

## Blessed Nicola da Gèsturi (1882 – 1958)



Giovanni Angelo Salvatore was the fourth of five children to Giovanni Medda Serra and Piràma Cogoni Zedda in the small Sardinian town of Gèsturi. His father died when Giovanni was only five, and he was thirteen years old at the death of his mother. He was taken on as an unpaid servant by the brother-in-law of his sister Rita. Recovered from a serious illness, Giovanni went to the friary of the Saint Anthony, Buoncammino, in Cagliari. there he was accepted as a non-cleric friar. He was recommended by his parish priest who expressed the loss to his parish of the young man known for his piety, chaste life and austere life style. At first he was received as a tertiary. He was then clothed in the Capuchin habit in Cagliari on 30 October 1913 and took the name Nicola da Gèsturi. After 13 June 1914 he continued his novitiate at Sanluri. He took simple vows on 1 November 1914, he made perpetual profession 16 February 1919 and was appointed to the kitchen in the friary of Sassari. Despite his efforts, Nicola was replaced and he was transferred in turn to Oristano, Sanluri and Cagliari. There he received the task of questor. Another Capuchin questor lived in the same friary during the 18th century: Saint Ignazio da Làconi (1701-1781) whose example Fra Nicola followed with extraordinary success. For thirty four years he would now go about, a silent witness, wending the winding country lanes of Castello and Villanova. He would press on to the areas near Campidano and travel far and wide along the streets and roads of Cagliari. His labours never ceased until he met "our sister bodily death" at quarter past midnight on 8 June 1958.

So revered was this simple Capuchin that more than sixty thousand people attended his funeral. The procession to the cemetery at Bonaria was under a rain of flowers and blocked Cagliari's traffic for hours. More than a funeral cortège it was a triumphal procession. Afterwards this veneration continued every day with pilgrimages to his grave there until 2 June 1980 when Bro Nicola's remains were transferred back to the Church of Saint Anthony.

He was popularly known as "Fra Silenzio - Brother Silence." He kept his silence so as to be heard and to listen - to sense the presence of the Eternal Silence that is God, and to derive from Him hidden promptings of love to express to his brothers and sisters whom he met each day on the streets of Cagliari. His questing companion noted, "To me his silence was never something negative. He was listening to the word of God and treasured it. If he said a word, it was never fruitless."

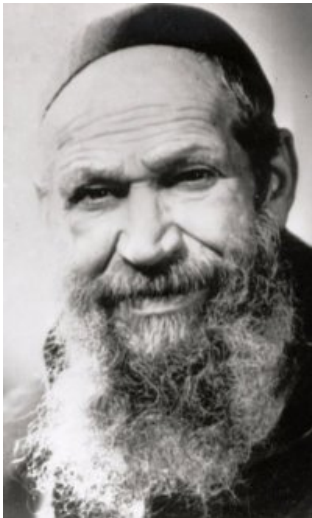
Usually thoughts and feelings find expression in language, though not necessarily. We can imagine his gestures, his gaze - especially his blue eyes, almost hidden beneath his eyebrows. Generally he kept his gaze downward. Occasionally though he would raise his eyes to heaven while wearing a truly radiant smile, and then rest his loving eyes on the persons and things of his land.

His contemplation of God was essentially a silent gaze - in gratitude for all he had received or of self-reproach for his not having done enough for someone, or for forgiveness for the frequent offence he received from those who regarded him as good for nothing, and for the communists who, in the

politically heated April of 1948, mistook him for a pro-Church "*agit-prop*"<sup>1</sup> and beat him up. Even in this deplorable situation Nicola replied with his customary silence. In the police station he categorically refused to accuse those responsible because, according to him, nothing had happened.

This kind of silence is typical of Franciscan spirituality. Fra Nicola had read and meditated on how Saint Francis invited his companion to preach in silence along the streets of Assisi. The refrain of Br. Giles of Assisi' echoed in Nicola's ears: "Bo! Bo! Bo! Molto dico e poco fo."<sup>2</sup>

Nothing better than popular estimation to appreciate the 'eloquent language' of Fra Nicola's 'transfigured existence.' Whenever he travelled by public transport the other passengers used to vie to pay his ticket and give him a seat. Smiling, he would thank them, put on his glasses and read some spiritual thought from his little note book. Those around him would say, "Shhh! Fra Nicola is praying." In a world dazzled by din, the silent Capuchin created a silent oasis of divine intimacy.



Always reserved, he was of short stature and kept his eyes downcast. With the traditional sack over his shoulder, the rosary in his fingers and shabbily dressed, Fra Nicola had all it would take to make himself unpopular, especially in some quarters and in the doorways of some well-to-do apartments. As a rule, this Capuchin questor never entered a house. He would stop at the entrance without seeking entry. Sometimes when the owner was not at home, Br. Nicola would sit on the top step and wait for the owner's return, or would wait at the door. And in his later years he also used to rest his poor, bare feet in the same way.

Four anomalies appear in the questor of Cagliari. The *frate cercatore* became the *frate cercato*. He was very uncomfortable in crowds but was always surrounded by them. For the sake of modesty he generally never looked people directly in the face but could see everything even within the inmost recesses of the human heart. Despite all this, Fra Nicola unwittingly generated around himself an extraordinary aura of veneration. He is an authentic Capuchin Friar. Fra Nicola does not observe the Rule, he is the Rule. In regard to contacts with the outside world especially, chapter three of the Rule was his model: "When the friars go about in the world, let them be meek, peaceful, docile and humble; speaking honestly with everyone, as is fitting." When he spoke he was always brief and focussed on the prayer in which he was involved, because he always had to answer the continuous, almost the sole request of the people; "Fra Nicola, pray for us!" He never tired of answering, "Let us both pray. You pray too. Pray." "Pray now! Go! The Lord has heard you." "Pray for me too."

His written things that we have - since requests came from far and wide from those who could not come to him - are also brief. His style was not the most elegant and he always used off-cuts of paper, out of respect for the vow of poverty. Sometimes he even used the blank space left on the page of the person who wrote to him. While his education did not go past

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<sup>1</sup> "Agitatore propogandista" a propaganda activist.

<sup>2</sup> Difficult to translate: "There you go! I talk a lot, but do little."

primary school, he was drawn to the writings of Angela of Foligno (1349-1309) which resonated with his own spiritual experience. The friar who lent him the book of her writings never quite managed to get it back. "I have read them many times. But when I reach the end I like to start again from the beginning. They are so beautiful." Apart from the Gospels, and the book by Fr. Gaetano Maria da Bergamo: *I cappuccino ritirato in se stesso per dieci giorni*,<sup>3</sup> which all the friars knew, fra Nicola also meditated on the *Trattato del Purgatorio* by Saint Catherine Fieschi of Genoa (1447-1510) and the *Esecizi di Pietà per tutti i giorni dell'anno* by Fr. Jean Croiset and printed in 1734. These were not a lot but sufficient for him to jot down notes and reflections for himself and others. Apart from these books, he also implored the Spirit of God who acted in him.

Very frequently he meditated on Jesus' saying found in the Acts of the Apostles: "There is more joy in giving than in receiving" (Acts 20:35). Assimilating these words, they were fundamental to him. Over the years he became a "gift of self gift", the essence of Christian love. This love shone out in him heroically each day, particularly during the conflict of the Second World War and the damage wrought upon the Italian city that the war ravaged the most. While many citizens sought refuge within the interior of Sardinia, four Capuchins remained, including Fra Nicola. He did not want to leave the city for any reason whatsoever. With the friary dispensed of the enclosure, the dispossessed, the homeless and the hungry turned to the friary where he continued his mission, and the beggar friar became the donor friar. With his patched up habit and re-soled sandals, used to little sleep on two loose boards with a rickety chair for a pillow, this little poor man of God became the supervisor of an open-house, though without the airs of a boss, but with the loving consideration of a brother. When the sirens would sound the "all-clear" over Cagliari, Fra Nicola was always the first from the friary to reach the places hit by the bombardment, to offer first aid. And he also sought out those who sought refuge in caves and were battling with hunger and cold. It was a miracle that he did not end up a victim himself either from the ravages of war, or from the frailty of his own poor health...

The canonisation of Saint Ignazio da Làconi, the Capuchin questor who inspired Fra Nicola da Gèsturi, was celebrated in Cagliari in 1951. Cardinal Eugenio Tisserant presided. Mons. Licinio Refice, the Chapel Master of Saint Mary Major in Rome, conducted the Mass he composed in honour of the new saint. When the function was over, the musician turned immediately to Fra Nicola and asked his opinion on the performance. Always reluctant to express himself, the Capuchin said, "Try to sing that *Sanctus* forever: it is music worthy of heaven." Later Mons. Refice commented, "This was the greatest judgement that I could have wished for." True. The silent Capuchin, always immersed in higher realities, was listening from Heaven.

Translation based on the original article by ANTONIO ROSSI in *Sulle orme dei santi*, 2000, p.103-112.

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<sup>3</sup> A ten day retreat for Capuchins.