

Saint Ignazio da Santhià (1686-1770)



orenzo Maurizio, the fourth of five children to Pier Paolo Belvisotti and Maria Elisabetta Balocco, was born on 5 June 1686 at Santhià (Vercelli). When he was seven years old his father died. His mother saw to his education and entrusted him to a pious and learned priest, a relative of hers. He then went to Vercelli for higher studies and in 1710 was ordained priest. He quickly won admiration in Vercelli. The noble Avogadro family sought him out as the tutor of their children. Other children joined them.

His native Santhià, preferring its own citizen, chose him as canon rector of the prestigious collegiate church of Santhià. In their turn the Avogadro family chose him as parish priest of the parish of Casanova Elso where they enjoyed right of patronage (or *ius patronatus*)¹. Finding himself the centre of such contention, Father Belvisotti chose neither. Early one morning he fled to Turin and obtained permission from the Capuchin provincial minister to be admitted as a novice.

“But why destroy such a good and spiritually fruitful career?” was the objection of the provincial minister. “Father, my heart finds no repose in these successes. I heard a voice repeat in the depth of my heart, ‘If you want to find peace, you must do the will of God through obedience.’” And so Father Belvisotti became Br. Ignazio da Santhià in the novitiate at Chieri on 24 May 1716. His determined aim for perfection; his complete, caring, spontaneous and joyful observance of Capuchin life attracted the admiration even of the oldest friars in the novitiate house.

After his novitiate in Chieri (1716-1717) and the period of simple vows (1717-1721) Ignazio was assigned back among the novices in Chieri, and then in 1727 to Monte de Torino for a short, complementary course in theology. There he was also head sacristan and confessor of the seculars. In the provincial chapter of 31 August 1731 he was chosen as vicar and novice master at Mondovì. In his fourteen years as novice master he signed the profession of one hundred and twenty one novices. Some of these would go on to distinguish themselves for their virtue and die in the fame of holiness. The testimony of these friars about the virtue of their novice master is moving. Br. Ignazio knew how to instil in the young a passion for the observance of the Rule and constitutions. His genius shone out in reducing the variety of practical aspects of life to the one guiding principle: love.

And certainly love has its own rigours. The novice master was unshakeable on the principal of *abneget semetipsum*.² But it was precisely here that his teaching talent shone out. He knew how to rouse the enthusiasm of the young for virtue and for sacrifice. He never wanted to impose a rigorous penance that had not first entered the ‘gioco d’amore’³ as he used to say. With his supreme discretion and ‘maternal’ gentleness he won the greatest

¹ “The right of patronage is a set of rights and obligations entailed upon a definite person, the patron (Latin *patronus*), especially in connexion with a gift of land (benefice). It is not a position with the Church hierarchy, but a legally regulated grant made by the Church, out of gratitude towards a benefactor.” From the Catholic Encyclopaedia (1913) cited on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ius_patronatus (18 June 2009).

² Echoing Jesus’ words in the gospel, “... let him deny himself.” (cf Matthew 16:24 and parallels)

³ Nothing should be imposed that is not inspired by love.

reputation. His education skills were irresistible with the young. One novice, Bernardino da Veza, had become a missionary in the Congo. However he could not continue his apostolic activity because of a serious ophthalmia. Ignazio gave him his own glasses, thus heroically taking upon himself the sickness of his novice. The missionary recovered, however the poor novice master was so violently struck down by the illness that he had to resign his office "to the great sorrow of the entire family of friars." Ignazio never regretted the offering of his glasses. Nor was he amazed by the illness: someone has to carry that cross! Released from the office of novice master, Ignazio did not see himself eligible for the pension, and he continued to work effectively at Monte di Torino teaching the friars.

Officially Ignazio did not have the office of preacher, but when obedience obliged him to teach catechism every Sunday to the lay friars, and then to preach the retreat to the fraternity of Monte di Torino, he did not hesitate to accept. His success was such that even his superiors, theology professors and preachers eagerly attended his catechism classes. Of the two annual retreats, one was always reserved for him and was the best attended. Even the religious who attended the other retreat wanted to attend his too, "attracted by the spirit that spoke in him." "He spoke to everyone with evangelical freedom and without flattery, joining truth and respect with the superiors, whom he considered *maestri*." His very practical observations so hit the mark that they "cured wounds without making them worse, but with pleasure and profit to everyone." One day someone made the observation to him that his words about the duties of superiors were a little too clear. Ignazio replied with dignity and certainty: "I speak about everyone and no one. What I say I read in the Crucifix." His words were none other than small sparks from the great fire that blazed within his soul and move him to do much more himself than what he proposed to the brothers; so much so that every one saw in him one of the "great in the kingdom of God, who first do, and then teach."

And so for more than twenty consecutive years he was like a "lamp on a lamp-stand" at Monte di Torino, a lamp that shed the light of teaching and flame of charity. His preaching at home continued until he was eighty two years of old, two years before his death. In 1744 Ignazio was freed from the task of novice master. In Piemonte he threw himself into against the war with France, and also the war against the plague. Carlo Emanuele III, the king of Sardegna, wanted the Capuchins as military chaplains. Without hesitation Ignazio hurried to Asti, Alessandria, and Vinovo – and he had the military hospital moved to wherever the field of battle was. For about two years the former novice master was a good Samaritan intent of comforting the wounded and curing their wounds.



Various brothers fell victim to epidemics. In 1746 the battle against the enemies and against the plagues concluded and Ignazio returned to the Monte dei Cappuccini. For the last twenty five years of his life this will be field his seraphic and peaceful battle. Here the heroism of all the virtues coincided with prodigious effects of his blessings. The poor and the sick of Turin immediately recognised the immense heart of the Capuchin who often went round the streets of the city. Without fear they would approach him to make known their needs. They knew he was not afraid to knock on the doors of the rich. In fact his great benevolence meant that he did not

stretch out his hand in vain. The nobility boasted of collaborating with him as ministers of divine Providence. In this way the poor Capuchin of Monte di Torino, a brother to the poor, kept the tradition of charity and beneficence alive in Turin. Charity is more than bread. The blessings that Ignazio gave to the infirm in their lofts, or that were petitioned by plaintive processions of people to the Monte, or which sent there by correspondence, had the effect of amazing, instant healings among the suffering at the sound of the midday *Angelus* bell.

For more than twenty years Ignazio was the most sought after confessor, an effective healer of those who had strayed. The marquis Roero di Cortanze, who used to visit him, called him the "the rascal hunter." In fact others called him, "the refuge of rascals." However it was well known that to fall into his net meant to fall into the merciful embrace of God. Eminent prelates, such as cardinal Carlo Vittorio Amadeo delle Lanze, or the archbishop of Turin, Giovanni Battista Roero, honoured him with their admiration and devotion. However, he preferred the company of the poor. Mixed among the rascals to enter his "cubby hole"⁴ – the little room where Ignazio heard only the confessions of men – were also more privileged souls: priests, religious and especially his own confreres of the Monte. The results were known to all. It was said quite readily at the Monte: "Whoever wants to be helped well should approach Father Ignazio's penitents."

He passed the last two years of his life (1768-1770) in the infirmary of his friary. There he continued to bless, hear confessions and advise all those who came to him. His life appeared to be already absorbed and transformed into the Crucified, from whom he could not remove his gaze. In the second last month of his life (August 1770) he was surprised in the infirmary chapel before the crucifix on the altar. His arms were stretched out in the shape of the cross and, motionless, his body was raised above the floor. This was not the first time that his intimate, uninterrupted converse with God withdrew him from his senses so that the brothers and novices had to gently shake him a long time to get his attention.



A fruit of his heavenly conversation and a characteristic of his penitential life was the continuous joy that sang in his heart and that burst forth from his smile. All those who saw him had to admit: "The joy of heaven shines out from this friar's face!" His whole life blossomed with this joy. We can't say, "This Capuchin life lived to the full despite his penances." More precisely, rather, he lived fully as a consequence of and in proportion to his penance. Such is the testimony of his confreres. And his superhuman joy continued to grow. "To him this vale of tears," said his former novice, Br. Giacinto da Pinerolo, "seemed transformed into a garden of delights because he willingly suffered for the One he loved so much." This joy, a real fruit of the spirit, is that genuine Franciscan joy. Ignazio never ceased to instil it even in those more prone to tears or in the more scrupulous souls. He used to go about singing to them, "*Laetare et benefacere*"⁵... and let the sparrows sing!"

His final agony found him radiant. "Father Guardian, it is read of certain saints that they trembled when faced with death. I instead feel so calm that

⁴ garibotto

⁵ Rejoice and do good!

I am afraid I trust too much. Please give me the charity of you counsel!" The reassuring voice of the one who acted on God's behalf put Ignazio at ease. When midnight rang on 22 September 1770, at the invitation of the Superior, "Depart, O Christian soul Amen" Brother Ignazio made his last journey, as if he were answering a call to receive a much longed for honour.

The fame of his holiness and the many miracles attributed to his intercession hastened the initiation of the process of his canonisation. In 1782 the apostolic process was introduced. On 17 March 1827 Leo XII proclaimed the heroism of his virtue. Paul VI beatified him on 17 April 1966. John Paul II canonised him on 19 May 2002.

Translation based on the article by PASQUALE DA BRA in *Sulle orme dei santi*, 2000, pp. 221-228.