

New Series

Volume 3

No. 1

May 2023

Pages 1-3



Maria

A Journal of Marian Studies

Published by the Centre for Marian Studies

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**Title:** Review of Salvatore Sorrentino, *Nel silenzio il sussurro di una voce: L'itinerario spirituale di Bartolo Longo*

**Review article**

**Salvatore Sorrentino**, *Nel silenzio il sussurro di una voce: L'itinerario spirituale di Bartolo Longo*, Turin: Effata Editrice, 2022. ISBN 9788869298738. 368pp.

One of the largest Marian shrines in Italy is found in Pompeii, a short distance from the walls of the famous ancient city that was buried by Vesuvius in 79AD. The story of this Catholic 'New Pompeii' began in 1872, when a young lawyer named Bartolo Longo (1841-1926) visited the area on business. Witnessing the poverty of the region and resolving to bring the devotion of the Rosary to the troubled people who lived there, Longo made Pompeii his lifelong home. His works included the construction not only of the enormous basilica, but also of a whole new town around it, as well as residential homes for children of prisoners, orphanages, affordable accommodation for the town's workers, and several other charitable institutions. The city of Pompeii now welcomes more than 2 million annual visitors – as many as the UNESCO archaeological site down the road. Meanwhile, Longo was beatified in 1980 by Pope John Paul II, who described him as 'a man of Mary' and 'a true apostle of the Rosary'.

The new book by Salvatore Sorrentino deepens our understanding of this remarkable character, exploring the vicissitudes of Longo's 'itinerario spirituale' (spiritual journey). Bartolo Longo's spirituality is a complex topic, and one that has often been erroneously or superficially reported (an online search for his name yields short-but-sensationalist accounts with titles like 'From ex-satanic priest to saint' or 'Turbulent occultist freed by the Rosary'). Longo did have a difficult spell in the 1860s when studying for his Law degree at Naples University, and was, amongst other things, briefly involved in the Spiritualism movement. But while this personal crisis would remain an important reference point throughout his life, it formed part of a much longer spiritual journey, which eventually led to him becoming – as Sorrentino shows in his study – a 'Marian Mystic of the first order'.

This is a fascinating and multi-faceted book, which develops the concept of 'existential Marianisation' in reference to Longo's life and writings (Marianisation is defined on p. 23 as 'the experience of continual conversation, identification and loving union with Mary'). As member of the Pompeian clergy and Director at the Shrine library and archives, Sorrentino has been able to mine the extensive collections of the Archivio Bartolo Longo, drawing on Longo's own writings and those of his contemporaries to deepen our understanding of the Blessed's relationship to Mary. In this brief review, I will focus on just a couple of the book's insights, chosen for how they relate to the widespread current scholarly interest in

apparitions, revelations, and sensory experience (see e.g. Maunder 2016, Orsi 2016, and Mezei, Murphy and Oakes 2021, reviewed in the previous issue of this journal).

Pompeii is unusual amongst Marian pilgrimage places for many reasons, including the fact that – unlike other 19<sup>th</sup> century Marian sites such as Rue du Bac, Lourdes and Marpingen – visual apparitions were not central to the shrine’s foundation. Devotees of Our Lady of Pompeii did experience visions of Mary, often in association with healing events, but the initial sequence of events which led to the Shrine’s construction involved an *auditory* rather than a visual revelation – an event which is referenced in Sorrentino’s title ‘In the Silence, A Voice Whispered’. It occurred in October 1872, during his trip to what was then known as ‘Valle di Pompeii’ (the modern Comune of Pompei was founded on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1928). Whilst wandering through a particularly desolate zone known as ‘località Arpaia’ (today Via Arpaia), Longo heard an ‘arcane voice’ which told him ‘If you are looking for salvation, spread the Rosary!’. This marked the beginning of his Marian mission, and (as Sorrentino shows in Chapters 2 and 3 of his book) constituted a major turning point in his spiritual journey. In Chapter 2, the close reading and comparison of two autobiographical accounts written in 1887 and 1890 demonstrates the deep significance which Longo attributed to the events on Via Arpaia – a mystical and highly sensory experience that he remembered as being like ‘a whale breaking the darkness of a stormy night’. Sorrentino highlights how these autobiographical texts resonate with older accounts of revelation like the story of St Paul on the road to Damascus, as well as with the writings of other mystics like St Theresa of Avila and St John of the Cross – whose concept of *locutio interior* provides, Sorrentino suggests, the most accurate interpretation of Longo’s own mystical experience.

Sorrentino’s reading of the Via Arpaia episode also provides a compelling new angle on the famous thaumaturgic icon of Pompeii – an oil painting of Our Lady of the Rosary dating from the late 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which Mary and Jesus hand rosaries to St Dominic and St Catherine. This image of Our Lady of Pompeii is the focus of international devotion and pilgrimage, and copies hang in churches and homes all around the Italian diaspora and beyond. The story of the picture’s arrival in Pompeii is another unusual aspect of the shrine’s collective memory: it came from Naples in a horse-drawn cart together with a delivery of manure, and was vociferously proclaimed by all (including Longo) to be unsightly and even ‘deformed’; two restorations by local painters were necessary before it was considered fit for

display and devotion. This story is re-told many times by Longo in his writings, and the initial ugliness of the icon is always emphasised, in a way that is, at first sight, almost puzzling. However, Sorrentino offers an interpretative key to this narrative, positing that the restoration and ‘beautification’ of the icon were seen by Longo as in some way analogous to his own spiritual transformation. More specifically, the icon is read to be a visual parallel (or ‘iconic translation’) of the words that Longo heard on the Via Arpaia, with the aesthetic ‘re-touching’ of the image – like the ‘arcane voice’ that instructed him to spread the Rosary – being evidence of God’s grace through Mary. Particularly interesting here are the contemporary accounts of how Longo interacted with the icon in his daily life, reconstructed through eye-witness accounts of those who knew and observed him.

Sorrentino ends his book by noting that further research is necessary to understand Bartolo Longo and his spirituality, and that much progress might be made by engaging with Longo’s own copious writings (something of a challenge, given the Blessed’s often-enigmatic handwriting). Thankfully, work towards this goal is already underway in the shrine, where a research group is preparing a multi-volume critical edition of Longo’s oeuvre. It will be exciting to see what comes out of the New Pompeii under the direction of Don Sorrentino and his colleagues at the shrine, in the run-up to the centenary of Bartolo Longo’s death in 2026.

### *References*

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