

Circular Letter on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the canonization of Saint Felix of Cantalice (1515-1587)



n 22 May, 1712 Pope Clement XI raised Br. Felix of Cantalice to the honours of the altar, adding his name to the catalogue of saints. Three hundred years later, in communion with the brothers of the Roman Province, we want to recall this confrere of ours, the first saint of our Order. This tri-centenary year coincides with the year of the 84th General Chapter, making it a privileged occasion on which to remind ourselves of the roots of our history and to be open to receive the gift of the Spirit, who is the living memory of Christ's presence in the world.

"Incline the ear of your heart and obey the voice of the Son of God. Observe his commands with your whole heart and fulfil his counsels with a perfect mind." Saint Francis of Assisi, *Letter to the Entire Order*.

I. Short biographical sketch of Brother Felix

1. *Difficult years for a new-born Order*

Felix became a Capuchin towards the end of 1543, after knocking at the door of the friary in Cittaducale. Born in 1515 in Cantalice, a small village in the Rieti valley, Felix was in those years a servant in the household of the wealthy Picchi family of Cittaducale. He spent the novitiate year in the friary of Anticoli di Campagna, as Fiuggi was then called, in the same place where one of the Order's great personalities, Br. Francis Tittelmans of Hasselt (Belgium) had unexpectedly died a few years previously. Tittelmans had been both pupil and teacher at the prestigious University of Louvain, and had joined the Observant Friars in 1521/1522, but on learning of the existence of the Capuchins he travelled to Italy and was accepted by our Order in Rome in 1535/1536. Just under a year after he entered the Order he was elected Provincial Vicar of the Province of Rome, but on September 12, 1537 he died suddenly while visiting the brothers in the friary of Anticoli di Campagna (Fiuggi).

For the Roman Province a great hope had been extinguished, but a few years later a new light was born, not a learned man this time but an illiterate one with the makings of a saint. Felix was a simple man who boasted that he knew only five letters, those of the wounds of Our Lord. Francis Tittelmans and Felix of Cantalice, both Capuchins, were worlds apart in origin and formation, but near neighbours in their love and zeal for the Order. They are living proof of the fact that, from its very beginnings, our brotherhood opened its doors to the scholar no less than to the humble peasant's son, the learned and the unlettered, as long as the desire and the will to follow Christ burned in their hearts.

When Brother Felix asked to be allowed to wear our habit, an event had just occurred which threatened to seriously compromise the beginnings of the Capuchin "reform". In fact, hardly a year had passed since Br. Bernardino Tomassini of Siena, known as Ochino, Vicar General of the Order, had gone over to the Protestant reform and Pope Paul III was minded to suppress the new-born Franciscan family. Br. Felix, by his holiness, helped the Order to surmount the crisis. In fact, by living his "Capuchin essence" so authentically, he demonstrated in a very concrete way the intention that animated our "Reform": to go back to the original inspiration, in other words to the life and Rule of our Father St. Francis, to be his sons and disciples and, like him, to live the life of Christ in obedience to the Church.

Day after day, for forty years (from 1547 to 1587), as a humble questor, he walked the streets of Rome, begging alms from door to door, but at the same time leaving behind him the beauty of a gospel word, spoken as only he knew how: singing along with the children, listening to people's troubles, gladly accepting whatever he was offered. The chroniclers tell us that he always kept his eyes cast down, but that did not prevent him from seeing and understanding the need of the person who stood before him: relieving a pain, comforting the afflicted, healing some physical or moral ill. No-one who met the Capuchin questor Brother Felix ever went away empty-handed. And those hands of

Brother Felix were the same hands that had received from the Mother of God the Child Jesus, whom he had tenderly embraced: that is the picture of him that has come down to us!

2. *Man of the people and man of God*

Being among people of every social class, day in and day out, brought him into contact with the many forms of spiritual and material misery of his times. He collected everything in his knapsack, and back home in the friary he emptied it all into the hands of the guardian: there would be bread, beans, and whatever else he had been given, but there were also all the misfortunes he had seen, the children he had taught to sing, the tears of many, the kindness of the good-hearted souls who had gladly given alms. All this, and all of them, a happy Bro. Felix would take to the church, and offer his prayer and the remains of his day for them, which usually meant most of the night. To this he added the penances of every kind to implore God's intervention for everyone, rich and poor, all of them in need of God's mercy.

Being among people did not distract him from union with God, in fact it was his way of contemplating the mystery of God's love for human beings. We could say that Brother Felix was a street contemplative. Surrounded by people he was joyful, cheerful, in a simple manner, characteristics that made everyone feel close to him. He was a true brother of the people! They knew him as Brother "*Deo gratias*". That was in fact his motto, his way of giving thanks for the alms he received. And if anyone made fun of him or thought him mad, he rejoiced inwardly and even managed to win the person round, because he welcomed everyone with the patience of God, who knows how to wait for sinners and never stops loving them.

So happy was he with his lot as a questing brother that he used to say: "I'm fine, better off than the pope. The pope has many troubles and worries, but I enjoy this world: and I wouldn't swap this begging sack for the papacy and King Philip put together!" His simple, direct manner led him to exchange witty stories with Pope Sixtus V and with Philip Neri, and also with the future Cardinal Cesare Baronio and Saint Charles Borromeo. He was witty and wise with the students of the German College, but also with a few ladies of the Roman nobility, with never a hint of malice! The saints know well how to laugh and raise a smile, hiding, as Brother Felix did, their zeal to give themselves to Christ, so that no-one will notice. Such is the humility of one who knows no other word except to do the will of God.

3. *A saint had lived among them*

His apparently simple spirituality was firmly based on the person of Christ, and he had a particular admiration for the crib and the cross. Our Lady and St. Francis he held in high veneration, and his prayer to them was strongly affective in tone; on receiving communion, he would be moved to tears. All this made him a true son of Saint Francis, a brother who approached everyone, rich and poor, cardinals and mendicants, learned and unlettered, with the same welcoming and respectful attitude of love for the person who stood before him.

The friars who lived with him and reaped the benefit of his daily wanderings through the streets of Rome, experienced his zeal for prayer: he was the one who called them to matins in the middle of the night, and again to lauds at the dawn of the new day. But equally they were surprised, after his death, to see the endless crowds of people flocking to venerate his body. They were all there, the children and the cardinals, the simple folk and the nobles, the beggars and Pope Sixtus V. Now the whole of Rome was coming to see the humble questing friar; instead of Br. Felix going out among the people, as he had done for so many years, the direction was reversed, and they came to him.

On the day that saw the heavenly birthday of Brother Felix, the crowds gathered around his mortal remains had but a single voice: they proclaimed him a "saint". The miracles which were said to have been a feature of his earthly life now began to be recounted, and they were many. Even among his fellow friars there were some who were amazed. Thus did Brother Felix teach his final lesson, the one that validated his entire life: in all things he had lived in humility, hiding what the Lord used to give him in prayer, his

mortifications, his self-giving while keeping nothing back for himself, but begging all and giving all for the good of those he had met during the day.

II. The message of Brother Felix for us today

1. *Being a gift to the brothers*

What was distinctive about Saint Felix and what has fixed him in our memory is that he was a brother, a questor. He would approach people to ask them for something, beg them for something, but most of all to *give*: to give them Jesus, to give them the gift of inner peace which is the fruit of prayer, to give wise advice from his rich experience of life. From his own poor, hard-working family he had learned the precious lesson of giving himself to anyone in need, according to the precious saying of Jesus the Teacher: "There is more joy in giving than in receiving" (Ac 20,35).

Every one of us has received from the Lord this marvellous capacity to be a gift. Today our saintly confrere encourages us to live in our everyday lives the fascinating adventure of being a gift to all, because it is in the exercise of a life generously given that our personalities unfold to their full potential, as Vatican II also confirms: "*man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.*" (GS, 24).

But Br. Felix had also not infrequently experienced a harsh refusal, or had a door slammed in his face, but his reply at those moments was always: "*Deo gratias!*" In that way he revived that perfect joy, embodying in his own life the lesson he had learned from Saint Francis. He was not one of those who are disturbed by a word which they take as an insult to them personally, or when anything is taken from them (Adm. XIV). As a true peacemaker he bore it all out of love of our Lord Jesus Christ, preserving peace in soul and body (Adm. XV) This speaks volumes about the painstaking work he conducted on himself, and his patient acceptance of correction by others.

2. *Contemplatives in action*

But there was something else in Felix that was distinctive: his extraordinary ability to welcome everyone and everything and to transform every situation into a *prayer* which he offered up to God in the secret hours of the night. His biography highlights just this prayerful spirit: *Brother Felix was made for contemplation. Without any effort, he could concentrate on heavenly thoughts even while walking the streets of Rome, amidst the hustle and bustle of the carriages and the clamour of passers-by. But that could hardly assuage his spirit's thirst for the things of God. And so he prayed at night. The hours of the night-time adoration would pass without his even noticing* (Santi e Santità nell'Ordine Cappuccino, Roma 1980, vol. I, 48).

This is a valuable lesson for us, dear brothers, to be welcomed with a generous heart and put into practice. Even today, a life of prayer is still the surest measure of how genuine we are as consecrated persons. It is rightly said as a slogan "*you are what you pray*", in other words, prayer reveals the quality of your life. It is precisely for this reason that someone once paraphrased the well-known proverb as: "*Tell me how you pray and I will tell you who you are*". Prayer is a vital exercise which determines the quality of every hour of the day. "*Pray – adds Fr. Mariano of Turin – not much..., but well; or else, much and well. Pray because it is beautiful, because it is right, because it is sweet, and not so much as a duty. Fulfil that duty as a pleasure, the greatest pleasure of all.*" (R. Cordovani (ed.), *Assoluto e relativo*, Roma 2007, 98).

Jesus speaks of prayer as a "*need*": "*He told them a parable about the need to pray always and never lose heart*" (Lk 18,1). Yes, exactly so! Prayer is not something extra or superfluous, still less, useless: quite the opposite, it is a need; it is essential for our daily life; it is an inextinguishable need of our heart. "*The desire for God is written in the human heart – affirms the Catechism of the Catholic Church, because man is created by God and for God*" (n.27). And the need to encounter God becomes an aching "*thirst*": "*For you my soul is thirsting*" (Ps 62,2); "*as the deer longs for running streams, so my soul is longing for you, my God. My souls is thirsting for God, the living God*" (Ps 41,2-3).

3. *The Capuchins: brothers of the people*

The holy friar was always ready to help, always welcoming. *His warmth* made him sought after by everyone. Not because he had a title or degree, or a certified role approved by society, but because his title was that of a genuine believer in Christ, certified by his way of life. He could truly say that God was his only good! This is where his life assumes a significance that is valid for every age and every place. In our day we are all inclined to search for degrees and titles and we want to be in charge of our own lives; there may be a risk here of excluding Christ from our personal history.

Capuchins are *brothers of the people*. This has been our identity card in every age. However, if we wish that unique identity to be concretely confirmed in our day also, it is up to us to be fully and convincingly open to God, so that we can be open and welcoming and available to any brother or sister in need. Exactly so! Brother Felix in fact was *a man of God and a brother of the people*. To be welcoming means to allow the Lord's grace and salvation to be channelled through the encounter with our brother or sister. The ministry of welcome always involves going out of oneself to open up to the other person; it means welcoming each person as "unique" and as "other" than our own expectations and categories.

Finally, we know that the contemporaries of Saint Felix, powerful men and simple people, learned and illiterate, all sought him out first and foremost for his holiness, because he was genuinely a man of God. He was part of an army of those who live poverty *joyfully*, which freed him from greed and avarice alike (Adm. XXVII). Today we tend to forget easily that what made the Capuchins so attractive in many people's eyes and made us for a long time one of the most admired of all the religious Orders was precisely the consistent practice of poverty. Saint Felix embodies the type of voluntarily poor man who is able to blend exterior and interior poverty, because in addition to possessing nothing he does not get angry or disturbed over anything (Adm. XI). We see that in him "*having nothing of one's own*" has attained its highest level, turning him into a man who is truly free.

Christ's invitation to be detached from the things of this world (*houses, land, brothers, sisters, children, father, mother...* (Mk 10, 29), rings out clearly for us too, because man is created by God and for God. Here, two essential aspects of poverty emerge: the effective and the affective, meaning real, actual detachment from all possessions, and detachment of the heart. It is a question of not setting one's heart on any created good, so as to tend towards the possession of the one true Good, who is God. Only God can fully meet the needs of our heart and of our spirit; only God can fill the immense void in our inner world.

My dear brothers, Saint Felix, the first Capuchin to be canonised, opened the way for a long line of brothers who, like him, learned from our Seraphic Father Saint Francis. They represent the true wealth of our Order, but it would be a shameful thing for us if we simply retold and preached about their achievements, while they actually lived them! (Adm. VI) From this point of view, the memory of Saint Felix becomes a strong challenge to us today to live our religious consecration, especially the vows, with extreme coherence and consistency. In a world that has lost the sense of God, and that no longer speaks of Him, still less to Him, we are called to become a forceful reminder of the need to rediscover these essential dimensions of any human life. And we are called to do it with humility and joy.

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Feast of Saint Felix of Cantalice

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