

Saint Giuseppe da Leonessa (1556-1612)



Like all the saints Giuseppe da Leonessa was quite reserved about himself. On special occasions, however, especially at the beginning and conclusion of his priestly life, he revealed some deeper motives along which lines his whole existence and activity developed. In fact a little before being ordained priest in 1580 he wrote to Perugia a kind of personal mission statement in his own hand in Latin. The entire future of the saint is in it: the love of God and neighbour which made him long for martyrdom; humble submission to the Holy Mother Church; filial trust in the Virgin Mary; special devotion to his guardian angel, the holy angels and to the Seraphic Father Saint Francis. Thirty two years later, just before his death, he wrote three long letters to reaffirm his faithfulness to the teaching of the Church because "this teaching alone guaranteed him the certainty of being saved in the true faith." In this faith of the Church he resolutely practised and lived the fundamental option of the Gospel of Jesus: "To evangelise the poor." This is the real and ideal background in which to position his biography.

Eufranio, as he was called, was born in Leonessa in the Alta Sabina (Rieti) on 8 January 1556 to Giovanni Desideri and Serafina Paolini. He was orphaned at the age of twelve. An uncle saw to his classical studies in Viterbo and then Spoleto where his religious vocation matured. To avoid an arranged noble marriage, he slipped away to the little friary of the 'Carcarelle' in Assisi. There among the Capuchins, on the conclusion of his novitiate year, he made religious profession on 8 January 1573. Attempts by his relatives to take him home again came to nothing. Sent for studies he displayed a keen interest in learning at the service of a serious and intelligent apostolate. He loved the teaching of Saint Bonaventure, in line with the prevailing Capuchin trend at the time which saw in that teaching a harmonious synthesis between contemplative spirituality and apostolic zeal. Among other things he outlined a work called the "Monarchia." The influence of the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and the *De reductione atrium ad theologiam* of the Seraphic Doctor were evident in it. He prepared for the apostolate with the serious study of theology, Sacred Scripture and moral theology, attentive to requirements of the post-Tridentine religious restoration. After his ordination to the priesthood in Amelia on 24 September 1580 he continued his preparation in the friary of Lugnano in Teverina.

Although he felt a strong attraction to contemplative solitude, he overcame the action-contemplation dilemma like Saint Francis. In one of his notes he wrote: "The one who loves contemplative life has a grave duty to come out into the world to preach, especially when the ideas of the world are very confused and iniquity abounds in the land. It would be wrong and against charity to hold on to that which has been founded on and given for the sake of charity." After receiving preaching patents from the Capuchin Vicar General on 21 May 1581, he dedicated himself immediately to the evangelisation of the poor in the country villages and little mountain towns of Umbria, Lazio and Abruzzo. Because of his gifts of mind and heart, he could have become a famous preacher, climbing into the pulpits of the cities. However he preferred to preach in the little towns only. He always considered himself a preacher for farmers, shepherds, mountain folk and children.

The ardour and tone of his preaching were clear from the beginning and have been broadly documented. The investigation processes into his holiness report an episode that displays Giuseppe's character. Banditry was raging in the Apennines of central Italy. A group of about fifty of these bandits desolated the township of Arquata del Tronto. No one succeeded in bringing them to heel, not even the secular arm. When he arrived there requesting alms, the people pressed him to intervene. He went to look for the bandits in their mountain hideouts and managed to get them together in a little church. Taking hold of his Cross he convinced them to change their lives. They became docile and remorseful and were among the most attentive listeners to his sermons when the saint came to preach the Lent. The secret of this success, even if connected to his indomitable character, should be attributed to his intimate union with God, a union cultivated in his spirit through unceasing prayer. This was very evident in the processes where we read, "With great ease he focused the powers of his soul within himself in order to enjoy his God with greater relish, not only at the times for prayer but all the time. While he was travelling he embraced his crucifix and considered those five wounds in such a way that his face used to change colour according to the mysteries he was contemplating. One minute it was pale and ashen, and the next it was so blushing and red, as if it were on fire. His head would appear to steam as if he had a great fiery furnace inside it. This also happened to him during the various talks that he gave."

In 1587 he was sent as a missionary to Constantinople and assisted the Christian slaves and plague victims. His zeal even succeeded in converting a Greek bishop and urged him to meet with the sultan himself, Murad III, in to intercede for those he was helping. However in Constantinople, out of hatred for the faith, he was captured and condemned to torture by the hook. He was suspended from a beam by means of a hook through the tendons of his right hand and foot. Like this he waited for a slow, agonising death in atrocious pain. After three days he was miraculously saved (by an angel or by human intervention) and he quickly recovered.



He returned at thirty three years of age in 1589 to Italy. There he took up again his beloved itinerant preaching throughout Abruzzo and Umbria, in the mountains and valleys, in those harsh and lowly places "where the others did not want to go." His companions who followed him were severely put to the test. With difficulty they endured the forced marches, sometimes in the most trying weather and without food. He used to preach many times a day and in different villages and taught catechism to the poor peasants and to the children.

His preaching was truly evangelical with powerful implications for social justice. He saw Jesus in the poor, just as he contemplated him in the Crucifix and the Tabernacle. For their sake he knew how to adapt himself to do everything, even the impossible, such as found grain cooperatives with a handful of grain scraped together in homes. He organised Monti di

Pietà¹ and modest hospices for travellers and pilgrims, as well as small hospitals for the sick. His maternal love for these ragged and wretched poor folk comes out so many times in the depositions given during his processes. He made them 'good as new' with clothing picked up here and there, and with basic shoes his imagination invented to defend them against the cold. He would give the persons a good wash, cut their hair, delouse them, clean their wounds and share among them the food received in alms. His concern to educate the children in piety also emerges. He had them learn their prayers and catechism by heart, in the spirit of the Council of Trent.

His charity also extended into the jails where he assisted those condemned to death. Even risking his life at times, he sought to reconcile feuding rival families and eradicate injustice, oppression and discord. With the Crucifix in his hand, grasped like a sword, he did not hesitate to enter the fray to bring peace and forgiveness. One witness said, "Whenever he heard of brawls or hatred he would hurry there straightaway in the hope of restoring the adversaries to eternal life. He did not worry about the weather, or snow, and places hard to reach. Consequently he often lost his toenails, as in Leonessa, Montereale and Amatrice." He drew his ardour from the Tabernacle where he used to spend many hours in prayer even at night – or from the Crucifix which he continuously carried on his chest. He love to install huge, heavy crosses on mountain tops, carrying them to top in procession.

After a very brief stay in Leonessa, exhausted from his efforts, worn down by penance and tormented by an incurable malady, he spent his last days in the friary at Amatrice where, at fifty six years of age, he met death on Saturday, 4 February 1612. The information process begun in Spoleto and interrupted in 1615 began again in 1628. Similar processes were initiated in Ascoli and Rieti. The apostolic process took place in Leonessa in 1629 - 1633 and 1639-1641. The recognition of all the apostolic processes was in 1669-1670. Numerous manuscripts and small codices with the finest handwriting – nearly all pertaining to preaching – were examined. Clement XII beatified him on 22 June 1737 and Benedict XIV canonised him on 26 June 1746.



His feast day is celebrated on 4 February. Named as their patron, he is a very popular saint around Amatrice and Leonessa. On 18 October 1639 the people of Leonessa took advantage of an earthquake to carry out a "sacred theft" in a covert, lightning fast incursion. They stole his body that is now venerated in the sanctuary dedicated to him in his city. Confraternities also were formed under his patronage in Otricoli, Amatrice and Leonessa. Some of these still exist today. Pius XII proclaimed him patron of the Missions in Turkey. He is minor principal patron of the Capuchin province of Abruzzo, along with Saint Bernardino da Siena. Paul VI proclaimed him principal patron of Leonessa. His iconography includes such characteristic emblems as the instruments of penance or the martyrdom of the hook and the crucifix in his hand. A bright magazine "*Leonessa and il suo Santo*" keeps his spirituality and memory alive among the people.

Translation based on COSTANZO CARGNONI, *Sulle orme dei santi*, Rome, 2000, p. 21-28

¹ The Monti di Pietà were co-operative financial institutions established as alternatives to crippling and exorbitant usury common at the time.