the first one to believe in me, and he offered his encouragement, asking me to go to his office, where I received the initial check for fifty dollars. This kindled the flame of hope in my heart and, more yet I had found someone who believed in me.

Meanwhile, another friend invited me to assist at the Foundation of a Lodge of the Italian Sons and Daughters of America and I went to see and learn. At this meeting I met Frank Pitrone who was the toastmaster, and admiring his fluent speech, and the excellent way in which he conducted the proceedings, I was convinced that he would be a valuable member of the Saint Francis Foundation. Moreover, his name was also Frank.

That night a new lodge was formed, named "La Bella Rosa" (The Beautiful Rose), and as soon as the speeches were concluded, I approached Mr. Pitrone to inform him of my dreams, asking him to participate in them.

This was a gift of priceless importance. I was not alone anymore, and that night I retired with a heart full of hope, which up to this time I had not experienced. Mr. Frank Pitrone is now the President of the St. Francis Foundation. Later I found Mr. Sebastian Azzolina to act as Treasurer, and my daughter Angelina became the Secretary.

Finally, the Foundation was getting into shape. I was happy every time new members would join, acquiring greater courage and confidence.



## CHAPTER XI

Winter was arriving and we decided to give a dinner-dance party to raise funds. We were fortunate to make six hundred dollars, a promising financial beginning. Later we bought twelve wooden boxes in the Franciscan style, having on the front the image of the Saint. Each member of the Foundation had one to use in request for alms from his friends. Each day would bring an improvement.

Near Christmas we mailed a circular which brought us eight thousand nine hundred dollars. It really was a blessed Christmas for us, but to follow the spirit of the Holiday, we sent a donation to Monsignor Caccisarro to celebrate a Mass for God's glory and the good intentions of all who contributed to our cause, a Mass which is celebrated every month.

## CHAPTER XII

Time was passing and soon came New Year's Day, which is also my birthday. All my children came to see me to bring their good wishes and congratulations. My younger daughter Giuseppina brought me some drawings for painting by number, one of the "Last Supper" and

the other of "Jesus and the Women." Surprised, I asked what was her purpose. "Father" she answered, "you often said if you had had the opportunity you would have liked to study art, and since you are working so much for your St. Francis Foundation, this might relax you a little"

I thought this would be too late but, looking at these numbers, I became more and more interested, so I decided to begin. My sons were teasing me, saying that I would not be able to succeed. I assured them that I would show them. In fact, I seemed to find in that easy painting a new life, a desire that had long been hidden in my mind, and my heart enthusiastically opened to a reborn interest, so much so that often I could not go to sleep at night because of the intense joy. After that first introduction to art, I soon started to paint free hand.

### CHAPTER XIII

The greatest need of the Foundation was to interest as many persons as possible, and this search for kindred minds lasted eight years, which were endured with courage and determination, and with each new member our hopes were again rekindled in this undertaking

almost without funds. But as I never tire to repeat, hope is a mighty fortress.

In my preceding chapter I said that I now enjoy painting, and even this avocation helped, because the sale of some of my pictures brought us the sum of three hundred dollars. Some may say “What is three hundred dollars in front of such an ambitious undertaking?” But regardless of how small the contribution may be, it is always a step ahead as for instance the twenty-five dollars my daughter Angelina gave me for the very first picture I produced. As far as painting was concerned my inspiration and inclination was toward religious pictures. Time literally flew.

At the Easter reunion I advised the members that it would be good to buy some land to prove to the public that we were not sleeping, also emphasizing the fact that it would be the best means to acquire its confidence, establishing the location of the future house.

My opinion was accepted so, together with Frank Pitrone, we found and bought about ten acres on Route 82 for ten thousand dollars, by paying four thousand in cash and taking a mortgage for the rest. In four years the land was paid in full, and at that point I felt the need to consult Monsignor Caccisarro who was well informed about our undertaking. Immediately he

asked about the location of the land, and when I put my finger on the area on the map, he looked at me coldly.

“Don’t you like it?” I could not help inquiring”. You are mistaken, my dear, he answered. “It is not that I don’t like it, but the fact that beautiful as this location is, it is not suitable for your purpose because it is in Youngstown territory, do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand.” I said, continuing this time with my own unavoidable coolness, “but what can I do now?”

“There is only one way out” he retorted, “sell it and buy another in the right location.”

I went out of his office feeling so utterly confused that I did in many other predicaments. I turned in prayer to God. “Lord Almighty you have always shown me the right path, help. You know that I am not working for myself, but for Your glory and for the good of mankind.”

## CHAPTER XIV

I remember when reading a biography of St. Paul, in a passage of his teaching, he stated that a promise is stronger than a contract and having made my promise to God Himself I could not

default. Thus, with the cooperation of the proper offices, we bought a large property in Auburn Corners Township. Naturally our debt with the bank increased, but that was the only way out. With the sincere cooperation of all members, the sending out of a circular letter each year, the yearly dinner dances, in a little over two years the new debt was also paid. Thanking all our benefactors, and persisting in relentless work, I was once more able to recognize the strength of prayers.

## CHAPTER XV

It is already known that I was forever seeking help and new recruits, and one day when I was in our Kinsman store, I saw one of our good customers enter. Knowing that he had the qualities desirable to our purpose I asked him to participate in our Foundation. He answered that he recognized the worth of our undertaking and even though at present he was too busy to help, he would never forget my request for help and would do so whenever possible.

More than a year had passed from that moment when, one fall day, when I was sitting in an automobile in a parking lot with Frank Pitrone, discussing our common enterprise, I saw the

same gentleman coming from the store. By chance he saw us and, approaching our automobile, said “do you remember, Mr. Alesci, my promise to help you at the first opportunity? Here is the name and telephone number of a lawyer whom I feel sure will be able to be of assistance. He is Mr. Howard Isham Chesler. Call him and you will meet a worthy person.” I learned later that the name of the kind person who advised us was Mr. Sam Ourve. We followed the suggestion and, after having fixed the convenient time, we met Mr. Chesler. He received us most cordially and invited me to tell him the whole story of our dreams. His first question was in regard to the State Charter and learning that we had already secured one, he asked us to bring all the documents we had so he might start his legal work at once. He liked our ideas very much and from that moment on he became part of our Foundation, in fact more Franciscan than ourselves. Every time he would see me sad and apprehensive, he encouraged me with his persuasive words, but when he met with any difficulty he would hide it from me as to not lower my fervent hopes. I can sincerely say, dear readers, that my contact with Mr. Chesler developed into the greatest and most sincere friendship ever possible, the blessing of which will be amply proven later on.

## CHAPTER XVI

My greatest consolation was in prayers ---“You enlightened me, Oh Jesus, and you must open the doors for me for Your Holy Glory and the good of mankind” I would repeat.

One of our stores is situated at Mayfield and South Green Roads and one Saturday as I was helping the customers I ran across Mr. Michael Velotta, a dear friend I had met when we were both working to raise funds for the building of Pacelli Hall of John Carroll University. We became fast friends, but since then we had not seen each other for some time. He asked me how things were going. Naturally, I informed him of the St. Francis Foundation, sharing with him, as briefly as possible, some of the past experiences and telling him of the two parcels of land we had already purchased. He praised our efforts, offering his services whenever possible, and we parted with a cordial handshake and renewed friendship.

## CHAPTER XVII

Our regular meetings were held the second Tuesday of each month, and when the

discussions were ended each one would return home. Invariably, I could not sleep those nights. My mind was so full of considerations about the success and progress of the Foundation. Then I would find comfort and appeasement in prayers. God had enlightened me on this dream and only He could help me to carry my cross and spiritually guide my course. Thus, with prayers on my lips, I would finally sink into sort of a stupor, late at night. When comfort would not come, bitter tears would flow to give vent to my suffering. However, I never felt the slightest doubt in my mind, and continued with determination to accomplish my goal.

Every Christmas I send a donation to the Convent of Padre Pio of whom I already spoke at the beginning of this story. This devotion increases the vision of my mind and hopes. A Trinitarian Sister that I have known since 1932, and love as a daughter. Sister Luci took a trip to Italy and I begged her to go and see Padre Pio. Giving her some money for the journey, she promised she would do so as she herself wanted to meet him. On her return she brought me a parchment with the following words: "The Padre thanks you for your generous donation. Furthermore, he assures you that he begs the Holy Spirit to give you guidance throughout the arduous undertaking you have attempted. He



also recommends you to the Holy Mother during his Mass and sends his solemn blessings.”

## CHAPTER XVIII

So, as it always happened during the nine years dedicated to the project, each experience of discouragement, weariness and anxiety was counterbalanced by a spiritual uplift which would reconfirm my hope in the undertaking that had now become an obligation.

One of these blessings was granted to me in the person of Mr. Chesler of whom I have already spoken, and especially because of his untiring dedication to the St. Francis Foundation. It seemed that he had the gifted faculty of opening doors and surmounting obstacles. Moreover, it was he who knocked at the Washington office door from which we hoped to receive the essential loan for our enterprise. Consequently, on December thirty-first, nineteen hundred sixty-three, as I was helping in the Mapletown store, I received a telephone call from Mr. Chesler urging me to come to his office to meet a gentleman from Washington who wished to talk with me. New Year's Eve was an important date for the store, but working for God was of greater importance, and I left immediately. After a few

minutes in Mr. Chesler's office I met the official from Washington, who seemed surprised about the work we had initiated, but after I had explained the location of our property and mentioned the loan needed, he bluntly said that the Government would never loan us the money to build in such a place. I was terrified, and of course, I inquired about the reasons. "You have to find a more suitable land for such a project," he answered. "A location on traffic lines, with bus service, near a hospital and a shopping center to give the tenants facilities for their convenience, adding with a faint smile, "furthermore, my dear, it should not be too far from a moving picture theatre." "But where could I find the money to buy such a property," I countered. "What are we going to do with the land we have already acquired?" "The terrain you have bought will remain the property of the Foundation, he replied, "and the Government will loan you the money for the right land. That is the only way we can help." That concluded our conversation and we parted with expression of gratitude and good wishes for the New Year.

## CHAPTER XIX

This was the second time that the location of the land proved unsatisfactory, and the reader can well imagine my feelings. I needed help and more people to share my interest in the solemn promise I made to God. Monsignor Caccisarro, as always, did not fail to encourage me, repeating that God who had given me the inspiration, would also help me, because God never abandons those who have faith in His greatness. I received these words as the good earth welcomes the dew when desperately in need of rain.

The same Monsignor Caccisarro called me on the telephone during those moments of disheartenment, saying that an important religious person wished to see me. It was an Italian Bishop who was visiting Cleveland and Monsignor Caccisarro introduced me saying that I was a spiritual son of Padre Pio. I immediately started relating the purpose of my ideal, to which he replied that I was fortunate to be elected to pursue this goal because it was not only a religious goal but also most humanitarian. “Do not become discouraged,” he continued, “because God will help you to bring it to completion, and I compliment you.” Taking his

leave, he added that he was proceeding to Detroit to stay for a week, but upon his return to Cleveland, he wanted to see me again before going back to Italy. I went to see him once more at the proper time, receiving more encouraging words, and afterward I kept writing to him about the progress of the Foundation, receiving repeated encouragement. Sorrowfully, in nineteen hundred sixty-five I learned from Monsignor Caccisarro that the Bishop had passed away. May God give his soul peace and glory.

## CHAPTER XX

Considering the magnitude of my dream, at times I could not help thinking that perhaps God had assigned me a mission beyond my strength. It is true that I embraced it with all my heart in April, nineteen hundred fifty-six, but the reader will remember that even at that time I was not a young man, and meanwhile the years were passing inexorably. However, my courage and my hopes to see my undertaking accomplished gave me strength, and seeking information about this type of venture, I was advised to consult Monsignor Ivanco, which I did at once. Upon hearing that I wished to speak to him in regard to

a religious matter, he promised to see me, and in fact one day he came to my store on Kinsman Road.

Quickly I related to him the history of the Foundation, remarking that I was fostering that project, not for personal gain but for our Lord's glory and the benefit of humanity. His answer was flatly, "Frank, it seems that you want to unload your dream on my shoulders," and with that, he left. I was petrified, almost ashamed, reflecting on the thought that while many priests expect to be helped, very few feel the same about helping others. The reader surely can imagine my disappointment, nevertheless his refusal did not humiliate me. On the contrary, it fortified my decision. I said to myself, "Monsignor, one of these days I am going to give you the right answer." "Proving to you that I am not a lunatic." Then I devotedly returned to my greatest courage, to my ardent prayers.

## CHAPTER XXI

Following this disappointing meeting, I went to see Mr. Chesler, informing him of what had happened. As always, he listened to me patiently and the following encouragement he gave me restored my mind and heart. I shall never grow

tired of praising this fine gentleman, Mr. Chesler. What would have happened to my sacrifices, my prayers, my tears and my money without this good and outstanding man? If the Lord gave me a cross to carry, He also gave me someone to help me. May God bless him and his family. He was the one who supported me through all the difficulties which faced me until the realization of my dream. Mr. Chesler did all that without remuneration. The name of Howard Chesler is written in my heart forever.

## CHAPTER XXII

This life full of hope, which continued for six years, had not yet produced my result. When one door opened, another would close. Therefore, it was forever necessary to recur to infinite praying, night and day, continually during any conscious moment, from the very minute I started my activity for the Foundation. Wars are fought and won with arms; God's blessings are obtained by prayers.

As it was, Mr. Chesler called me one day, saying that he wanted to talk to me because he thought he had found a way out of our difficulties. He asked me if I knew Mr. Frank Celeste, then Mayor of Lakewood, Ohio, assuring

me that Mr. Celeste could be of great help to us because of his numerous acquaintances and contacts. Mr. Chesler is a good friend of the Mayor, so he called him immediately. I listened to the one-sided conversation with great anxiety. Then I was informed that Mr. Celeste wanted to see the two of us, and Frank Pitrone, in his office the next day. Who had not the opportunity to meet Mr. Celeste can hardly imagine his inner goodness, his competence and his understanding. When he arrived at his office, he received us with a promising smile and, the introductions finished. He immediately asked if I were the Alesci who opened importing food stores east and west of the city of Cleveland. He congratulated me, and after Mr. Chesler finished giving a complete account of our efforts toward the Foundation; Mr. Celeste's comments were that he would have liked to have known before of our project, and that we had no reason to doubt our success. He commented pleasingly about the coincidence that the first name of three of the persons present should be Frank, and that three Franks and Mr. Chesler would show Cleveland that my dream could come true. The Mayor realized, above all, the need for such a home for the aged, and that in Lakewood, they too were just finishing such a project, although for only a hundred and sixty persons while the need was for

more than three hundred. Continuing his conversation with Mr. Chesler, he inquired about the technicalities involved, was informed about our land purchases and of the results of the meeting with the Government official. He concurred in the recommendation on the importance of the location and suggested that we request a grant of three million dollars. I could not help remarking that it was impossible to hope for such an amount when we were denied our former need of one million. "It depends on the size of the facilities one wants to create," he answered. "Then the Government can grant three million just as well as one." Our meeting ended with his conviction that our work would be successful, and that Nick Milete, his assistant, would keep us informed on his progress. Pleasant and encouraging words!

## CHAPTER XXIII

A few days afterward, Mr. Chesler contacted the Mayor's assistance, Nick Milete, in regard to the land to be purchased. There was a possibility near Huron Road Hospital, but because of a number of owners an agreement could not be reached. My personal anxiety made me feel that we had been looking for the appropriate location



for at least a century, without success. but, if the ever-comforting Mr. Chesler or Mr. Pitrone were disturbed, no one could tell. However, I could not ignore the storm that was tormenting me. Those were the moments during which I was seeking inner peace, remembering what Bishop Crivellari had told me: “Frank never lose hope because God inspired you and He will guide you to the success of your task.” Then I also remembered Mother Cabrini, also an immigrant, and her magnificent dedication to the welfare of humanity.

An old saying reminds us that “He who searches will find, and the one who perseveres will conquer.” So, to follow the suggestion, one day I called Mr. Chesler’s secretary and, unexpectedly, she told me that they had found a new parcel of land. At this point I must say a few words of appreciation for this fine secretary who has been for me as the fresh water to a dying tree. Although so much younger than I, her encouragement and kindness can only be compared to those of a mother. She also told me the names of the owners of the land: Sam Bucchieri,, Frank Negrelli and Milan Rapel. I was pleasantly surprised to hear the name of Mr. Bucchieri, who was an old friend of mine, and consequently also aware of my undertaking and in fact a past contributor to it. This new land had

a definite bearing on our plans; the price was high, and the federal regulation stipulated that the total cost should not exceed one thousand dollars for each apartment. According to the design of the architect we were to build two hundred and forty-two apartments and, consequently, the land price of three hundred thousand dollars was exorbitant. What could we do? Mr. Chesler called a special meeting of all the interested parties. Mr. Celeste proposed to the owners that, in consideration of the purposes of the Foundation, perhaps we could hope for a little sacrifice on the part of the owners. They did not give an immediate answer, but Mr. Bucchieri promised that within a week it would be forthcoming, and in just about that length of time, they informed us that they decided to make a donation by way of reducing the original price by thirty-four thousand dollars, bringing the cost to \$266,200. May God bless all of them! My faith in Sam Bucchieri was amply justified.

Since the federal official wished that the Foundation be represented by more persons, we extended this invitation to the American Society of the Sons and Daughters of Italy to participate, which they gladly accepted.

## CHAPTER XXIV

The most critical persons are usually the ones that never do anything, particularly in favor of charity or any welfare project, and I am sure that this truism has been observed by many more before me. Certainly, the many persons who unselfishly worked with me are aware of it. So, it was perhaps only normal that I should hear the comment that our work had been very simple and that it was an easy matter to get a Government loan. The kind readers know that answer from the account I gave them of the difficulties we had to conquer, and the realization of the tremendous amount of work donated by friendly lawyers and many other professional men.

Perhaps I tire my readers, but I am sure they understand my suffering at the repeated disappointments, especially when they consider that this had lasted already almost eight years. The twenty-fourth of December, nineteen hundred sixty-four, at my store on Kinsman Road, I received a call from Mr. Chesler. "Courage Mr. Alesci, I wish to inform you that I received a letter from the Federal office, which tells us to go to the Union Commerce Bank to receive our money for the land." "I have already called Sam

Bucchieri to tell him everything,” he added. I was so happy that I almost could not believe him, so to convince me, he read the letter. This was one time that I truly felt the happiest man in the world.

## CHAPTER XXV

I must confess to everyone that Christmas nineteen hundred sixty-four was one of the most memorable days of my life. The celebration of the feast of the Nativity found a receptive enthusiasm in my heart, and I think my lips never uttered more meaningful prayers of thanksgiving and adoration. On December twenty-eighth, together with Mr. Chesler, Mr. Pitrone and Nick Milete, I went to the bank, welcomed by a Mr. Brown. Again, we signed more documents but this time happily. We received the money, enabling us to pay the first large expense we had to meet. I could not help becoming anxious for the ceremony of the breaking of the ground to arrive, but nothing came easy for us. When a victory was achieved, other perplexing problems would arrive to worry us. In the meantime, I wondered if my advancing age would allow me to witness that glorious moment.

I knew that formalities had to be faced and much work had to be done yet, but Mr. Chesler would never let any of his worries transpire to me and Mr. Pitrone, in spite of our daily visit to his office, mostly to sign new documents.

Finally, in May nineteen hundred sixty-five, we were able to receive estimates for the construction of the building. The opening of the bids took place in the office of Mayor Celeste, with many contractors present, offering their appraisals. The best bid was that of Weinstein Company of Akron, Ohio, for the sum of two million nine hundred thousand dollars. The granting of the building permit from the City of Mayfield Heights seemed a mere formality. A call from Mr. Chesler's secretary summoned me to the office of the architect in the Citizens' Building. There I found Mr. Chesler, Mr. Pitrone and the representative of the builders; one of them said that he had been at the City Hall of Mayfield Heights to obtain the building permit which read thus: "Permit granted to the Saint Francis Foundation to erect a building for a Golden Age Home." We found the price of this document rather high, three thousand dollars, in addition to the one thousand one hundred dollars paid in Columbus for the State Permit, and one thousand dollars to the two appraisers of the land. This gives an idea of the cost besides

all the hard work required. All the considerations made at the meeting kept us busy until noon. The representative of the contractor surprised us pleasantly by inviting us to luncheon, as his guests.

Justified by the very accurate plans and detailed figuring, we finally came to the decision that the ground-breaking would take place on July twenty-second. My inner reactions, however, continued to be conflicting, almost doubtful, and the reason for this feeling was revealed one day when I received an urgent request to go to Mr. Chesler. Upon arriving at his office, the first thing his secretary, in her understanding way, asked me to do was to sit down. She realized that the blow I was about to receive could perhaps be taken better sitting down. Mr. Chesler was busy with a client at the moment and when he appeared he asked me to still wait while he appeared in court. I tried to ask the secretary why Mr. Chesler had called me in, but all she could say was that she just knew that he wanted to talk to me. He returned in about two hours, and noticing immediately that he was upset, I inquired at once as to the cause of the new trouble. As I stated before, Mr. Chesler never conveyed his worries regarding the Foundation to me, but this time even he admitted that he was worried. A call had come

from the City Hall of Mayfield Heights informing him that they wanted to revoke our building permit. We just looked at each other for a while, speechless. I remained seated for awhile to recuperate from this new blow to my dearest hopes, trying not to believe that this would mean the end of eight years of sacrifice, much money spent and prayers proffered

Finally, Mr. Chesler, this very good man, proposed this alternative. With tears in his eyes he said: "Mr. Alesci, we have to change the name of the building to Villa Serena. What do you think of it?" "Very well," I answered, "as long as we may succeed in our purpose." That ended our sad meeting that day, and upon leaving I noticed that the secretary was also deeply touched. The name that had inspired me all my life, and that I had wanted to associate with our noble, unselfish and Christian endeavor was unfortunately lost.

All the happenings just related occurred just when we were expressing to set the date for the ceremony of ground-breaking. Now everything seemed to be lost again, and I became desperate to the point that the doctor warned me not to worry so much if I cared for my health.

The Councilmen of Mayfield Heights, influenced by our objectors, were finding one excuse after another for not releasing the

building permit, regardless of the sum of a quarter of a million dollars already spent, and the architects asking for their fees. Members and attorneys were frantically trying to find a way out, and finally we were asked to appear in court. Mr. Chesler advised me not to go because he feared for my health. But soon after we had another Foundation meeting, during which, for a while, everyone sat in silence. I was anxious to know what had happened at the other meeting and inquired of Mr. Chesler as to who was supposed to start the proceedings. He answered that Frank Celeste would as soon as he arrived from a meeting. Soon Mr. Celeste came in, looked at us, who in our silence, must have resembled the twelve Apostles who, closeted in a house, were waiting for the Holy Ghost. Mr. Celeste informed us at once that our neighbors would withdraw their objections providing that we would not use the name of Saint Francis for the building.

Reflecting on the reason given by Mr. Chesler that I should not attend the meeting at the Mayfield Heights Council, it occurs to me now that probably he was afraid that I might not be able to control my emotion and speech. I agree with him now. However, I asked Frank Pitrone, as President of the St. Francis Foundation, to let



me know everything that took place in the court. The following is his exact report:

On Friday, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1965, the Board of Zoning Appeals of the city of Mayfield Heights, met to consider the renewal of a building permit for the House of St. Francis, Inc. Present at the meeting were about fifty members of the Order of Italian Sons and Daughters of America, and the St. Francis Foundation. Also present, besides Mr. Pitrone, were Howard Chesler, Mr. Wallace Teare of Weinberg-Teare Architects and Mary Cologero. There also were present many residents of Mayfield Heights and members of the St. Francis of Assisi church. The committee hearing our request consisted of Councilmen Mr. Kay, Mr. De John, Mr. Immarino, Mr. Contine and Mr. Barron. All of the members of the Council were in favor of the renewal, except Mr. Barron, who objected in every way possible. We were given to understand that he was speaking for Monsignor Gallagher, the pastor of St. Francis of Assisi church, who has continuously opposed our project ever since we first approached him with our plans. The behavior of Mr. Barron and many of the local residents was atrocious to say the least. They behaved in a most uncharitable manner. At this point I must comment that the behavior of OUR friends was a tribute to the Saint Francis Foundation. Everyone was a perfect lady

and gentleman. I am sure that the decision of the Board of Zoning Appeals was influenced by their behavior. The Board recommended that our request for renewal be approved.”

“On the evening of Monday, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1965, the City Council of Mayfield Heights met to hear the report of the Board of Zoning regarding the issuance of a renewal of a permit to Villa Serena, Inc. Present were about twenty-five members of the Saint Francis Foundation and the Italian Sons and Daughters of America. Mr. Howard Chesler and Mr. Wallace Teare officially represented the Villa Serena, Inc.

“The City Council in approving our request for permit noted that we had officially changed the name of our organization in return for a promise from Monsignor Gallagher and all of his parishioners to desist from opposing our project. A covenant had been drawn up by the opposition in which certain restrictions had been imposed upon us and a promise by them to desist from objecting, if we agreed to the contents of the covenant. The motion to approve the building permit was passed by vote of six to one, with Mr. Barron, who had been representing Monsignor Gallagher in an unofficial capacity (we were told) being the only person voting nay.

“It was brought to our attention that this man subsequently wrote to several of our representatives in Congress and in the Senate, suggesting that they bring their influence to bear, to defeat our project. Fortunately, his request fell on deaf ears. The above stated actions on the part of our adversaries in this matter clearly indicates that they no sooner gave their word to the covenant referred to above than they immediately betrayed their trust.

“The instrument was duly approved and affixed with the signatures of the officers of the St. Francis Foundation.”

So, dear readers, each stone that had been thrown into our path was rolled away. Many of those stones, many times, seemed insurmountable, but by the grace of God, our ground-breaking ceremony took place on August twenty-second, nineteen hundred sixty-five. And it will please God if you will realize that there is nothing in this world more important than human beings.

## IN CONCLUSION

Ending my remarks on the history of the Saint Francis Foundation, I feel sure that the readers will understand that, to me, it represents the noblest as well as the most daring undertaking of my entire life. It was realized only by ever growing determination and constant prayers.

I experienced moments of weakness, but the solemn promise made to God has been rewarded by His Divine help. I thank Him devotedly first and always. However, I would feel utterly ungrateful not to express my infinite appreciation to all the gracious and competent people who helped to create the greatest monument of Villa Serena. They are:

*-----All the members of the Foundation.*

*-----Mr. Frank Pitrone, who has been my faithful companion.*

*-----Mr. Howard Isham Chesler, who worked untiringly, and was not only the attorney for*

*the Foundation, but also its supreme advisor.*

*-----All the members of the Society of Italian Sons and Daughters of America.*

*-----All contributors who helped in the humanitarian dream.*

*-----Monsignor Caccisarro for his invaluable service.*

I shall continue praising God for His mercy in allowing me to reach my seventy-ninth year of age so that I could witness the completion of my work, and have the utmost satisfaction of seeing about three hundred persons living happily in the beautiful building of Villa Serena.

---Frank Alesci

