

Blessed Angelo d'Acri (1669-1739)



Luca Antonio was born in Acri (Cosenza) on 19 October 1669 to Francesco Falcone, a goat herder, and Diana Errico, a baker. While materially poor his parents were rich in virtue and Christian piety. Luca was baptised the following day in the little medieval church of San Nicola in Belvedere. The parish priest was Fr. Bernardino La Gaccia. He received the name Luca Antonio at the baptismal font because he was born the day after the liturgical feast of Saint Luke. Perhaps too there may have been the motive of their devotion to the great Franciscan Br. Umile da Bisignano who, in the world, had that name. At that time the cause for his beatification was in progress. Little is known of Luca's childhood except that he was formed by his mother's devotion for Our Lady of Sorrows and for Saint Francis of Assisi. We only learn from him about one episode from his early years. He told Sr. Mariangelo del Crocifisso and Br. Bonaventura da Scalea. They bequeathed us this memory in their testimony in the canonical process.

Sr. Mariangelo recounted that, "When he was a little boy, and such a little boy that when his mother used to go to church, he used to get up to the usual mischief of little boys. So as not to be disturbed, his mother decided to leave him at home. To spite his mother he wanted to remove an image of Our Lady hanging on the wall." However, touched by the Virgin's gentle and yet sad gaze, he had a change of heart. "He knelt before the image and placed a piece of corn beneath his knees. He staid there such a long time that when his mother came, she not only found him but also the corn that had really hurt his knees." In the final part of this testimony we read that "While doing this, twice he saw the image shine, surrounded by beams of light. Because of this he remained enthralled and carried away in that holy practice."

The little Luca Antonio, dressed plainly and often barefoot, grew in piety and the fear of God among the boys of Casalicchio. It was modest but morally sound setting at the extremes of poverty. From his earliest years this produced in him certain signs of that holiness which he reached under the influence of divine grace. On 24 June 1764, when he was not yet five years old, in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Padia, he received the sacrament of Confirmation. He acquired the basics of reading and writing from a neighbour who had opened a grammar school. Meanwhile his religious formation developed under the instruction he received in the parish of San Nicola and at the Capuchin friary of Our Lady of the Angels. When he had grown up somewhat, his mother's brother, Fr. Domenico Errico, sent him for higher studies in the hope that as a learned and educated person he might be a help and support to his young mother who had been prematurely widowed. However, this hope was not destined to be realised. After an adolescence spent in moral integrity and religious fervour, Luca Antonio felt called to the monastic life. His vocation however was strongly opposed by the family and by his priest uncle and subjected to trials and hesitations that could be overcome only when the power of grace gained the upper hand over the weakness of nature.

His meeting with Br. Antonio da Olivadia was instrumental in awakening this vocation. Br. Antonio was a Capuchin whose holiness was famous and esteemed throughout the South at the time. In 1689 he had come to Acri to

preach a series of sermons. Heedless of his mother's pleas and fearless of the threats of his uncle who was truly determined to oppose his nephew's choice, Luca Antonio gave heartfelt acceptance to the message of love that emanated from the inspiring words of the preacher. He suddenly felt that city life, the attractions of the world and the joys of family life were not for him. Even though he felt a great sorrow for the pain his decision would bring to his mother, he decided to become a Capuchin.

And so at nineteen years of age, answering the call of God, Luca Antonio entered the novitiate in the friary at Dipignano. After some days spent in perfect joy he was disappointed at not finding the poverty he expected and so he left and returned to his family. On returning to life in the world he became aware yet again that such a life was not for him. With humility and courage he presented himself again to the friars in Acri. He asked their forgiveness and to be re-admitted to religious life. Having obtained the necessary permission from the minister provincial, Francesco Caracciolo da Scalea, Luca Antonio entered the novitiate in Belvedere with greater decisiveness on 8 November 1689. This time he was determined to stay. However, yet again, overcome by temptations and oppressed by uncertainty and doubts, he did not manage to hold fast. Having taken off the Franciscan habit he left the cloister a second time.

Quite soon, however, he understood that he had been mistaken. Profoundly humiliated for having given in so easily to the temptations and longings of the world, he prayed sincerely to God not to abandon him but sustain him against the snares of the devil. Trusting and apprehensive he presented himself a third time to the friars, his voice quivering with emotion, he asked the grace of readmission to the novitiate yet again. Miraculously he was accepted again. With the help of Br. Francesco d'Acri, guardian at the friary of Montalto at the time, and thanks to the intercession of Br. Antonio d'Acri who at the chapter held at Castrovillari in that year had been elected provincial minister on 17 June 1690, the young Luca Antonio succeeded in fact to get the necessary permission from the Minister General, Br. Carlo Maria da Macerata to receive the Franciscan habit a third time.

Thus on 12 November 1690 at twenty one years of age, in the mystical ambience of the friary of Belvedere, Luca Antonio received the habit for the third and last time, and set out resolutely along the way of perfection. He filled his days with continuous prayer, passing hours and hours kneeling before the tabernacle in the church, immersed in the contemplation of the Passion of Christ where he recognised his divine and human ideal. He only left this to apply himself to the humbler chores of the fraternity. Slowly the temptations returned, however, and ignited crises in him yet again. The solution of leaving the Capuchin life presented itself to him yet again.

One day, in the refectory, during the scant lunch, the reading of some passages from the life of Br. Bernardo da Corleone struck him. These told of how that holy Capuchin, whose cause for beatification was well underway, had succeeded to win out against the weakness of human nature. That very evening when, worn out by his enormous struggle against the assaults of the devil, he went to his little cell. Weeping he threw himself at the feet of the Crucified and cried, "Help me, Lord! I can't battle on any more." Then, to answer him, a heavenly voice sounded, "Do like Br. Bernardo da Corleone." This was the signal he had been waiting for unawares in his anxiety and the struggle with the doubts and temptations. This was the turning point for him, the beginning of a new life. Encouraged

by the example that had been pointed out to him, Luca Antonio began to read the biography of the Capuchin of Corleone and translated it faithfully into practice. In the footsteps of Br. Bernardo he dedicated himself to a life of meditation and penance, spending long hours within his cell, immersed in prayer or intent on the affliction and mortification of his body. Continuing in this way and with the support and wise guidance of Br. Giovanni da Orsomarso, the novice master, a priest of great virtue and great theological and classical culture, Luca happily concluded the novitiate year. On 12 November 1691 he made final vows and received the prophetic name Brother Angelo d'Acri.

Despite his humble desire to remain a simple lay friar in the Order, he was destined for the priesthood and took up studies in the friaries of Acri and Saracena. From 1695 to 1700 he completed his classical, philosophical and theological studies in the friaries of Rossano, Corigliano Calabro and Cassano Jonio – studies that he had begun in Acri. Among his teachers at the time, Br. Bonaventura da Rotonda merits mention. He was outstanding for his knowledge and virtue. As his confessor and spiritual director he shaped Br. Angelo's character and his imitation of the Crucified Christ through a life of penance, renunciation and sacrifice.



After an intense preparation, on Easter Sunday, 10 April 1700, he was ordained priest in the cathedral of Cassano Jonio. His superiors assigned him to the ministry of preaching. He exercised this ministry within an environment full of social contrasts and unequal privilege. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few while the poor peasants, shepherds and town dwellers lived in misery, with the characteristic difficulties of the South. Using simple and moving language that had not been heard for some time, his preaching was remarkably fruitful. Having lived between Paolo Segneri (1624-1694), who had profoundly renewed religious eloquence, and Alfonso Maria de' Liguori (1696-1787) who introduced new and more effective principles for preaching, he chose for himself a popular, evangelical preaching style that was properly Franciscan, particularly reminiscent of that of Bernardino da Siena (1380-1444) and San Leonardo da Porto Maurizio (1676-1751).

And so after initial preaching flops in San Giorgio Albanese, Br. Angelo d'Acri, while using plain and simple language within the grasp of everyone, he became the most effective and sought after preacher in the Kingdom of Naples. For thirty years from 1702 to 1739, the year of his death, he preached throughout Calabria and much of the South, without ever ceding to tiredness and extreme difficulties of every kind. He preached Lenten courses, missions, retreats in Cosenza, Catanzaro and Reggio Calabria, as well as the most unheard of little towns in the mountains. He even came to preach in Salerno, Naples and Montecassino. Sincere in the extreme, with impetuous vehemence he railed against every form of domination and exploitation, criticising the corrupt customs of his contemporaries and working concretely to remove social injustices, to bring peace where hatred held sway, to reawaken the duty of those responsible for the common good. Similar to Manzoni's Padre Cristoforo, he often raised his voice against the Sanseverino princes of Bisignano and against the marquis

Paolo Mendoza della Valle to defend the just rights of the people. He rebuked useless and excessive luxury that stood in such stark contrast with the miserable conditions of the populations under their administration.

Aware that the preacher who does not attend to confession is like a sower who forgets the harvest, Br. Angelo loved to spend long hours in the confessional where he gathered the more abundant fruits of his gospel preaching. Wherever he preached his presence drew countless multitudes of the faithful, and a continuous concourse of people of all ages and backgrounds to his confessional and he never tired of hearing their confessions. If he was intransigent in the pulpit and hard in his condemnation of sin, in the confessional he was instead a man of infinite goodness and mercy with the penitents. He was convinced, in fact, that charity can resolve the most difficult situations. He believed that with mercy he could lead all sinners back to the grace of God, sinners whom the charity of God urged to kneel before the confessor.

Because they felt more comfortable in this, he usually received men in the sacristy or in his poor, unadorned cell. Those who came to him were nobles, princes, bishops, priests and, in a particular way, the young of every social grade, whom he knew how to make feel welcome, listen to, understand and guide. The princes of Bisignano, Giuseppe Leopoldo and Luigi Sanseverino also came to seek his advice in the various difficulties of their office and their responsibilities. They held him in great friendship and esteem. A good number of public administrators and prelates also had recourse to him. His zeal often led him to seek out sinners who were reluctant to reconciliation, and it also made him solicitous in hurrying to the sick who sought his spiritual assistance, irrespective of the hour of the day or of the night. Along with the penitents who came to him occasionally there were individuals and groups – not only persons consecrated by religious vows – who continuously benefited from his spiritual direction, and sometimes even by correspondence. Among these were the enclosed nuns of the monastery of Cappuccinelle of Acri whom he guided to spiritual perfection right up to the time of his death. There was also Giuseppe Leopoldo Sanseverino, the eighth prince of Bisignano. He had asked for and obtained an apostolic brief (dated 13 July 1726) from Benedict XIII which authorised Br. Angelo to reside in his vast palace in order to take care of Leopoldo's soul. There was also Maria Teresa Sanseverino, daughter of the same prince, for whom he stood godfather at her baptism and supported her in her determination to become a Capuchin nun.



In 1724 with the help and generosity of prince Giuseppe Leopoldo, Br. Angelo began the construction work of a convent for the Cappuccinelle in Acri by rebuilding the ruined house and church of the Augustinians. The monastery, under the patronage of Saint Peter of Alcantara and Saint Catherine, virgin and martyr, opened on 1 June 1726¹. Maria Teresa became a nun there, taking the name Mariangela del Crocifisso. She died there on 3 October 1764, with a reputation for her holiness, after a life of self denial and penance. Despite his reluctance to occupy positions of responsibility in the course of his life, blessed Angelo was appointed novice

¹ Translator: 1 June 1726 was a Saturday, while Pentecost that year was 9 June.

master a number of times, guardian (at Mormanno, Cetraro and at Acri), visitator, provincial Definitor and minister provincial (1717 to 1720), and finally general visitator in 1735.

In all these tasks, which he only accepted in obedience, he was always diligent to promote fidelity to the Rule and Constitutions of Order that he governed with moderation and prudence. During the apostolic process in Bisignano a friar has left us a marvellous testimony concerning the manner in which Br. Angelo governed in the fraternity as guardian and provincial. "He governed our religious communities as guardian, and the province as provincial, so well that his way of governing has remained the norm and example to be imitated by anyone who has wanted to govern with both zeal and charity together."

He knew the Sacred Scriptures and the works of the Fathers very well and was naturally gifted in poetry. Br. Angelo had a sound philosophical and classical background. Very few writings of his remain, mostly attached to the process of 1772-1775. His "Gesù Piissimo o vero Orologio della Passione di Gesù Cristo" published posthumously in Naples with the first edition in 1745; "Devotissime Meditazioni sopra tutte le ore della Passione del Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo", also posthumously in Naples (the second edition was in 1774). There are also some prayers and little religious songs, the daily Exercise that he gave to his devotees, and finally thirty or so letters.

Br. Angelo had the charismatic gifts of miracles, ecstasy, prophecy, bilocation, healing and reading of hearts. Adorned with all the virtues he lived in the heroic practice of love for God and neighbour. His contemporaries called him "The Calabrese Preacher". He died in Acri on 30 October 1739 amid general mourning.

Immediately after his death insistent requests began to arrive from many parts of Calabria and southern Italy, from the Court of Naples and from the king of the two Sicilies himself, Ferdinando di Bourbon. They petitioned that Br. Angelo, who while he lived was subject to great veneration, be proclaimed a saint. Only five years after his holy death, on 10 October 1744 his process began with the ordinary investigation in Bisignano (1748-1759) and Cosenza (1764-1769). The apostolic processes were conducted a Cosenza (1786-1789, 1791-1792, 1793-1795) and at Bisignano (1793-1796).

His cause for beatification was introduced on 27 May 1778. His postulator was the venerable Nicola Molinari da Logonegro who had been appointed Capuchin postulator general for the causes of the saints in 1765. This concluded on 17 June 1821 with the recognition of Br. Angelo's heroic virtue. On 18 December 1825 Leo XII proclaimed him blessed. His remains were kept in the old church of Our Lady of the Angels of the Capuchins in Acri for eighty six years, that is, up until his beatification. After the exhumation and identification authorised by the Congregation for Rites on 22 November 1825, the remains were deposited in the altar dedicated to him in the same church. On 22 August 1925, on the occasion of the solemn centenary celebrations of the beatification, the bones of Br. Angelo were transferred in an ornate urn to the sanctuary that had been built between 1893 and 1896. John Paul II raised the sanctuary to the dignity and title of min basilica.

Translation based on the article by GIUSEPPE FIAMMA in *Sulle orme dei saint*, 2000, p.263-274.