

Blessed Felice da Nicosia (1715-1787)



It is well known that the first Capuchin saint, Felice da Cantalice, contributed in giving a particular tone of humility, poverty and joy to Capuchin holiness. For many lay friars he was almost an irreplaceable model. So it was for Giacomo Amoroso from Nicosia, in the fertile land of Sicily. At twenty eight he began his novitiate in the friary in Mistretta in 1743 and, as well as the name, took on the character and example of the holy brother who had been canonised about thirty years earlier. His vocational path, however, had not been easy, despite having spent his youth in a life of extraordinary virtue. His parents, Filippo Amoroso and Carmela Pirro, who welcomed him into the world on 5 November 1715, raised a large family in poor circumstances, but they were rich in the fear of God and solid Christian witness.

His father Filippo worked as a cobbler in a poorly lit cubby-hole and barely managed to get by. He wanted his son to become expert in this work. Consequently when as Giacomo came of age Filippo entrusted him to the most famous shoe-shop in the city. It had many workers and was managed by Giovanni Ciavarelli. Here Giacomo learned the trade well. As he sat in silence at his work table he managed to instil seriousness, respect and devotion among his other work colleagues. Although he was very young, with his keen faith he not only managed to be part not only of the pious society of *Cappuccinelli* connected to the friary of Nicosia, but was enrolled and therefore wore the cape of its members with a small Franciscan cowl. With relish he drank in Capuchin spirituality which he lived out in all his actions and during his work.

A witness, who had been his colleague in the shoe-shop, told how when Giacomo entered the work-shop "he used to take off his hat and then greet everyone, saying: 'In every hour and every moment, may the Most Blessed Sacrament always be praised.' He always had his head covered because he said that God is everywhere and it is necessary to stay in his presence with reverence, respect and veneration." If someone teased him he usually replied, "Let it be for the love of God" – a refrain that would become the programme of his entire life. As a "*cappuccinello*", when he heard the bell ring in the nearby Capuchin friary, he used to kneel down and pray and invite the others, "Compline is ringing. Servants of God, let us pray the holy rosary to the Blessed Virgin."

He seemed born to become a Capuchin. But he had to wait many years yet. At eighteen years of age he knocked at the door of the friary, asking to be accepted as a lay friar since he was not educated. He always received a resounding refusal because the poverty of his family required the contribution of his work. However after his parents had died Giacomo asked again. This time he asked the new Capuchin provincial, Br. Bonaventure da Alcara, who was in Nicosia on visitation. (Br. Bonaventura first became Provincial minister in 1741.) Finally, after ten



years of waiting, the “*cappuccinello*” could become a real Capuchin friar, with the name of Felice da Nicosia, determined to follow the same path of Felice da Cantalice, so much so that a number of coincidences occurred: novitiate at twenty eight years of age; professed at twenty nine years; questor for forty three years in place of his birth, Nicosia – like Saint Felice in Rome – and he died at seventy two years of age. A popular biography by Icilio Felici defined him as the “*Bisaccia eroica*.”

To follow the events of his life is a very easy task. After the novitiate year in Mistretta Brother Felice was sent to his Nicosia where he remained as questor for the rest of his life. In the city he became a well established presence of spirituality in the population, and was therefore untouchable. This explains his unusually long tenure in the friary of Colle in Nicosia, in contrast to the usual practice in the Order. He accepted every kind of work: questor, doorman, gardener, shoe-maker, nurse. He extended the range of his questing beyond the city of his birth to take in neighbouring such regions as Capizzi, Cerami, Gagliano, Mistretta and others. He walked from house to house, recollected and mortified – as one witness states – with the rosary in his hand and “his eyes shut tight as if he were within a cave, always in silence. When I looked at him he always seemed to be recollected in God.” The one expression that everyone had already learned was that of his joyful gratitude, “Let it be for the love of God.” In endearing terms he described himself as ‘the friary’s little donkey’ who after the questing came home with his load like the Sicilian carters.



Along the road he used to instruct the children in the catechism basics. To win their attention gave them bread and beans. In fact he had his own practical method. He took from his pockets little gifts for the hungry, bedraggled children: one nut, three nuts, five beans, ten chick peas – to remind the children about the one God in three persons, the five wounds of the crucified Jesus and God’s ten commandments. Little gifts and kindness made these little lessons in faith concrete. Like Felice da Cantalice on the streets of Rome, he also taught little songs composed on prayers, or the practice of the theological virtues.

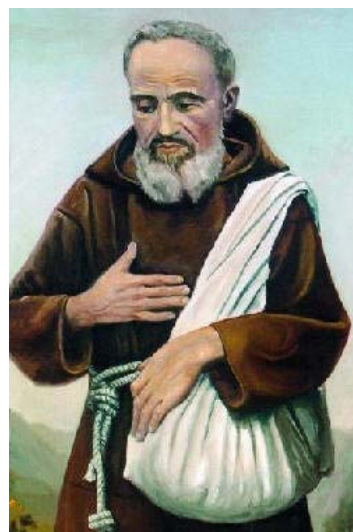
When he met poor persons carrying wood or other heavy loads he used to offer his help. However, each suffering found a profound echo in his heart. He allowed himself no peace until he could do something for the needy. He was always ready to serve the sick, day and night. Every Sunday he used to go to visit prisoners in jail and took them bread. His superior and confessor Br. Macario da Nicosia attested that Br. Felice “helped everyone, and as much as he could tried to put everything in order in things both spiritual and temporal. He kept bread and meat and other things to give to the needy. If obedience permitted, he would have taken it from his own mouth. He went here and there asking clothes and help from the well-off in order to clothe and help everyone. When he could not help he became quite anguished.”

His superior treated him harshly in the twenty three years that he was his spiritual director. Everyone knew about the reproaches and nicknames he used to humiliate Br. Felice: lazybones, hypocrite, people-cheater, *fra Scuntentu*. In reply to these harsh and crude terms came the well known

refrain, "Let it be for the love of God." Many times Brother Felice had to play the jester in the middle of the refectory with improvised carnival clothing. Once he had to pretend to distribute out very costly ricotta from a paste of ashes in a wicker basket on his head. Miraculously though it had become real, fresh ricotta, much to the amazement of the friars and the chagrin of the superior.

He was illiterate. His devotion was simple, his words were concrete rather than an intellectual. He was very devoted to the Eucharist, to Our Lady of Sorrows and to Jesus crucified. The sacristan of the Nicosia friary, Brother Francesco Gangi, remembered him this way, "He always told me and encouraged me to learn to do mental prayer, specially that based on passion of Jesus Christ. He told me that the one who meditates on and thinks about the passion of Jesus Christ will not suffer the pains of hell. And he told me this with such heartfelt fervour that he was weeping. Because of my task as sacristan I often had occasion to meet him. Weeping, he would embrace me and told me to pray over the passion of Jesus Christ."

An account of the numerous facts and anecdotes that flourished like a legend during his life would be endless. However there is one aspect not to be overlooked: his popular, candid faith. As an infallible remedy for every evil he used his "*polize*" of Our Lady, cut strips of paper printed with devout invocations to the Blessed Virgin written in both Sicilian and Latin. He always had some with him and often distributed them. He hung them on the doors of houses where there were sick or poor people or on the barrels from which he received an alms of wine. He threw them into a fire that had attacked sheaths waiting for threshing, or into some grain blackened by natural disaster, or in to a dry, cracked cistern. Many graces and miracles flourished, often real pranks of Providence.



Finally relieved of every responsibility, with is his physical state already reduced by extreme penance and mortification, he was always available for any kind of service, especially towards the sick in the friary infirmary. While his strength declined in the languor of his seventy two years, his focus on God increased along with his happy and simple obedience. If it can be said that Saint Francis had become the personification of prayer, it may be said that Brother Felice embodied obedience as an act of pure love. This was his ultimate and unique message. At the end of May 1787, '*u sciccareddu* – the little donkey of the friary, having gone down to the cloister to tend to the medicinal herbs that he cultivated for the sick, he collapsed weak onto the flowerbed. In his little bed, having received the sacraments and commending himself to the "*mani 'nchiuvat*" (nailed hands), that is, Father Saint Francis, he often invoked Our Lady. On Friday 31 May he asked his superior obedience to die. He received permission after his third request. Radiant in his happy smile, with his last breath he said, "Let it be for the love of God." Then bowing his head, Brother Felice died.

Leo XIII proclaimed him blessed on 12 February 1888.

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