

Saint Eustochia Calafato
(Eustochia of Messina, Smeralda Calafato)

born 25 March 1434, Annunziata, Messina, Sicily
died 20 January 1485, Montevergine, Messina, Sicily

From the beginning Eustochia was special: she was born in a stable on Good Friday. Her parents had been on the way to their country villa when she arrived. Her devout mother, who had prayed for a daughter after three sons, named her precious jewel Smeralda (Emerald). At fourteen, Smeralda wanted to become a Poor Clare, but her father arranged her marriage to a wealthy widower. When he died before the wedding, her father negotiated another marriage, but that man also died, followed by her father. Smeralda finally overcame family resistance and entered the convent of Santa Maria di Basico, one of the richest in Sicily, taking the religious name Eustochia after Eustochium Julia.

Eustochia discovered that her new convent had drifted away from "holy poverty" of Clare of Assisi. For more than a decade, Eustochia struggled to be an authentic Franciscan in this materialistic atmosphere. She finally receive permission to found a new convent, Santa Maria Accomandata, but her next challenge was the male clergy that resisted her reforms. When the Little Friars of the Observance refused to consecrate her new monastery, Eustochia appealed directly to Rome. The friars were threatened with excommunication unless they assumed the spiritual care of her nuns. Although Eustochia clashed with many men throughout her life, women loved her. She drew so many vocations to her community that they soon outgrew the building and moved to Montevergine, near Messina, where their convent still stands, and where Eustochia is honoured with an annual procession.

The Genius of Eustochia Calafato:

Eustochia often led her nuns in two-hour Scripture study sessions. When they gathered around her deathbed, she spoke about the Passion for an hour before passing to her final rest.

Reflection:

"I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing."

John 15.5, opening citation of her canonization homily