

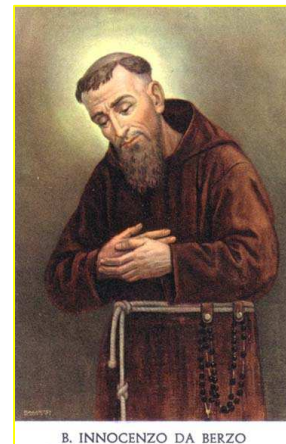
Blessed Innocenzo da Berzo (1844-1890)



Giovanni Scalvinoni had only been ordained a priest three years when he was assigned to Berzo as assistant parish priest. On 2 June 1867 he had been ordered to Brescia by the bishop, Girolamo Verzeri, who had sent him immediately to Cevo in Valsaviore to carry out the office of vicar co-adjutor. However, after two years the bishop recalled him to Brescia and appointed him vice-rector of the diocesan seminary. Responsible positions of authority and direction were a suffering for Giovanni; so much so, that only after one year he was removed. Why? As we read in his process, "As for his exercise of authority he was less than nothing." However, he could not be surpassed if it were a question of helping a poor person or staying in adoration before the tabernacle or of reading and studying. His mother, Francesca Poli, who had given birth to him twenty six years earlier in Niardo in Valcamonica on the feast day of St. Joseph 1844, who lived with him and knew him, had to be careful because everything in the house could disappear. It was enough for a poor person to arrive and everything useful in the house would end up in the hands of that person, even a chicken in the pot ready for the evening meal. Her son used to do so with disarming calm, "Any way, we can eat tomorrow"; because "it is necessary to consider our neighbour as in the bosom of the Lord." If he wasn't in the Church to hear confessions or spiritual direction or other ministries, he was unmistakably in silent prayer near the altar or "alternatively to long adorations he would go into the sacristy to read an article from the Summa of Saint Thomas."

However something slowly began to shine through his behaviour. His desire seemed to be in another higher place. Visible on the other side of the valley, lying on the slope of the mountain side, was the outline of the friary hermitage of the Annunciation with its bell-tower reaching skyward. Blessed Amedeo Menez de Silva had founded it in the 1400's and the Capuchins had been living there a little more than thirty years. His heart longed to be there and to satisfy his thirst for interiority and mystical silence. In his letters he had written, "The greatest need we have is to remain silent before our great God, both with our desire and with out tongue whose speech – the speech that God hears more willingly – is the silent speech of love."

This longing was the result of a strong Christian experience growing in a humble family of farm-workers between Niardo and Berzo. His father, Pietro, and grandmother died while he was still very young. The suffering of sad separations accompanied by those deep sentiments lived with the reserve, modesty and nobility of the poor, was lived in the rhythm of prayer and devotion inherited from a tradition of a concrete faith, steadfast like the mountains that encircled his home town.



B. INNOCENZO DA BERZO

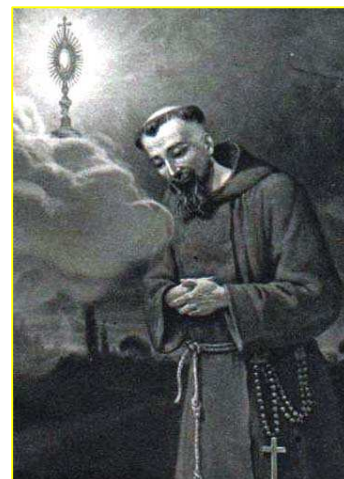
His uncle, Francesco, was father to him, and had him go to school for five years in the municipal college until 1861. With teachers of great spirit, he developed that spiritual orientation of his personality. He showed a quick intelligence (with the highest marks), diligent application to work, careful

attention to the weak, a desire to serve and to remain hidden, and a intense passion for the Eucharist. Instead of continuing his studies, which the superiors of the college had offered him *gratis*, he had wanted to enter the seminary in Brescia. He imposed on himself a severe spiritual discipline, set out in his numerous "spiritual rules" which he called 'Orari' (or 'schedules'), so that he could transform everything into prayer and the interior life. And so he became a priest, but continued to adjust his 'orari' in his yearning for a formidable interiority or spiritual life. This will only be satisfied when, on 16 April 1874, at thirty years of age, with the consent of his mother and the bishop, Father Giovanni went up to the friary of the Annunciation and began his novitiate as a Capuchin with the name Br. Innocenzo da Berzo. His Capuchin biography is one of disconcerting simplicity. After first profession on 29 April 1875 he was assigned to the friary at Albino. He remained there only a year and then return to the friary of the Annunciation where he took solemn vows on 2 May 1878 and was appointed vice-novice master. This assignment did not last long. When the novitiate was transferred to Lovere in November 1879 he had no job in the friary.

The learned provincial Br. Agostino da Crema, a friend of Rosmini, called him to Mila in October 1880 to be part of the editorial group of the periodical *Annali Francescani*. A few months later, in February 1881, he was sent on supply to the friary of Sabbioni di Crema. In June he returned to his solitude at the Annunciation friary. His superiors and confreres would have to let themselves be convinced by his repeated failures to abandon him to his isolation and to respect its secret. Some had the impression that he suffered from an inferiority complex and felt compassion for him. In reality he made no attempt to avoid the awareness of his own limitations. Rather, he immersed himself in it even more. The only external pursuit he persevered in was that of giving to the poor whatever came to hand – whether they were truly needy or whether they those who took advantage of his trusting goodness. He often returned from questing serene and contented with his sack empty, having made actual Fra Galdino's image of the sea (from *I promessi sposi*). It receives water everywhere and then returns to distribute it to the rivers.

Finally, the superiors entrusted to him, in autumn 1889, the preached retreats of the principal friaries at Mila-Monteforte, Albino, Bergamo and Brescia. He managed to complete only the first two. These cost him much effort which disturbed him and seriously compromised his already dubious health, hastening the end. In fact he fell gravely ill while preaching at Albino and on 3 March 1890 would breath his last at the infirmary in Bergamo. This see-saw of appointment and removal is like an antithesis which imprints the attraction of mystery and the rhythm of a sacred drama on the external aspects of the life of blessed Innocenzo da Berzo and on his inner secret.

Br. Innocenzo only wanted to serve and to occupy the last place, "even to the point of becoming physically stooped; he would withdraw into a corner as if he wished to disappear." In his exercise book he wrote, "I will long to be subject to all and be horrified of being preferred in the slightest way. I am treated too well. I truly



deserve something else, because I have so many debts with the Lord." This attitude caused him many humiliations. The friars did not go too much for the thin fellow and they often maltreated him, especially for his endless Masses that lasted well beyond the usual time. Even their tugs at his chasuble to let him know this had little effect. It was as if he were engulfed by the Holy Spirit and his exclamations and silent meditations lasted a long time. His thirst for expiation urged him to find invent a thousand ways to suffer and be humiliated. He always had his calm, even jesting response prepared, ready to laugh at his own inability and lack of skill. The priests of Valle Camonica came to him for advice and he knew how to resolve every complex case with doctrinal precision and profound intuition. However his "shrewdness" made him appear inept. An immense desire for purification and prayer was his attempt to respond to that Love that is not loved. A cruel torment, reflected in his physical lines, accompanied him: the evil of sin. He asked the official theologian of the province "whether venial sin could caused infinite offense to God." He trembled just at the thought of being able to commit the slightest defect.

His focal point of his attention was the tabernacle. In front of the tabernacle he found all this good. The prayer of the fraternity was not enough for him. The day time was insufficient. Given the task to dust the benches, he never finished. He dusted and then would dust again. When the others finished he continued on. They imposed on him to leave the church like the others. He obeyed, but went round close to the outside walls lamenting like dove and if the door was ajar he would stop there, ecstatic. Once he discovered a little door to the church from the friary library. From that moment on he was always in the library to study. However, the books remained open. He would be absorbed in mysterious, Eucharistic intimacy. There was already for him an irresistible attraction even on the physical level. He could not live far from the tabernacle. He would spend nights in silent adoration, as he did once in the church at Ossimo. He had gone there to hear confessions. His face became radiant, beautiful and relaxed. The parish priest found him like this when he came in the morning to open the church.

As with the Eucharist, so too with the cross, the Crucified. He meditated on the Cross continuously and repeated the Stations of the Cross as many as eight or ten times a day, weeping and crying. He had become the apostle of the Way of the Cross. "When someone was seen making the Way of the Cross," said one witness, "the friars knew that person had confessed to Br. Innocenzo."

Ilarino da Milano wrote, "His temperament was decidedly timid and his personal tendency disposed him to compliance and submissiveness, to always withdraw apart and stay in a corner. All the more striking or paradoxical is this fact. The transforming divine action non only did not cancel this psychological inclination to littleness and the conviction of being little, but used them amazingly to transform them into the practice of heroic virtue and into a mystical state."

John XXIII proclaimed him blessed on 12 November 1961. He defined him in these words, "a modern saint, a saint for our times." But what is the secret of his very simple life? The "modernity" of holiness is difficult to explain. According to the words of Paul VI, "the biographers say that he kept his head bowed and it was difficult even to see his face. But if we look at the reality of this soul, we must say that he kept his eyes looking up, for

as we gravitate towards the earth he truly gravitated, levitated towards heaven." He is a saint that fled and hid, restless in the desire for mystical introversion built on cutting away, throwing away, destroying, to find an ever more absolute, longed for and sought emptiness, a "loving nothingness." And that is how the author, Curzia Ferrari, titled her splendid biography of the blessed, towards a fullness of divine love. With everything removed, he could say truthfully with Saint Francis, "May God and my all!" This is his deep secret which the simple people of the valley had already sensed in calling him "the Little Friar from Berzo" (*Il Fratino di Berzo*),

Translation based on the article by COSTANZO CARGNONI in *Sulle orme dei santi*, 2000, p. 239-246