

Saint Felix da Cantalice (1515-1587)



On 12 May 1712 Pope Clement XI raised Saints Pius V, Andrea Avellino, Felix da Cantalice and Caterina da Bologna to the honours of the altars. One had been a pope, another a priest, the third a lay friar and one a religious sister. All of them had lived in an historical period characterised by the great movement of the Catholic restoration before, during and after the Council of Trent.

All had been religious – a Dominican, a Theatine, a Capuchin and Poor Clare, as if to highlight the support given by religious Orders, both old and new, to the renewal of the Church. This support was at various levels: at the Chair of Saint Peter (Pius V); the formator of a new clergy (Pietro Avellino); the edification of one's neighbour through humility and piety (Felix), and the prayerful silence of a monastery (Caterina). Whether he was aware of it or not, in canonising them together in a kind of amazing synthesis, Clement XI presented four outstanding and typical representatives who had translated the renewal of the Church into practice.

Among them is the humble and symbolic figure of Felix da Cantalice,

Born in the small farming centre of Cantalice (Rieti) around 1515, Felix Porro entered the Capuchins between the end of 1543 and the beginning of 1544. On completion of his novitiate in the friary of Anticoli di Campagna (today Fiuggi) on 18 May 1545 he took his vows in the little friary on Monte San Giovanni where his will (made on 12 April 1545) is still kept today.

Therefore he belongs to the first generation of Capuchins, among those who did not come from the Observants or from some other religious Order, but from the "world." He became a Capuchin immediately after the unfortunate defection of Bernardino Ochino (that occurred in August 1542) when the poor Capuchins were publically accused of heresy, and it was feared that the Capuchins might be suppressed.

Nonetheless, from the words of Brother Felix himself we come to know how, in that very difficult crisis, the Christian people – not the persecutors or some officials in the Roman Curia! – thought about the life and faith of the Capuchins. In fact, Felix said to an Augustinian cousin of his who exhorted him to follow him into his Order, that if he had not been able to become a Capuchin he would have preferred to remain in the world. From this it must be argued that despite the persecutions and calumnies the Capuchin Reform enjoyed high esteem.

It seems superfluous to insist on recalling the whole series of picturesque anecdotes that characterise the life of Brother Felix. Certainly to be counted among these are the encounters and exchange of witty remarks that he had with Sixtus V, Saint Philip Neri, Cesare Baronio (later a cardinal), with saint Charles Borromeo, the students of the German College and the ladies of the Roman nobility on whose doors he knocked in search of alms. All these things are well known, as are the ditties he sang in the houses and along the streets of Rome; his admonitions to powerful and to sinners; as well as his prophecies and miracles that witnesses recalled during his canonical processes and which Sixtus V said he was ready to confirm under oath, in his desire to shorten the time taken for Brother Felix's canonisation.



However it should be pointed out that all those who testified to Brother Felix's marvels while he was still alive were not members of the Capuchin Order. Either the friars did not know about these things, or they did not think it appropriate to speak about them.

If we set aside his anecdotes, clever and witty sayings, miracles and prophecies, little remains to tell. In fact, apart from his first four years of religious life in the friaries at Anticoli, Monte San Giovanni, Tivoli and Palanzana (Viterbo), he spent the rest of his days in Rome (1547-1587). There he first begged for bread each day (until 1572), and later, until his death, he begged for wine and oil for his brothers. The Capuchins who rubbed elbows with him considered him to be a good religious like so many others. Therefore they were completely amazed by the endless crowds of people who came to venerate his body after his death, and who, together with gentlemen and ladies of the Roman nobility, including cardinals and Sixtus V himself, proclaimed his miracles and holiness.



During the first canonical inquiries the friars limited themselves to tell how Brother Felix used to spend his time in his day-to-day life. Because of this we know today what he did every moment of his busy day: when he prayed (day and night), his disciplines, his questing for alms, his counsels, visits to the sick within the friary and in the city, and how he made rough crosses for the devout who ask them of him.

Therefore, in the earliest inquiries very few miracles are mentioned. To the contrary, great pains are taken to describe Felix's ordinary, daily life. This then, with some notable exceptions, was the way of life of the Capuchins in the second half of the sixteenth century. A quick glance through the index of things, places and persons in the critical edition of the beatification process, with its twenty dense columns about the Saint, will show this.

In this way we have received a concrete and detailed picture of a model of Capuchin life. Brother Felix realised fully what the Constitutions were prescribing. He did this not in a servile way, but in the freedom that comes from grace. And so he became a model to imitate, and he was imitated.

While he was alive Brother Felix taught some of the friars how to pray and how to go out for alms. After his death he became a model for many. Those who testified to his life and virtue in 1587, in the processes celebrated after twenty or thirty years reported amazing things that were not mentioned in 1587. How could that be? Were they making up stories? No, but with the passing of time they came to better understand the meaning of his life which, lived before their eyes, had appeared to them to be so ordinary and no different from the lives of so many other friars.

Even if Brother Felix was in the lowliest of positions, nevertheless he had lived in Rome for forty years, in the main friary of the Order, in the residence of the Vicar General. Many famous friars had known him, especially at the time of General Chapters. Bernardino da Colpetrazzo notes that in the chapter of 1587, because of the events that followed the death of Brother Felix, the friars at the Chapter almost completely left aside the usual sermons made on the occasion of the chapter, since Brother Felix had preached more than satisfactorily with his holy death. The Chapter friars were the ones who took back to their various provinces the news of the amazing things they had experienced. Immediately biographies and images of Brother Felix went in to circulation and later his beatification (1625) and canonisation (1712) will be celebrated everywhere.

Among the ranks of friars regarded as fathers of the Capuchin Reform, Brother Felix is perhaps second only to Bernardino d'Asti who in 1543/45, while he was guardian, welcomed Felix to the friary in Rome. More research would be needed to better gauge the influence – not on the official level, but on the charismatic and real levels – on the life and history of the Capuchin Order in the fertile field of religious perfection and holiness. Certainly there is no shortage of clues to reveal the outline and shape of that influence. It would be enough to point out the huge circulation of images of Brother Felix. "*Pictura est laicorum litteratura*" and not

just of the learned. So too with the “lives” and relics of Brother Felix, as well as devotion to him, and prayers. What counts most though was the desire to imitate him, especially among Capuchin lay friars. And some of these in turn have since been numbered among the blessed and saints. In fact it is certain that among the Capuchins Brother Felix was the saint who was been most loved and most followed. An indication of this can even be found in the great number of friars who, on entering the Order, took the name Felix. And so, in Italy in 1650, there were around eleven thousand Capuchins, two hundred and seventy seven were called Felix. And up to 1966, in the *Necrology* of the Roman province, two hundred and seventeen friars bore the same name.

Perhaps the broadest and deepest influence that Felix exercised over the Order was greater than can be imagined. For example, in the Capuchin Order there is no trace of the kind of clericalisation which, within a few short years after the death of Saint Francis, polarised the Lesser Brothers. What is more, even contrary to the scrupulous preference of the post-Tridentine church, the Capuchin Order was always committed to defend the rights both of the lay friars and the clerics. In this question it would be difficult to sideline the important role played by Brother Felix who was the first to honour the Order with the nobility of holiness and who in the novitiate in Anticoli di Campagna had a non-cleric Capuchin novice master, fra Bonifacio.



In 1537 Francis Tittelmans van Hasselt died in the friary of Anticoli during his stay there for the canonical visitation. He was the vicar of the Capuchin Roman province. From a human point of view, his untimely death was a disaster for the young Capuchin family in which he had been one of the mainstays. But within just a few years, however, in the same place where the learned Tittelmans had died, the uneducated Felix would take his first steps in religious life. Despite their different circumstances – Tittelmans being a great professor and Felix illiterate – they both shared a common love for manual work, contemplation, a strict observance of the Rule, humility and the care of the sick. Unlike Tittelmans though Felix had more time to realise in himself a perfect model of a Capuchin life imprinted with those characteristics. His example has taught so many.

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