

Blessed Bernardo da Offida (1604-1694)



f all the Capuchin Saints and Blesseds Bernardo Peroni lived the longest. He died at ninety years of age in the friary near his home town, at dawn on 22 August 1694. He was born in Villa d'Appignano outside Offida, the third of seven children, on 7 November 1604, the same year that Serafino da Montegranaro died. His father Giuseppe had him baptised the same day in the church of Santa Maria della Rocca, outside the town walls.

Life in the fresh air of the countryside was the scenario of his infancy and childhood. Domenico, as he was called, grew to be strong and robust. The recollections of his childhood in the affidavits of his process almost seem like a fairy-tale. He was already a precocious shepherd boy, gentle and calm. While the sheep nibbled at the grass he nurtured his devotion. Kneeling down a little distance away, he recited his book of the Cross or prayed in front of an image of Mary that he carried with him or before one of the painted images found in little niches along the roads. Sometimes he was a little apostle to his peers, the other shepherd boys. A saint in the making? A pious cliché? No. It is enough to refer back to his family and rural environment as it was in the past – sound and full of Christian wisdom and charming candour, along with religious instruction received in the rural church of San Lazzaro.

After he had grown somewhat, by the age of fifteen in 1619, Domenico was put in charge of cattle and began to put his hand to the plough to till rough ground that was quite often knotted with brushwood. Here too he found quiet in prayer next to the cattle stall on returning from the fields. He also knew to share his bread with beggars.

The austere life of the Capuchins established in the countryside of Offida in 1614 had a strong attraction on him. He found among them a kindred spirit. He visited their plain and devout church. However he waited a number of years until he spoke about it with his parents and then with the friars and he met with no opposition. On 15 February 1626 he received the novice habit in Corinaldo. His novice master was Br. Michelangelo da Ripa. One year later in Camerino, where he completed his novitiate, he made first profession and took the name Bernardo dalla Lama, a more precise name for his place of origin than the better known Offida. Already seasoned in work in the fields, he brought to the friars the his industriousness, frugality, modesty and wisdom, as well as the healthy realism and strong will of a farmer from the Marches.

Straight away he was sent to the friary in Fermo and assigned to Br. Massimo da Moresco, director of the young lay friars. He also worked in the kitchen and assisted the infirm brothers. Perhaps he remained here for about twenty years. There is no documentary witness to break the deep silence surrounding this long period in his first assignment. Then he went to Ascoli, to the friary already imbued with the holiness of Serafino da Montegranaro. He will go to other friaries also, though there is little, very general information. However in 1650 he was definitely in the friary at Offida. Except for a brief hiatus of a few months spent in Ascoli he remained in Offida without interruption for forty four years.

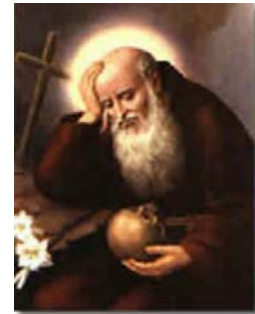
His simple life simplifies the task of the biographer. He lived within a limited geographical area and never made long journeys outside the

Marches. He lived a life hidden in the humble circumstances of the ordinary tasks of a Capuchin lay friar: cook, nurse, questor, gardener, porter – all done with devotion and prayer. He always prayed.

One witness tells how the people used to say, “Bernardo? Who ever sees him! He is always at prayer in the church or in the woods.” Another added, “He spent the best part of the day and night in prayer. He was so fervent that in prayer he even appeared externally to exhale the love of God that burned in his breast, making him move as if under the influence of a fever or burning heat.” His mere presence induced one to pray. He always carried the rosary in his hand.

The lace-makers of Offida used to gather on the road side to work with their lace pillows. When they saw Br. Bernardo come along they would exclaim, “Here is Br. Bernardo. Let’s say the rosary.” In the woods of the friary he built himself a hut from branches and grass. He delighted to go there and would lose all sense of time.

He used to remain absorbed before the tabernacle or some sacred image, with his eyes lifted up to heaven, still as a statue, often with his arms raised. He wouldn’t even be aware of a fly on his face or his bald head, oblivious to any noise too. He recommended to the faithful not to stay at the back of the church, “Because,” he said, “there are too many opportunities for distraction with people coming and going. One needs to go towards the altar and draw nearer to God.” In love with the Eucharist he had a deep respect for priests. He used to say, “My children, when you see priests, respect them, venerate them. You should kiss the ground where their feet have passed.”



One needs to scrutinise the process depositions closely in order to this hidden life some colour and movement. Even when he went out to quest he used to remain focused in his recollection. He could never be surprised in a distracted state. His eyes were always downcast, the rosary in his hand, calm in his gestures, affable in his speech.

His mien and appearance, clearly marked by fatigue, certainly made an impression on the people. Perhaps the touching episode told in the sources and related by his most recent biographer refers to the last period of his begging for alms: “One winter morning, after a fairly heavy snowfall, Br. Bernardo went into town to quest. His feet sank into the blanket of snow. The wife of a certain Pucci was by chance standing by the window when she saw the “old saint” go by. She was moved to tears and cried out, “Poor Br. Bernardo!” With his usual joviality he replied, “My daughter, it’s nothing, it’s nothing. The grace of God does not let me feel the cold.” And as he spoke he took off his sandal. He placed his bare foot onto the snow. The snow instantly disappeared like magic, as if boiling water had been poured onto it.”

The churches he passed along the road were all ‘his.’ In them he distilled his fervent devotion. If he met poor farmers or wayfarers carrying heavy loads, with a gesture of delicate charity he eagerly took their loads himself for that section of the road. He preferred to stay at the door of houses without going in, except to visit someone who was sick. If they offered him a glass of wine to drink, he first gave it to any children present to drink.

"You drink first, innocent mouths." The last sip was his. He was fond of the little ones whom he blessed with devout signs of the cross.

"Hungry for souls" he was a true missionary for the poor rural people. His exhortations echoed still in the memory of the witnesses: "Stay with God! Fear God! Flee from sin! Be good!" He knew how to calm souls with exquisite tact and to reconcile disputing factions. Even after his death, when disputes arose, someone would say, "Oh where is Br. Bernardo who used to come quickly to restore peace? Now no one takes any action."

With his serene face and simple words of advice he could comfort the afflicted: "My child, be patient and be of good cheer. This will be nothing." "Patience, such is this valley of tears." He had favourite sayings to restore trust and confidence in those who were suffering, "Paradise! Paradise! Our homeland is in heaven"; or "I want us all to go to heaven." He was a counsellor who could penetrate the heart. Even nobility and prelates sought his advice. Although he was illiterate he could speak with them at theological depth. It was not uncommon that his simple, direct words were prophetic.

In the purest tradition of the Capuchin brothers, after a day a heavy and tiring work, his rest was to spend hours in the church before the tabernacle or at the altar of Felix of Cantalice. On Sundays and other feast days, which were so common in a society soaked in religiosity such as seventeenth century Italy, he spent serving Masses. His ardour would burn brighter from the moment of consecration until communion. His heart was so used to expressing its affection to God with expressions of love that these often came out, even in front of the people, without his being aware. The faithful remained amazed and taken by this.

His gentle, strong and attractively unshakeable character was joined to an extraordinary candour of spirit. He gave the impression of someone truly at one with creation. No animal could resist his innocence. They would be intrigued, obedient and submissive. They neither resisted nor flee from him. He used to tell owners to care for their animals and be compassionate towards them because the animals are irrational and can neither speak nor express their needs. Accustomed to serving, with Franciscan love and respect he used to give fodder, grass, and hay to the animals that strayed into the friary garden.

Another aspect of his humanity was his mercy towards the sick, the poor and the imprisoned. As porter courteous charity flowed from him. No one went away empty handed. He cultivated a little garden for the poor and from the meagre larder of the friary he got bread, wine and meat to help the sick especially, while often experiencing reproaches and rebukes from his brothers. He also used the oil of the lamp that burned at the altar of Saint Felix of Cantalice to conceal his charism of miraculous healing. The memory has endured, recorded by notaries, of children being resuscitated, as well as many instances of healing.

The sick in the friary almost enjoyed being ill because of the loving attention of Br. Bernardo. He devised a thousand ways to show them charity, even to the point of locking himself in the infirmary day and night, dispensed from all other chores, so as to be always available to serve. He would open a little window that gave onto the church, in order to follow the Masses and adore the Eucharist. His charity was practical. He made

decoctions, balms from flowers, plasters, bandages, napkins of used linen, and attended to all the concrete needs of the sick.

One of his biographers has written, "He was always like that. Even as an old man in his decline when he needed himself to be assisted and served, he found ways to make himself useful in so many ways to an ill brother. He would cook meat and minestrone for him. To encourage him to eat he put flowers in a rough vase which he presented with the meals. If necessary, he would feed his brother and offer him all the lowly assistance needed by someone who is bedridden. In cases of serious illness, he had himself dispensed from his office to be able to assist day and night without interruption. Therefore he took all his sleep seated on a stool, resting his head against the wall. In his final years, unable to do very much for the sick, he kept them company, dedicating himself to prayer. He was like a mother in his attention to the needs of the brothers. He repaired their sandals, sewed their habits and mantles, repaired the garden tools and the poor utensils used in the house.

By the time he was nearly ninety years old, Br. Bernardo had his own afflictions (a hernia, arthritis and erysipelas¹) but he still exercised compassion. He was of short stature, a little stooped and worn out, "ruddy and trembling all over" – as we hear from one witness at his process. Showing clear signs of the harsh penances he had done, he was completely stiff and rigid. He supported himself with two crutches that enabled him to spend long periods in front of the tabernacle since he could no longer kneel.

In the full summer heat of 1694 the erysipelas prostrated him completely, but his spirit was more radiant than ever. One witness tells how "he showed such joy on his face and in his words that he did not appear to be sick at all, but delighted."



He wanted to strip himself of everything and asked his guardian to allow him "out of charity" to use of the habit he was already wearing. After receiving all the sacraments, "he appeared to be outside his senses" as if rapt in ecstasy. On returning to his senses he commended his brothers to observe the Rule, to preserve peace and love among themselves and towards their neighbour, to pray for their benefactors. He also encouraged the many lay faithful present to remain faithful to the Law of God and to the Christian formation of their children. Then as the sun was rising on 22 August 1694, he serenely breathed his last.

His funeral was a triumph. Graces and miracles abounded. However the friars did not move straight away to gather testimonies for a formal process of beatification and canonisation. They only did this in 1745 in Ascoli and in Offida,. The procedure was long and tiring. Finally Pius VI declared him blessed exactly one century later on 19 May 1795. Six days later the beatification was celebrated in the Vatican basilica.

Translation based on an article by Costanzo Cargnoni in *Sulle orme dei santi*, 2000, p.195-204

¹ *Erysipelas* (Greek ερυσιπέλας - *red skin*) (also known as "Ignis sacer," and "St Anthony's fire") is an acute streptococcus bacterial infection of the dermis, resulting in inflammation and characteristically extending into underlying fat tissue (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erysipelas> 13 June 2009)