

Saint Lorenzo da Brindisi (1559-1619)



He was born in Brindisi on 22 July 1559 to Guglielmo Russo and Elisabetta Masella. Little is known of his childhood in his home town where he received his first formation. When his father died he was welcomed by the Conventual Friars in Brindisi where he went to school and did well. His mother died later and the adolescent moved to Venice to stay with an uncle who was a priest. With him Lorenzo advanced in his cultural and spiritual formation. In Venice could get to know and visit the Capuchins who lived in a simple friary next to the little church of Our Lady of the Angels on the island of Giudecca. Immediately their austere life of poverty attracted him and he soon asked and received admission to the Order. He received the Capuchin habit at Verona on 19 February 1575 and Br. Lorenzo enthusiastically completed his novitiate year, a real school of asceticism and holiness. He made religious profession on 24 March 1576. Then he studied philosophy in Padua, followed by theology in Venice. Straightaway he showed himself to have considerable intellectual ability and an insatiable thirst for knowledge. He gave particular attention to the Sacred Scriptures, all of which, it is said, he committed to memory and he perfected his skill with the biblical languages. More than anything else, however, he applied himself to progress in religious perfection following the Bonaventurian school which emphasised fervour of the will and the ascent of the spirit.

After ordination to the priesthood at the hands of the Patriarch of Venice, Giovanni Trevisan, on 18 December 1582, Lorenzo's main activity was the ministry of preaching. Already as a deacon he had preached the entire Lent in the Venetian church of San Giovanni Nuovo. Now he travelled throughout Italy, committed to the announcement of the Word of God. He was most suited for this task by a range of physical, intellectual and spiritual qualities that made him a true and fruitful speaker. Following the Franciscan School, his preaching was solidly based on the Scriptures which he proclaimed with clear thought and rich expression. There are countless stories of conversions which multiplied around him, and often even among non-Christians, as happened in Rome in 1592 and 1594 when he preached to the Jews at the request of the papal authorities.

Lorenzo was soon called upon to accept responsible tasks in the government of the Order. From 1583 to 1586 he carried out the office of professor. In the next three years, from 1586 to 1589, he was guardian and novice master. In 1590 he was elected provincial minister of Tuscany and was called to the same position for the Swiss province in 1598. Two years earlier, in 1596, he had also been elected Definitor General.

Lorenzo's activity was fundamental to the spread of the Order in central Europe. After the foundation of the friary in Innsbruck in 1593, it was up to him to choose the site for the new friary in Salzburg, founded three years later. In imperial territory he also founded a friary in the city of Trent I 1597. Due to pressing requests from Prague's archbishop, Zbynek Berka von Duba, the General Chapter decided in 1599 to send to the capital of Bohemia a group of brothers led by Lorenzo. They arrived in November 1599 and were immediately confronted with endless problems. These were, above all, brought on by the population and mostly by anti-Catholic sentiments. Intense apostolic activity focused on the ministry of preaching.

Open and friendly dialogue finally resulted in the opening of a friary and the return to the Catholic faith by many people won over by the convincing arguments of the Capuchin and especially by his holy reputation. In the course of 1600 he established two new friaries in Vienna and in Graz. An important fact was his participation in the campaign against the 'Turks'. Despite the ineptitude of its military leaders, it was possible for the Christian army, spiritually sustained and encouraged by the Capuchin, to win the key victory of Albareale (or Székesfehérvár) in 1601.

In the General Chapter on 24 May 1602 Lorenzo was elected Capuchin General Minister. This new task involved, in the first place, a visitation of all the friars. The Order then was subdivided into thirty provinces throughout Europe with about nine thousand friars. It was the responsibility of the General Minister to visit every Province and meet the friars and to exhort and encourage them. He visited Italy, then Switzerland and passed through the Franche Comté (the Free County of Burgundy in eastern France) and Lorraine. In mid-September he was in the Low Countries and spent the winter visiting the provinces of Paris, Lyon, Marseilles and Toulouse. In the first half of 1603 he was in Spain. From there he returned to Italy to visit Genoa before making for Sicily and southern Italy. Despite the exhausting distances he always continued to rigorously observe the strict customs of the Order, the long fasts and times of demanding abstinence.

After his three years in the Generalate he was sent by Paul V to Bavaria and to Bohemia. Apart from his apostolic activity he carried out a diplomatic negotiation between Maximilian von Wittelsbach and the imperial authorities that resulted in a Catholic alliance against the Evangelical Union formed between the Lutherans and Calvinists to divide the Catholic states for territorial gain. For this undertaking Lorenzo made many trips between Munich and Prague and also had to go to Spain where he managed to convince Philip III to support the alliance and help it financially. Then for about three years between 1610 and 1613, he resided in Munich as representative of the Holy See. In the General Chapter of 1613 he was elected Definitor General a third time and was sent as visitator to the province of Genoa where, however, he was acclaimed as provincial minister. It was not before 1616 that he could return to his province of Venice and devote himself to a more intense period of recollection and prayer. Particular characteristics of his typically Franciscan and Christocentric spirituality were his focus on the Eucharist and on Our Lady. The Holy Mass, which he celebrated with irrepressible fervour and heart-felt invocations, usually lasted one, two or three hours. After having received an indult from Paul V the Mass often lasted up to eight, ten or twelve hours. He attributed every gift and grace to the Virgin Mary and spared nothing to spread devotion to her,

Under orders of the pope, and despite his desire for a withdrawn life, he often had to interrupt it to take up diplomatic missions for the sake of peace and harmony. He was doing this in 1614 when he negotiated the surrender of the Piedmont forces besieged in Oneglia; or again in 1616 when he intervened to attempt a compromise between the Spanish and Piedmont representatives at Candia Lomellina. In 1618 he succeeded in making peace between the Governor of Milan, don Pedro di Toledo, and the Grand Duke of Savoia, Carlo Emanuele I. In the autumn of 1618 he was involved in the attempt to restore peace and calm to the Kingdom of Naples when the reckless and domineering viceroy, don Pedro Téllez Giron, Duke

of Osuna, was abusing his power and perpetrating outrage. Representatives of the nobility and the people turned to the holy Capuchin who again had to submit to the difficulties of a long journey to the court of Madrid. When the negotiations were just about to reach a successful outcome Lorenzo fell gravely ill. Exhausted by fatigue and suffering, despite the help from the king's doctors, Lorenzo died on 22 July 1619 at the age of sixty. His body was transferred to Villafranca del Bierzo (Galicia) where it was buried in the church of the monastery of the disalced Franciscan sisters.



Despite the weighty responsibilities of government within the Capuchin Order and hectic diplomatic activity outside the fraternity, Lorenzo da Brindisi found a way to compose a good number of works, collected and published as his *Opera Omnia* between 1928 and 1956. These works can be subdivided into four categories: 1) Works dedicated to preaching. These constitute the majority and include separate volumes of his Lent, Advent, Sunday and Saint-Day sermons as well as his *Mariale*. This is a true Mariological treatise with its presentation of all the prerogatives of the Virgin Mary and her role in the history of salvation. The volume also includes commentaries on the Salve Regina, the Magnificat and the Hail Mary. 2) Exegetical works. Among these are his *Explanatio in Genesim*, a commentary on the first eleven chapters of Genesis; and the *De numeris amorosis*, a small work on the mystical and cabalistic meaning of the Hebrew name of God. 3) Works concerning religious controversy, the most important of which is the *Lutheranismi hypotyposis* composed between 1607 and 1609. At first addressed against the reformation preacher Polycarp Laisero, it represents a complete and organic refutation of Lutheran teaching. 4) Personal and auto-biographical writings. This includes a small work *De rebus Austriae et Bohemiae*, written by order of the superiors. It contains an account of the events that took place in Germany between 1599 and 1612,

Just four years after his death, the General of the Order, Clement da Noto introduced Lorenzo's process of canonisation. The process went through long periods of inactivity, both because of the decree of Urban VIII, but also as a consequence of critical, political-religious events. His beatification took place thanks to Pius VI on 23 May 1783. About one hundred years later he was canonised by Leo XIII on 8 December 1881. After the examination of his works, defined as "true treasures of wisdom", John XXIII proclaimed Lorenzo da Brindisi "Doctor of the Church."

The most repeated themes in his iconography are those which take their inspiration from Lorenzo's celebration of the Mass and his knowledge in which he is represented as writing his works. A third theme is that of the battle of Albareale (Székesfehérvár) against the Turks.

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