

With great anticipation of Blessed Father Justin Russolillo's canonization this year, the Vocationist family is presenting a biography of Fr. Justin's exemplary life, his great faith, and profound love of God.



*Pianura: a volcanic land*

## FATHER JUSTIN'S EARLY LIFE & EDUCATION

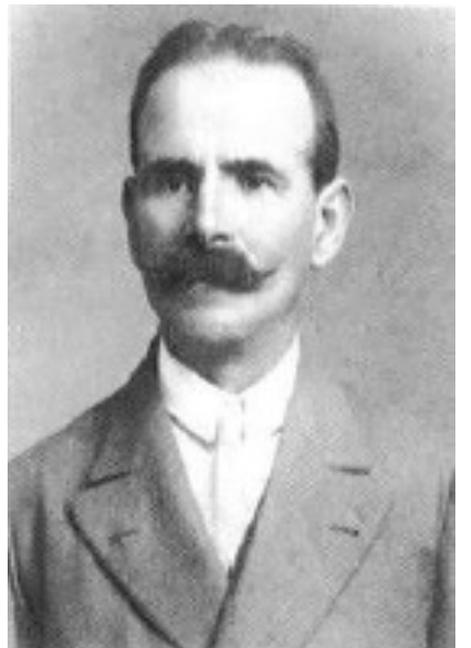
Father Justin was born on January 18, 1891 in Pianura (Naples), Italy, a small town in back of the Posillipo Peninsula, not far from Pozzuoli, a region of extinct volcanoes. His parents were Luigi and Giuseppina Simpatia, humble people who lived an exceptional Christian life.

On the day Justin Russolillo was born, an unusual and abundant snowfall occurred in Pianura, an area where snow very rarely appears. That same day, his parents brought the infant through the snow to the Church to be baptized. Justin was the third of six boys and girls. From this beautiful nest, the Lord picked three for himself: Justin, who became a Priest and Founder of the Society of Divine Vocations; Ciro, who later entered the Congregation and also became a Priest; and Giovanna, who joined the female branch of the same congregation, eventually becoming its Superior General.



In addition to his parents who instilled in him the basic principles of Christian life from an early age, Fr. Justin remembered with deep gratitude the part played in his vocation by his three aunts, who were all school teachers.

A very serious problem arose when Justin completed elementary school. From an early age, Fr. Justin had told everyone that he wanted to be a priest. He strengthened his wish through prayer and reception of the sacraments. In order to satisfy his desire, the family needed to find a seminary and a way to pay for the tuition.



His family was quite large with limited means. His parents tried to approach a wealthy man in Pianura to seek his help. When they were turned down, his mother, in a mixture of anger and a transport of faith, told here son: "Don't be afraid, Justin, your mother will send you to the seminary even if she has to pawn her eyeballs." Sustained by this faith and determination, Justin was sent to the Pozzuoli's Diocesan Seminary. During

the entrance exam, one of the teachers remarked: "I have never come across a young man as intelligent as this one." He was admitted to the seminary for his first year of high school.

Yet Justin's beautiful and promising vocation was threatened by some adverse events. At first his father was severely injured while working, and subsequently, one of his aunts - who was paying for part of his tuition - suddenly died. At this point, it was impossible for Giuseppina to keep her son in the seminary. Before making any painful decisions, she decided to go to Bishop Giuseppe Zezza who, when he heard the story, immediately offered his help.

Justin continued his studies in the seminary: he finished high school, college, a year of Philosophy and the first two years of Theology. When Pope Pius X decreed that the seminary curriculum must be updated, Justin was sent to the newly built Regional Seminary of Posillipo, staffed by the Jesuit Fathers. Since the new accommodations were not yet ready for occupancy, Justin was given a room in the religious house of the same Fathers who were attached to the new seminary.

Justin's intelligence, goodness, humility and spirit of prayer were irresistible and contagious. One priest who lived in the same house, Monsignor Nicola Esposito, said, "That little room where Justin lived remained lit up long into the night. We used to peek through the keyhole and see him on his knees praying before a crucifix. It was my distinct impression and that of my peers and superiors that we were in the presence of an angel."

The Jesuit Fathers, especially Father Antonio Stravino, Giuseppe De Giovanni, and Giuseppe Manzo, spoke often with enthusiasm about this new seminarian and referred to him as the most intelligent and holy seminarian who ever passed through their theological institute. Father Stravino, in particular, once said, "Justin is a saint who should be canonized during his life; the Church should make an exception for him." His remarks became more significant when it was learned from other sources that Father Stravino was extremely conservative with praise.

On September 20, 1913, Justin was ordained a priest. The reception in his town was warm and joyful, and marked by two coincidental occurrences that heightened the happiness of everyone in town. An abundant rain fell after many months of drought, and the new aqueduct that brought city water to the whole area of Pianura was finally opened. People from every walk of life were exceptionally joyful that day. At a certain point, someone from the crowd welcoming the new priest exclaimed: "We want him to be our Pastor!" Everyone immediately joined in the thunderous popular outcry.