

Saint Crispino da Viterbo (1668-1750)



orn in Bottarone, a rural district of Viterbo, on 13 November 1668, Crispino was baptised 'Pietro' two days later in the Church of San Giovanni Battista. From the baptismal record we learn the names of his mother, Marzia, and his father, Ubaldo Fioretti. His godfather was called Angelo Martinelli. When Ubaldo married Marzia, she was a widow with a daughter. He was an artisan and left the scene early, leaving Pietro an orphan at a young age and Marzia was thus widowed a second time. His uncle Francesco a shoemaker was as fond of Pietro and had him attend schools run by the Jesuits. He then took him on as an apprentice in his shoe shop.

Pietro donned the Capuchin habit on 22 July 1693, the feast day of Mary Magdalen, and received the name by which he is known in the history of holiness: Crispino da Viterbo. After his novitiate year he was transferred on 22 July 1694 to Tolfa where he stayed almost three years, until the month of April 1697. He went to Rome and was there just a few months. Then from 1697 until April 1703 he lived in Albano. From there he went to Monterotondo where he remained uninterruptedly for more than six years, until October 1709. He then went to Orvieto where he was gardener until January 1710 when he took up the office of questor. Thus began almost forty years of life in Orvieto, interrupted by a brief stay in Bassano in the final months of 1715 and in Rome from mid-May to the end of October 1744. Finally, on 13 May 1748, he left Orvieto finally to be admitted to the infirmary in Rome. There he died on 19 May 1750.

Brother Crispino was beatified on 7 September 1806 and canonised on 20 June 1982.



Any biographical profile of Brother Crispino da Viterbo would be incomplete if it did not refer to his aphorisms: sayings, expressions, maxims, reflections and exclamations in which he, like a master, could concisely express the essence of his deepest convictions and feelings. A thinker and a courteous man, he liked metaphors and images. Above all, he knew how to find the right words and tone of expression when it was a matter of giving a 'caution' to people of any condition. Someone who noted this with great insight was the lay friar, Domenico di Canepina, 43 years old. He testified at the process: "When he was giving his holy cautions he practised a kind and courteous manner, seeming to joke in a holy way, and directing his words as if to a third person so as to express his intent more prudently..."

Some of Brother Crispino's aphorisms went on to be oft repeated at length. The canonical processes give this credence with the great number of instances that were cited. Moreover they could also be heard along the streets and in houses, so much so that a Capuchin, Brother Giuseppe Antonio dalla Valtellina, commented on Brother Crispino's "sayings and maxims" during his Lenten preaching in the *castelli* of Orvieto (Sugano, Torre, Sala and San Venanzio). The people flocked to hear these sayings repeated, convinced of their value.

We will cite some here too, though without pretending to be complete or to contextualise them in their original settings – something that would require too much space.

Raising his eyes to heaven, Brother Crispino often used to exclaim, “Oh Divine Goodness!” Or in inviting others to admire creation he used to say, “What a great God. .. what a great God!” He often sighed, “Oh Lord, why doesn’t the whole world know and love you?!” He used to exhort, “Let us love this God because He deserves it.” “Ama Dio e non fallire, fa pur bene e lascia dire – Love God and do not falter. Do good too and let others say what they will.” He admonished some merchants, “Be careful, don’t be ninnies, because God is watching.” Again, “The one who does not love God is crazy.” “Anyone who loves God in purity of heart, will live contented and die happy.” “Nothing contrary will ever happen to the one who does the will of God.”

During a time of grave famine he encourage trust in divine Providence in this way, “Place your hope in God so that abundance will be yours.” “Divine Providence will take much better care of things than we.” During that same period someone asked him how he would provide for the needs of the friary where the fraternity had grown with seven students. Brother Crispino answered that “he did not have to worry about it because he had three great providers,” namely God, Our Lady and Saint Francis.

On hearing the bell for prayer he used to take leave saying “his Lord Father was calling him.” To Brother Francesco Antonio da Viterbo he declared, “*Paesano*, all that we do and everything we have to carry out for the love of God... I would not lift a finger if not for the glory of God.” To do otherwise, “would be a martyrdom for the devil.”

Br. Crispino’s “holy maxims” about Our Lady were often on his lips. He called her “my Lady Mother”. “Anyone who is devoted to Mary cannot be lost.” “The one who loves the Mother and offends the Son is a counterfeit lover.” “Whoever offends the Son does not love the Mother.” “Someone who disgusts the divine Son is not a true devotee of Mary.” He taught others to repeat the words, “Most holy Mary be my light and companion especially in the moment of my death.” When he was asked to pray to Our Lady for serious cases - (ordinarily people asked for miracles) – he said, “Let me speak with my Lady Mother for a little while, and then come back.” Or he would say, “I will send my Lady Mother a reminder, and we will see the reply.” The reply was not always the one that was desired, as in the case of Francesco Laschi, to whom Br. Crispino said, “My Lady Mother has not endorsed the reminder I sent about the health” of your son.

His sayings about ‘the last things’ are quite numerous. Br. Crispino did everything in view of the eternity that awaits us according to how one will have lived. He wanted no one to lose sight of this terrible but joyful reality. With the words, “Chi nasce, muore – One is born and dies,” he informed Sister Maria Costanza of her imminent and unavoidable end. He reminded one person who was attached to the vanity of the world, “Each day is one day closer.” He encouraged those who were sick or troubled by saying, “Suffering is brief, joy is eternal” or “Such is the good awaiting me that each suffering is a delight.” “God gave it to me and God will lift it from me. Let his holy will be done.” He cheerfully answered someone who commiserated with him over his sufferings, “When do you want to suffer for the love of God? After you have died?” “Hey, do we want to wait to suffer when we are in the grave?” He often admonished, “You don’t get to heaven

riding in a carriage"; "Heaven is not made for armchairs"; "You won't reach heaven in a pair of slippers."

The thought of hell often made him cry out, "Oh eternity, eternity!" even if he was convinced that "It takes more effort to go to hell than to gain heaven with holy works." He added, "Death is a school of sensibility for all the crazy people who are attached to the world." And he helped those crazy persons he met to come to their senses in time. To merchants he said, "Know that God sees the contract and the goods." Or again, "Things of the world do not lead to God." More often though he tried to instil trust. To some who asked if they would be saved, "he promptly answered that if they had hope of being saved they would be." "He always alluded that the mercy of God was infinite." "God's mercy, madam, is great. One may be freed from a bad habit with a good confession." "The power of God creates us; the wisdom of God governs us; the mercy of God saves us." To the lady Paola Schiavetti, tormented by scruples, he answered, "When a person on her part does all she can, for all the rest she must throw herself into the sea of God's mercies."

Crispino's sayings about religious life in the Capuchins are particularly numerous. "O how obliged we are to the Lord who called us to this holy religion." In that Order he served by carrying a sack and flasks which were "his cross", "but how much greater was that of Christ!" More than once he was heard to say that the cross of religious "was like straw compared to that of lay people. And there is no comparison between the crosses that the lay people carry, even if they are made of iron, and the cross that Christ carried." Therefore he had a rather pessimistic view of the religious life lived in his day. He wanted it to be committed, austere and steeped in good works. He used to repeat, "My sons, do good while you are still young and suffer willingly because when you are old the only thing you will have left is good will." Though very courteous when giving "cautions" when it was a question of religious he freely left aside metaphors and allegories. Once Brother Francesco Antonio da Viterbo was angry with the guardian and Brother Crispino suddenly said to him, "*Paesano*, if you want to save your soul, you must observe these three things: love everyone, speak well of everyone and do good to everyone." To another religious he suggested, "If you want to be happy in religious community, among other things you must observe these three things: suffer, keep silent and pray."

He was particularly severe towards anyone who failed in the vow of obedience. He warned, "The one who does not obey is a dead soul in front of God and father Saint Francis, and he is a useful body to the Order." "He resembles a young person without sense, foolish and vague within a family, who is only good for unsettling and disturbing the others and creating confusion..." "He is like a dead body in a house that is good for nothing except to plague it with its own fetid stench."

He often encouraged and helped the poor who came to the door and would say that God would provide abundantly "when we keep open two doors: namely the door of the choir to the greater glory of the Lord, and the front door to the friary for the benefit of the poor." Again, "The front door supports the friary."

Brother Crispino was exacting with religious but was not pessimistic regarding the Order. He regarded it a great gift to be able to serve God in it. Once he met an Orvieto boy, Girolamo, the son of Maddalena Rosati. He announced to the boy that he should be a Capuchin, singing, "Senza pane e

senza vino, fraticello di fra Crispino” – “Without bread and wine, Brother Crispino’s little friar.” The boy went on to become a friar named Giacinto da Orvieto and died while still a cleric in Palestrina in 1769. He had just turned twenty.

However there is a whole series of sayings that could be said to be in keeping with Brother Crispino’s character. With this sense of humour, used to joke joyfully with these sayings about facts or situations that were often difficult. The pharmacist from Orvieto, Francesco Barbareschi, tormented by gout, was invited by Brother Crispino to “take the ‘Achilles’ spear’, that is, the spade, and to work in the ‘villa Crispigniana,’ as he used to call his little garden where he sowed and planted vegetables and greens for benefactors.” He once gave a stinging reply to someone who asked to be cured of the same ailment, “Your complaint is more gout in the hands than gout in the foot because ... you do not pay wages as you should: your workers and servants are crying.” To the Princess Barbarini who wanted to see her son Carlo healed immediately, he said, “Hey, isn’t it good enough for him to be healed during the Holy Year? ... and do you want to make the Lord do as you want? It is necessary to receive God’s graces when he wants to give them.” He said to Cosimo Puerini, who regretted giving alms of a flask of good wine, “Hey, do you want to offer Cain’s sacrifice?” After the miraculous escape of a Capuchin who attempted to cross a flooded inlet, he sang, “Muddy you are, muddy I see you. Crazy I am if I want to pass you.” (Torbida si vede, torbida si lassa; son un gran matto, se si passa.”

It often happened that Brother Crispino had to speak about himself ... in order to help others to come to an idea closer to the truth. At least he thought so when he echoed his detractors by saying, “I am worse than a Seville orange. At least you can get a little juice from them, but what can they hope to get from me.” In order to avoid praise and admiration Brother Crispino often used imagery and metaphors. He answered a person told him not to ruin the *minestra* with absinthe he said, “Value anything bitter;” or, “This absinthe is not according to taste, but according to spirit.” Once someone took pity on seeing him walking in the rain. Brother Crispino said, “My friend, I walk between the drops.”

Having gone to visit Cardinal Filippo Antonio Gualtieri he was asked why he didn’t wear a better habit or mantle for the occasion. “With his usual wit” Crispino “opened his mantle which let light through everywhere which meant that it was threadbare and full of holes.” To a person who was rejoicing over Crispino’s miracles he said, “What are you so amazed about? That God should perform miracles is no novelty”; “Don’t you know, my friend, that Saint Francis knows how to perform miracles?” At Montefiascone he shouted at the people who were cutting his mantle to pieces to make relics of it, “Poor people, what are you doing?! You’d do much better to cut the tail off a dog! ... Are you crazy? So much a din for passing donkey! God to church and pray to God!”

The humble beast of burden was found often in Brother Crispino’s speech and there was affected in his words. One day he said to Brother Giovanni Antonio, “Father Guardian, Brother Crispino is an ass, but his halter is in your hands. So when you want him to go or to stop, pull or ease up on the halter.” When had others help him put the sacks over his shoulders, “joyful and jovial he used to say, ‘Load the donkey and go to the fair.’” Someone asked him why he never covered his back against the rain or the sun. He

answered “impishly, ‘Don’t you know that donkeys don’t wear hats, and that I am the donkey of the Capuchins?’” Sometimes he added with a note of seriousness, “Do you know why I do not cover my head? Because it shows that I am always in the presence of God,”

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