

Blessed Florida Cevoli (1685-1767)



he will not succeed! was the dramatic prediction of Cosimo III when he learned of the intentions of Lucrezia Elena Cevoli. She was determined to dedicate herself completely to God. The Grand Duke was certain that the young woman from Pisa, daughter of Count Curzio and the Countess Laura della Seta would not know how to overcome the difficulties of such a harsh and austere life like the one she wanted to adopt. She was too used to every kind of comfort and security. However, once she crossed the threshold of the Monastery of the Capuchin Poor Clares in Città di Castello, the girl – born in Pisa on 11 November 1685, and not yet eighteen years old – would never turn back.

However, it is not as if the prediction of the Grand Duke would prove completely false! The encounter with the monastery was more difficult than anticipated. The nuns seemed like demons to her and the mistress, Veronica Giuliani, was more inclined not to receive her. She managed to overcome that first awful moment precisely because hers was an authentic vocation. This experience strengthened her will and gave her the constancy she would need to remain firm in her resolve. Above all she knew how to stand the test of humility and sincerely desired to do penance. Therefore she submitted herself to a rigorous ascetic. This urged her to seek further rigours for herself more than those already reserved for the novitiate year. And those ordinary rigours were not a few! So many accounts have survived that give us a rather precise idea of the great difficulties novices had to face in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The discipline was very demanding. One risked being shown the door even for things that today seem to be of little importance. Among the virtues there was great emphasis on humility. To inculcate it in novices there was no hesitation to inflict upon them public humiliations. The fear of not being admitted to profession was very strong in the young.

It is not always easy today to understand education principles so remote from ours. Other times, other methods which nevertheless produced saints! Often novices enthusiastically submitted to a life of discipline which today would be regarded as unbearable. Lucrezia is herself confirmation of this. At the end of her novitiate she asked to be able to extend it another year. This rigorous ascetical journey was not, however, and end in itself. In genuine persons it also worked as a kind of purifying fire. In burning away the dross it ignited souls in fervent prayer. Her ardour for contemplation never grew tepid in the noble Pisan, now known as Sister Florida. She had become a fervent exponent of the more rigorous Franciscan ideal.

Nevertheless she will not distinguish herself so much for the heights of her contemplation as much as being a woman endowed with determination. She was a gifted leader. That the nuns quickly recognised her extraordinary character is demonstrated by that fact that while she was still a “girl” they entrusted her with the very delicate office of ‘rotara’.¹ This allowed her to know the concrete situation of the monastery. She soon realised that the convent was not completely aligned with the spirit and

¹ The sister responsible for the ‘turn’, ‘turnstile’ that allowed immediate contact with the world outside the enclosure. The monastic wheel is the vertical, twin compartment, rotating cylinder in the monastic wall in the sacristy and near the front door or guest area. It is used for the exchange of things and messages in those days.

will of Saint Clare. A 'soft' interpretation of the Rule often gave rise to compromises.

"Sister Veronica was very good at prayer. Sister Florida had more spirit and more courage." That was how one of the witnesses distinguished the particular abilities of the two nuns who would have given the face of the monastery a different complexion. Therefore in 1716, when Veronica was elected abbess, Florida was placed by her side as vicar, just at thirty one years of age. While the holy abbess fought her spiritual battle, reaching dizzying heights whose dreadful fascination she approached with trepidation, her vicar- with her abbess' full agreement - took care of daily life. She attended to the concrete concerns, the small and great difficulties of life, giving special care to the human relationships of the monastery.

Veronica remained abbess for eleven consecutive years, until her death in 1727. Sister Florida succeeded her and guided the monastery until 1736, continuing the work she had already begun. She did not use harsh impositions, but with a steady hand she undertook a gradual change of direction in community life, *fortiter ac suaviter* (with firmness but also gentleness). She was sure that the great ideals proposed by their holy founders would be realised by faithfulness in the matters of everyday life. She was not without opposition, as one would expect for someone called to this task who showed herself opposed to any compromise of the essential. She knew how to overcome such difficulties with her unshakable determination that sustained her in realising her projects.

No doubt the courage and natural ease with which the abbess carried out the lowliest tasks and accepted trying humiliations aroused wonder among the nuns. After all, she had grown up in an aristocratic environment and it not unusual for her to receive visits from women of high standing. A personality like hers, both firm and gentle at the same time, could not but impress the sisters who continually called upon her for tasks of responsibility. After the first nine years as abbess, she was novice mistress once, then alternated between abbess and vicar until her death. The monastery itself benefited from her prudent and practical leadership. In the monastery she also wanted to establish a spice garden for which she provided the necessary water supply. In short, she was a good Martha "with one hundred eyes and as many hands." Nonetheless she never forgot the longings of Mary.



She was not without her own sufferings. By their very nature the offices she held already produced their own sufferings for her, as did a painful and annoying herpes. For twenty years she was afflicted by itching. She accepted this without becoming upset in such a way that the other nuns were not aware of her difficulties. Resolutely, even with her suffering, Florida did not want to wear special clothing. She preferred instead to face the daily martyrdom inflicted on her not as blows from a scimitar but - here we refer to the eloquent metaphor used also by Therese of Lisieux - she preferred to see them as mere pinpricks. The sisters used to say that she

would even have refused the stigmata with which Christ wanted to sign her, for fear of falling into pride.

Capable and very practical she demonstrated her insight and intelligence in some initiatives regarding her former novice mistress, Veronica Giuliani. It was Florida who supported the introduction of the cause of Veronica's beatification. It was also Florida who decided to erect a monastery in the Giuliani house in Mercatello.

In some of her letters regarding the monastery in Mercatello she demonstrated herself to be a practical and single-minded woman. A *practical woman*: On 18 April 1754 she wrote to the Canon Santi, who with Signore Perini supervised the construction. "I recommend to you that what is not necessary of the old (building) not be demolished, because it seems to us that some of the walls can make use of the old walls, which would ensure less expense and an early finish to the work."

A *woman of character*: On 11 February she wrote specifically about the Canon himself. "With some insistence last Lent (that is the Lent or Forty Days of Advent) I recommended to him that he tell me some news from time to time about the building. However, the Lent has passed two months ago and I still haven't seen a single line from the chaplain. What is going on? Are they dead or are they alive? Let them tell us something..."

At her death on 12 June 1767, after thirty seven days of "burning fever", an examination of her body revealed unusual markings on the sides of her chest. A surgeon also removed her heart which appeared perfectly normal. Afterwards, however, some effects were seen on her aorta that were inexplicable as natural phenomena.

These details are part of the epilogue. They are another story written by the finger of God for another purpose: to indicate the extraordinary quality of an existence lived entirely within what was characteristically ordinary. However there is something else that makes Florida's life more vivid for us. Immersed as we are in a deafening and chaotic day by day reality, bombarded by messages that are often contradictory, our Poor Clare sister reminds us of the greatness of weekday holiness, the value of consistent faithfulness and continuous prayer, the heroism of doing the ordinary things well, accepting those things that weigh upon us and which seem unreasonable. Of course, the gospel has its reasons which the reason has not.

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