

Blessed Helen of Bologna  
(Elena Duglioli dal'Oglio)  
born 1472, Bologna, Italy  
Died 23 September 1520, Bologna, Italy

There is a legend that Helen was the daughter of a Turkish pasha, born in Constantinople and carried off to Bologna by angels on the day she was born. This fantastic tale has been traced to Peter de Lucca, a priest who knew and admired Helen. De Lucca worked hard for Helen's canonization, but the Life he wrote was so full of fantastic claims that it helped delay her beatification for more than three hundred years. This was unfortunate, because Helen was a truly noble woman whose good works live on in Bologna.

There is no doubt that Helen was the daughter of prominent local parents. They arranged her marriage at seventeen to forty-year-old Benedict dal'Oglio. She remained childless, and Peter de Lucca claimed that the marriage was celibate. Others were doubtful. What stands out is that in spite of the marriage difference, Helen's thirty-year marriage was "uncommonly harmonious, peaceful and happy." Among her gifts to the city of Bologna, Helen commissioned Raphael's *Saint Cecilia in Ecstasy* and worked closely with the artist on the concept and execution. For many years, the painting, depicting Cecilia of Rome (22 November) served as an altarpiece in Helen's chapel in the church of San Giovanni in Monte. It can now be seen in Bologna's art museum. Helen also founded an organization to discreetly help the "shamefaced poor", today. Helen outlived her husband by only a few years. She was entombed in her chapel, which is always brilliantly lit with votive candles and draped with mementos left by grateful pilgrims.

**The Genius of Helen of Bologna:**

Peter de Lucca concluded that Helen was born elsewhere because he misunderstood her frequent remark: "*I'm not an inhabitant but a pilgrim. This is not my country. These are not my family.*" Surely Helen was referring to her home and family in heaven.

**Reflection:**

*"When one finds a worthy wife, her value is beyond pearls...*

*Give her a reward of her labours, and let her works praise her at the city gates."*

Proverbs 31.10, 31

Gallick, Sarah, [The Big Book of Women Saints](#), p. 286