

sovereign majesty. Sweet Lord, grant that for love of You I may despise all the delights and vanities of the world and of the flesh as vile trash, so that I may gain You, my infinite treasure. May I possess You all the days of my life, in the momentous hour of death and in the eternal life to come. Grant, my most perfect Lord, that for love of You I may patiently and cheerfully endure all the injuries which may come to me and any evil which You, my sweet Lord, may permit me to suffer. Grant that I may willingly pardon all those who have injured me, or will injure me. Most kind Lord, freely pardon them and me, and make us live and die in Your grace. Amen.

THE SEVENTH PRAYER:

To the Holy Spirit.

I adore You, most merciful Holy Spirit, sweetest and best, and bless You and as far as I can, I thank You for Your infinite goodness and Your infinite love, and for all the benefits You have granted to us Your insignificant creatures, especially for the precious gift of the incarnation, passion, and death of our sweet Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and for all the saints You have purified, adorned, enlightened and inflamed. We implore You by the prayers, merits and love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, of His sweet Mother and of all the saints and elect. Come, Holy Spirit, come sweet Love! Come our most worthy and best Lord and God. Cleanse and embellish, illuminate and inflame our hearts with the fire of Your divine love. Grant that we may think, speak, and do what pleases You, Lord. Forgive us for all that we have thought, spoken or done that was displeasing to Your sweet majesty. Do not permit us to think, speak or do what is displeasing to You.

God the Father of heaven, have mercy on us. God the Son, Redeemer of the world, have mercy on us. God the Holy Spirit, have mercy on us. Holy Trinity, one God, have mercy on us. Jesus, merciful and gentle, true God, have mercy on us and aid us against our enemies and in our every need, now and forever, and save our souls. Amen.

Saint Felix of Cantalice: One of the Fathers of the Capuchin Reform

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After studying the careers of Matthew of Bascio and Louis of Fossombrone, Bernardine of Colpetrazzo came to the conclusion that the Capuchin reform was not the work of any one man. While each of them played an important though different role in its establishment, both of them left the group shortly after its inception, and died outside it. Bernardine of Asti finally solidified the new community pointing out that it had been founded on the firm foundation of the spirit of St. Francis.¹

Modern scholars are not quite sure why he made this remark which is based on James of Massa's alleged prophecy.² Mario of Mercato Saraceno had already stated that the Capuchin reform was not the work of Matthew or of Louis but of a select group of men. With Bernardine they gave religious stability to the little flock of frightened and scattered brothers. Bernardine of Colpetrazzo points out that Brother Felix of Cantalice was outstanding in holiness. So there was a

¹"The reform was made in the spirit of its Founder and from the beginning was different from other orders because God gave it a holy head, who was St. Francis, and will always give him to it." Bernardine of Colpetrazzo: *Historia Ordinis Fratrum Minorum Capuccinorum (1525-1593)*, I: *Praecipui nascentis Ordinis Eventus*. Published by Melchior of Pobladura (*Monumenta Historica Ordinis Minorum Capuccinorum*. II) Assisi 1939, 69, 23.

²F. Ehrle; *Die 'historia septem tribulationum ordinis minorum des fr. Angelus de Clarino*, in *Literatur-und Kirchengeschichte des Mittelalters* II Berlin 1886, 281; *Chronica XXIV generalium Ordinis Minorum: Analecta Franciscana*, III, Quaracchi 1897, 285.

saint, though not yet canonized, present during the first years of the Capuchin reform.³

To those critics who faulted the Capuchins for lack of saints, Bernardine of Colpetrazzo could point to Felix as a friar of eminent holiness and a candidate for the honors of the altar.⁴ One might ask, however, whether and by what right Felix can be called one of the "fathers" of the reform.

Born in Cantalice (Rieti) about 1515, Felix Porro⁵ entered the order in the closing months of 1543 or in the beginning of 1544. He made his novitiate in Anticoli di Campagna (Fiuggi) and was professed in 1545 in the friary of Monte San Giovanni Campano (Frosinone) which was at the time in the process of renovation. Felix belonged to the first generation of Capuchins. He came to them, not from the Observants or any other religious community, but from "the world." He entered shortly after Bernardine Ochino's tragic defection (August 1542), at a time when the Capuchins were under attack on all sides and charged with heresy. The Order seemed doomed to extinction.

Felix' own words show us what the people — not their enemies, nor the Observants, nor certain officials of the Curia — thought of the Capuchins during his time of crisis. To a cousin of his, an Augustinian friar, who was trying to persuade him to join his community, Felix replied that he was looking for a strict and austere life, and that he would be a

³Marius of Mercato Seraceno: *Relationes de origine Ordinis Minorum Capuccinorum*, published by Melchior of Pobladura (*Monumenta Historica Ordinis Minorum Capuccinorum*, I) Assisi 1938, 418: "We can say that it began to take the note that is characteristic of every true religious order, being up to those days a band of lost and frightened little brothers and in the time of Father Asti it took the form of well organized religious orders."

⁴Bernardine of Colpetrazzo: *Historia Ordinis*, II; *Biographiae Selectae* (*Monumenta Historica Ordinis Minorum Capuccinorum*, III), Assisi 1940, 462-482.

⁵To avoid a multiplicity of notes, we refer the reader to the work entitled: *Processus sixtinus fratris Felicis a Cantalice cum selectis de ejusdem vita vetustissimis testimoniis*. Published by Mariano d'Alatri (*Monumenta Historica Ordinis Minorum Capuccinorum*, X), Rome, 1964, which presents a summary of the life and spiritual experiences not only of Brother Felix but of the entire sixteenth century Capuchin fraternity.

Capuchin or nothing.⁶ In spite of scandals and opposition, the Capuchin reform was still looked upon as a perfect way of religious life.

Bernardine of Colpetrazzo divides the beginnings of the reform into two periods, the first from 1528 to 1533 and the other from 1533 to 1543. The first, he claims, was the more glorious in the sight of God and the other more famous in the sight of men, especially because of the eloquence of Bernardine Ochino.⁷ We might also speak of a third period, extending more or less from 1543 to 1550, a time replete with dangers and persecution, when the new reform, like the gospel grain of wheat, had to die to strike deep roots in the soil of patience, humility, penance, seclusion and prayer to the God who had power to save.

It was during this period that Felix came to know the Capuchins, became one of them, and lived their life strictly especially with regard to food, clothing and housing. Toward the end of his days he often rebuked his confreres, superiors as well, for violations of poverty. Even though at that time poverty was quite strictly observed by all the friars, it seemed to him relaxed compared with the days when he entered the Order.

This is not the place to spend time on recounting the charming anecdotes told of Felix's life, of his delightful conversations with Pope Sixtus V, St. Phillip Neri, Cesare Baronio (the future cardinal), St. Charles Borromeo, the students at the Collegium Germanicum and ordinary housewives whose home he sought and daily begging for bread. All this is well known, and so is his habit of singing in the street or in the homes of the people, his admonitions to erring sinners, his prophecies and miracles as attested to during the canonical process leading to his canonization by Pope Sixtus V, who himself was a witness.

⁶*Processus sixtinus*, 69, Felix "took counsel with a friar of the region, who, I think was either an Augustinian or a Benedictine and who told him that he should join his community. And he wanted to give him a letter. And Felix seemed to take a long time getting up, saying within himself: 'Either I'll be a Capuchin or I won't get involved.'" cf. also *ibid.*, 97 and 280.

⁷Bernardine of Colpetrazzo, *Historia ordinis*, I, 259.

We learn of the wonders wrought by Felix during his lifetime only from outsiders. His brethren were either unaware of them or reluctant to talk about them.

The fact is, apart from anecdotes and sayings, his miracles and prophecies, there is very little that can be said of his life. He spent the first four years of his religious career in the friaries of Anticoli, Monte San Giovanni, Tivoli and Palanzana (Viterbo). The rest of his life (1547-1587) he spent in Rome, where he begged bread, wine and oil for the friars. The Capuchins with whom he lived looked upon him as an ordinary friar and were astounded when they saw the crowds who came to pay their respects to his remains. Among them were men and women of the nobility, cardinals and the Pope himself, all talking of his miracles and sanctity.⁸

When the process of his canonization opened the friars had nothing much to tell except the routine of his daily life. From their accounts we learn how Felix spent each hour of his laborious day, praying by day and night, scourging his body, questing for the daily needs of the community, counseling the people, visiting the sick in their homes and in hospitals, carving little wooden crosses for those who asked for them. Little was said about miracles during the first hearings. What we read is a day by day account of the life of a typical friar of the sixteenth century. Felix faithfully observed all that the Constitutions of the Order prescribed, not in any servile fashion, but with the freedom of his own charism. He was a model easy to imitate, and was imitated.⁹

Consequently Felix is rightly considered one of the fathers of the Capuchin reform, not because he happened to live in the first decades of the order, or had any part in framing its legislation but for quite another reason. Matthew of Bascio had practically no influence on the subsequent history of the reform, though many still think of him as the founder of the

⁸*Processus sixtinus*, 137: Brother Boniface of Anticoli who had been Brother Felix's novice master concluded his testimony with the words: "I had great devotion to him but not as much as God has brought about. Who would have believed that he was such a holy one and that he would die at a general chapter when so many fathers were in Rome!"

⁹*Processus sixtinus*, 423-432.

Order. Louis of Fossombrone has a good claim to be considered the "juridical" founder, but his impact on its later development was minimal. Felix, on the contrary, had enormous influence in setting the mold, or life style, that would characterize the Capuchins for almost 450 years. It was a pattern of prayer and work, of humility, poverty, kindness, a joyful spirit radiating from his countenance, a readiness to serve others and care to occupy the lowest place.

It was in this way that Felix became one of the fathers of the reform, not in any hierarchical or legal sense, but charismatically. He takes his rightful place with that group of friars who, especially in 1535 and the years following, stamped the order with its authentic character. Eminent among them were the noble Bernardine of Asti; John Francis Tittelmans, the brilliant teacher; Bernardino Ochino, the famous preacher; as well as the belligerent John of Fano; the austere Anthony of Monte Sicardo; the theologian Eusebius of Ancona; the scholarly Bernardine of Monte dell'Olmo who was called "the eye of Scotus" and finally Francis of Jesi who outshone them all in his zeal for the reform.

Felix taught some of his fellow friars how to pray and to beg alms. His methods were not always gentle and refined. After his death, many of them took him as their model. The same witnesses who testified concerning his life and virtues in 1587, later on, some 20 or 30 years later recounted more wonderful things than they did in the first hearings. What happened? Were they inventing stories? No, but in the course of time they finally came to understand the significance of a life which they had looked upon at close range as quite ordinary and not too different from that of the rest of the friars.

Felix spent forty years at the headquarters of the Order in Rome, the seat of the vicar general. Bernardine of Colpetrazzo writes that in the general chapter of 1587 because of the stir occasioned by Felix's death, the capitulars dispensed with the sermons customary on the occasion of the chapter. The humble brother had already preached for them by his death and the revelation of his sanctity.¹⁰ They carried word of his death

¹⁰Bernardine of Colpetrazzo, *Historia Ordinis*, II, 474. "...and it was not without significance that he should die on the feast of Pentecost and during a

and his wonderful life back to their home provinces. Lives of brother Felix were published, pictures printed. With his beatification (1625) and canonization (1712) his feast was celebrated with great solemnity.

Among the ranks of the friars honored as fathers of the reform, Felix takes a place second only to Bernardine of Asti, who, while local superior, received him into the Roman friary. Much more research must be made into Felix's influence on the history and life of the Order. There are abundant source materials in the numerous pictures, biographies, special prayers and, what is most important, the intense efforts of the friars, especially the lay brothers, to imitate him. Capuchins earnestly striving to attain religious perfection would choose Felix above all others as their model and patron. No other saint has had such a spontaneous and enthusiastic following among his fellow friars.

His influence extended wider than we might at first think. For example, the Capuchin Order never had a trace of that "clericalization" which sprung up among the Friars Minor shortly after the death of St. Francis. The democratic Capuchin Constitutions accorded the same rights to lay brothers as to clerics, as far as church law permitted — sometimes more than it permitted! These realities are certainly not unrelated to the historical influence of Brother Felix, the first fruits of holiness in the Order, whose novice master in Anticoli was a certain Bonifacio, a lay brother.

In 1537 Francis Tittelmans of Hasselt, then vicar of the Roman province died while conducting a visitation of the friary at Anticoli. From a purely human standpoint his death was an enormous calamity for the new Capuchin family. With Bernardine of Asti he was a mighty pillar of strength. He could have contributed much to its growth by his words and activities. A few years later, in the very place where the learned Francis died, the illiterate Felix began his religious life. With a wisdom and witness flowing not from a human but a divine

general chapter, Divine Providence having selected such a time for the common benefit for the world and the order. His glorious passing took the place of the sermons which were usually preached at the chapter which were omitted since the saintly death of a poor lay brother was worth more than the learned sermons of the preachers."

source, he accomplished what Francis might have achieved with his learning and great initiative. Though differing greatly in their backgrounds — Francis the brilliant scholar and Felix the unlettered lay brother — they had in common a zest for manual labor, dedication to prayer, strict observance, humility and care of the sick.

Had Francis Tittelmans lived for many years he probably would have contributed greatly toward a more perfect type of Capuchin life. But history teaches us that Brother Felix, the least of his brethren, presented the order with a perfect model of seraphic life and attracted others to walk in his footsteps.