

Saint Ignazio da Laconi (1701-1781)

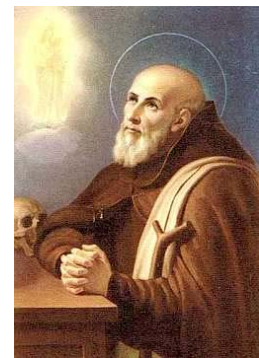


Friday 11 May 1781. At 3 p.m. after the announcement of the dying of the Lord, the bell of the friary of Buoncammino signalled the death of one of the religious of the friary. Not much is needed to have the news spread through the streets and alleys of the city. The name of Br. Ignazio makes the news fly faster: a name already on everyone's lips. An unusual competition begins among the people of Cagliari. Each one wants to be the first to the friary to give homage to the friar. An endless throng passes before the body, which in the evening needs to be decisively interrupted, to begin again the next day with even greater numbers of people.

Striking. Such crowds were incomparable, the poor alongside the powerful of the period. Even the viceroy, accompanied by the vicar general of the diocese, paused before the body. Two days later, on the Sunday, the funeral Mass was jubilant and definitively sealed the affection of the city with hits 'saint' – as he was immediately in the judgement of the people. Yet the story of Br. Ignazio had been disconcertingly ordinary. Even the miracles, to which the processes give abundant witness, appeared to be almost taken for granted, ordinary – like a natural fulfilment of an existence that had been more angelic than human.

He was born in Laconi on the southern margin of the mountainous region of Sardinia in December 1701. His parents were Mattia Cadello and Anna Maria Sanna. It was taken for granted that he would be a farmer like his parents. Could this have been otherwise in a remote region that did not accept change? One ought to bear in mind that during the seven years between 1713 and 1720 – when Ignazio went from being a child to a young man – the government of Sardinia changed three times after four years as a Spanish dominion. Now it was Austrian, only to return to Spain, and finally it came under the house of Savoia. Meanwhile Sardinians had the least awareness of the governmental changes. It can be understood how life on the island followed its own course, established on laws that were not those gazetted into force of law by the European monarchies.

The gospel was inculcated in him within his family. Even when he was a young boy the townspeople called him *lu santuxeddu*: the little saint. He never went to school and never learned to write. Every day, however, we attended Mass, celebrated before dawn in those days. He was an altar boy. As was the custom of the time, he was not yet seven years old when the archbishop of Oristano, Francisco Masones y Nin confirmed him (17 May 1707). According to witnesses, the little saint persevered even in the delicate and difficult age of adolescence and as early youth. He was still considered a little saint when, at eighteen years of age, a sickness confined him to bed and brought him to the brink of death. At that moment he made a promise to God: if he survived he would become a Franciscan.



Vincenzo recovered but he did not keep the vow and we will never know with certainty why the young man forgot the promise he made. Therefore any attempt at an explanation is pointless since it could only be based on hypothetical conjecture. In fact, it is true that very often "the past remains

obscure and mysterious, which lodges in the human heart” (Paolo Golinelli).¹ And still it is true that for some time Vincenzo seemed to forget not alone the promise but also he his earlier religious fervour. Instead he was more intent on discovering the joys of youth. However if he had forgotten the promise made to God, God certainly had not forgotten him. One morning in autumn 1721 he was heading to the high plains of the Sarcidano on horseback when he was touched by tragedy. Suddenly the horse began to run crazily. Vincenzo had already lost control and looked anxiously at the precipice that fell away from the edge of the track. He was certain that sooner or later he would plummet over the edge. Convinced that his hour has come the horse stopped unexpectedly, leaving the youth exhausted, bathed in perspiration, pale from fear. Only as he sighed from relief did he remember the vow he made and had not kept. It was at that moment that he decided to fulfil the vow.

Early in November of 1721, accompanied by his father, Vincenzo arrived in Cagliari and the friary of Buoncammino. He presented himself to the Capuchin Provincial and asked him admission to the Order. He probably had not expected what happened next. His application was refused. His health was rather frail and he may not have been able to overcome the difficulties that the harsh life a friar would have had to face. Vincenzo and Mattia went then to the marquis of Laconi, Gabriele Aymerich, so that he might intercede in favour of the boy. It was thanks to his good offices that Laconi would have one less citizen and Sardinia one more saint. On 10 November Vincenzo received the Capuchin habit and the name Ignazio. He began and completed the novitiate – though not without difficulties. He passed the last scrutiny by just one vote (six in favour, four against). Nevertheless this was enough to admit him to profession and he took vows on 10 November the following year, 1722.

The next twenty years are wrapped in almost complete silence. Witnesses over that long period are few and contradictory. He was probably in Iglesias and then Domusnuova (or perhaps vice-versa). He had different tasks, but did not keep any of them for long. He came to Cagliari around 1742. From that time until his death with his sack on his back he travelled the streets of the city,. He got to know all the stones in Cagliari, and all the people. He entered all the houses – of the poor and the rich. He asked for bread and offered another bread in return: the Gospel, which he announced in a simple and effective way, especially to children and to the poor. The poor felt welcomed, loved, understood and defended by him.



There is the famous lesson that Br. Ignazio gave to Gioacchino Franchino, a merchant who became rich by bleeding the poor. He wanted to the airs of greatness and even desired to be seen as a benefactor. The friar, however, was careful not to knock at the door of his house! The speculator complained to the guardian who asked Br. Ignazio to visit the Franchino’s house too when he went out to quest. Probably with reluctance, the friar obeyed. However as soon as the left the house of the rich profiteer, his full sack began to drip blood. It left a continuous trail from the city to the friary. When he put the sack at the feet of the guardian, horrified he

¹ The author does not identify the work he cites here.

immediately asked an explanation. "Father," said Bro. Ignazio, "it is the blood of the poor." He said nothing more and the superior asked him nothing more because Ignazio had said everything that was to be said.

A friend of children and close to the suffering our good friar could scrutinize hearts and inflicted his body with hard penance. He received from God the gift of miracles and prescience. Legend sprang up around him. He became an important part of Cagliari and important persons came to ask seek his counsel and intercession. The miraculous element so predominates the testimonies given in the processes, it could appear to us somewhat sickly sweet, if we did not have a testimony above all suspicion. This was given by a Protestant pastor who did not have the intention of promoting the canonization of the friar. Giuseppe Fuos had come to Cagliari in 1773 as a chaplain to the German regiment. He remained there for some years. In 1780, in Leipzig, he collated in one volume the letters he wrote in Sardinia between 1773 and 1776. In one of the letters he wrote, "Everyday we see a living saint begging around the city ... He can have entire cheeses hurry to him, when he is refused just one piece. If a wheat hoarder has him accept his bread as an alms, it bleeds. If a joker offers to fill his cloth sack with oil, he takes it home without losing a drop. Even the young ladies on the eve of giving birth ask him for a happy result. Their trust in him is very deep and above suspicion because he is already grey with one foot in the grave."



The author and Nobel Prize winner, Grazia Deledda, taking up statements by one of the biographers of the saintly friar, highlighted how he "never wrote a single line, because he was uneducated; he left no teaching, because he was not a philosopher; he didn't found an Order, not because he was not a genial man of courageous initiative. He was a poor questing friar, everyone's servant, the least of all men. And yet he is the most remembered man of the Eighteenth century Sardinia." And Deledda again remembered a characteristic portrait "that presents him already old, perhaps blind too. With the rosary, the staff, his shaggy beard; with his flattish, dusky face. There is nothing seraphic about him. Nevertheless he is an old Sardinian shepherd, whose sack contains a treasure of wisdom and virtue." That wisdom and virtue which are still alluring to this day.



Translation based on the article by FELICE ACCROCCA in *Sulle orme dei santi*, Rome, 2000, p.61-68