

Saint Veronica Giuliani (1660-1727)



It is not unusual for mystics to be fluent with the pen. Veronica Giuliani indeed was no exception. Her manuscript *Diary* contains twenty two thousand pages in which she relates the dramatic and intense events of her journey towards God. The saint wrote it “with mortification and embarrassment ... for the sake of simple obedience.” However, the truth be told, it could also be said that she wrote with great effort and loss of sleep since she usually wrote these things through the course of the night, depriving the body of its needed rest.

In practice the *Diary* ranges over a period of the sixty seven years of the saint’s life. Starting with her memories of early childhood – and these are discussed in five special tracts - the *Diary* continues up to 25 March 1727 when, as Veronica says, Our Lady said, “Time for a full-stop.” And her hand put down the pen forever.

Veronica was born in Mercatello sul Metauro on 27 December 1660 and was baptised Orsola the following day. Her father commanded the local garrison with the rank of ensign. Seven children were born to him and his wife Benedetta Mancini. Two of children died quite young. Orsola was the last, and like the other daughters, grew up within a very devout environment created by her mother in particular. Her mother was deeply religious and sensitive. She left her little brood of children and teenagers on 28 April 1667, at only about forty years of age.

Before dying she gathered her daughters around. Showing them the Cross she assigned a wound to each of them. Orsola, the smallest, received that of His side. This action says a lot about the faith of the Giuliani family where prayer in common, harmony and the practice of works of mercy nourished everyday life. During the process of Veronica’s canonization someone added, “In the Giuliani household they read the life of a saint every evening.”

As in Mercatello so also in the years 1669-1672 at Piacenza where the girls followed their father who had obtained the office of superintendent of taxes in the service of the Duke of Parma, and then after their return to Mercatello.

Of this happy period of her life Veronica will remember the pranks, the goodness of those who surrounded her, the tender devotion of the prayers to Our Lady and the Baby Jesus, the first attractions to the religious life, the long and exasperating resistance with which her father opposed the fulfilment of this ardent wish of hers.

Francesco Giuliani had allowed his other four daughters to enter the monastery freely. However, he was not prepared to cede to the request of Orsola, his dearest, the most intelligent, and the one in whom he was the most interested, the most spoiled and pampered of the daughters. He wanted her to marry and stay with him. However Orsola had already decided when she was nine years old and it was up to the old ensign to capitulate to her immovable determination. So it was that on 28 October 1677, while she had not yet turned seventeen, Orsola was clothed in the religious habit of the Capuchin Poor Clares in Città di Castello, taking the symbolic name of Veronica.

But whose 'true image' or faithful copy will she be? Veronica's enthusiasm, an expression of her young age – for a long time in the monastery they called her "la bambina" (the baby), did not countenance any doubts. With all her being she longed to become a true image of Christ crucified.

On entering the Capuchin Poor Clares she brought her inestimable spiritual riches: innocence, the habit of prayer, boundless enthusiasm, a determination to live the life in earnest, and a large quantity of candour that did not envisage any obstacles whatsoever to her burning thirst for religious perfection. Veronica is ready and determined to reach holiness heroically, as did her models, the saints, whose deeds she had learned to understand since her childhood. The monastery is the gym that will enable her to become generous like them. In her view she must run in pursuit of them along the tracks of prayer and penitence, contemplation and suffering.

Veronica continued on this line for around twenty years, amid obstacles and misunderstandings, resolved to succeed at all costs. Around her in the monastery everything happened within the greyness of the ordinary day to day life. However, her journey towards God was marked with important milestones: 1 November 1678, religious profession; 4 April 1681, Jesus places the crown of thorns on her head; 17 September 1688 she is elected novice mistress, an office she will fill until 18 September 1691; 12 December 1693 she begins to write her *Diary*; from 3 October 1694 until 21 March 1698 she was novice mistress again; Good Friday, 5 April 1697 she receives the stigmata, and in the course of the same year she was denounced to the Holy Office and in 1699 was deprived of active and passive voice.

These are dates and events, which in themselves allow us to intuit that something mysterious was happening within Veronica to which her monastic world reacted with trust and admiration and also with open warfare at the expense of her poor "humanity" subjected to privations, difficulties and humiliations of every kind. The account of her sufferings, whether those sought by her or imposed upon her, is somewhat horrifying. Neither the modern hagiographer nor modern reader can manage to justify or even understand such behaviour. In a certain sense Veronica herself will renounce them when, after finally having surpassed that stage of her fearful self-discipline, she spoke of "the crazy things that love had me do."

From the moment she received the stigmata (1697), these "crazy things" became less frequent and disappeared completely in 1699. From that time Veronica will be satisfied with "suffering the difficulties and torments that she saw and knew to be given her directly by the hand of God in order to purify her still more." This was a golden rule that she never failed to instil in the young sisters: she wanted them "to moderate their desire to do penance."

Veronica's natural inclination meant she took more the part of Mary rather than that of Martha. In her first years spent in the monastery she believed she could quench her thirst for perfection by immersing herself in contemplative meditation. Her repugnance for menial domestic tasks and the lowly services of charity also pushed her in that direction. Then to fill her sense of emptiness and discontent, she chose to serve. Moreover she saw manual work as an aesthetical practice, like a penance, This unleashed in her an indomitable revulsion because until that moment it had never entered her mind that carrying out those actions would be more useful and

more altruistic than withdrawing to her cell in contemplation and mortification. And yet she wondered if contemplation alone could resolve the moral problem of life. This led her to argue within herself about which had the greater spiritual value, the active life or the contemplative life. And here we come across a revealing phrase: “you could have remained in the world to do good and you would have been even more useful to others.” Fortunately she quickly concluded that remaining within the monastery can also be useful for others. So when speaking about living a life hidden in God she writes, “I have to do this in prayer, in the things that happen, everywhere; it is not by withdrawing into the cell but in the midst of the entire community that I have to practise solitude with Jesus ... It seems to me that what God requires of me becomes evident through works.”

Veronica had gained a practical insight, that the most efficient way to find and adore God consists in seeking Him with sincerity in the midst of a hundred different concerns. She will follow this practical rule of thumb until her dying day and convincingly instil this in her sisters.



On 7 March 1716 the Holy Office revoked its disciplinary measure imposed upon her. This allowed Veronica to participate with full rights in the elections for the various monastic offices. Then in fact a few weeks later, on 5 April, the sisters elected her abbess, the office that she held until her death. Those would be fourteen years of uninterrupted leadership, years blessed by God. They are years bathed in the light of marvels. Her martyrdom of love had meant that she had to endure many things. Love had kept her humanity in unmistakable suffering. On 6 June 1727 her physical sufferings were sharpened even further. For thirty three days she passed through a triple purgatory – in body, mind and spirit. As we read in an

account in her process, this holy woman called together many of her novices and young sisters and said, “Come here, for Love has let himself be found: this is the cause of my suffering. Tell the others, tell them all.” Then she asked to hear a song in praise of the Incarnation of the Word. During the singing she broke into tears, “Who among you would not weep at such Love?” Then with the obedience of the confessor who assisted her she fell calm and breathed her last. It was the dawn of 9 July 1727.

Given her reputation for holiness, the diocesan bishop Alessandro Francesco Codebò opened the diocesan process five months later on 6 December. Veronica was beatified on 17 June 1804 and canonised on 26 May 1839.

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