

Saint Serafino da Montegranaro (1540-1604)



he Province of the Marches of Ancona was from the beginning like a sky ablaze with stars with so many holy and exemplary friars. Like lamps in the heavens they adorned and shed their light upon the Order of Saint Francis and the world with their example and teaching." That is how the *Little Flowers* speak with their fragrant poetry. In his Annals, Zaccaria Boverio da Saluzzo echoes and takes up this theme. He writes that "in the Province of the Marches there is now one star that shines more brightly than the others in the Order. This is Br. Serafino da Montegranaro." The splendour of this holiness is shown and interpreted by various witnesses collected after 1610 and were put together in the transcript of the initial process of Serafino's cause concluded in 1624. With the intervention of Cardinal Madruzzi of Trent in 1625, the apostolic process extended to 1632.

His is a holiness that is marvellously in tune with the holiness of the pioneer of Capuchin non-cleric saint, Felice da Cantalice. In fact there are many easily recognised similarities even for the least sophisticated reader. At the same time, he is an expression of genuine Capuchin life and its characteristic spiritual tradition from the Marches. In fact, Serafino da Montegranaro never went beyond the borders of the Marches.

Born in Montegranaro towards 1540 he was the second of four children. He was baptised Felice. Of frail health his father, a builder, soon sent him to help a farmer who entrusted him with the flock. There, in the silence of the countryside, he experienced the beauty of recollection and prayer – so much so that there are various stories about extraordinary things that happened during his childhood. When their father died, the eldest of the children, who had taken on all the building work, called Felice back home as a labourer. However Felice was not at all suited to that kind of work and had to endure non-stop rebukes and blows from his irascible brother. Felice felt called to a life of penance, of the desert, just as he had heard read in the lives of hermits. He was revealing this wish one day to a pious girl from Loro Picena. She spoke to him about the Capuchins and their spirituality that might fulfil his wish. He responded eagerly to this suggestion and immediately presented himself to the friary at Tolentino. Even though he was not accepted as immediately as he had hoped, he knew that this was his life. He finally entered the novitiate in Jesi, in one of the old, early friaries near Tabano. At his investiture he received the name Serafino. It was also here that he made his religious profession.

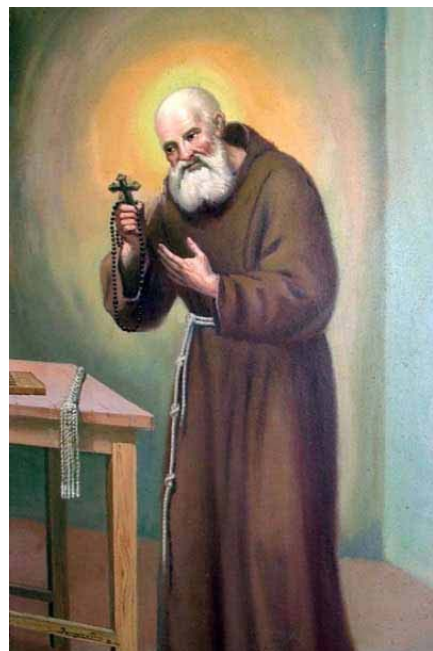
In his sixty four years of life he lived in various friaries of the province: Loro Piceno, Corinaldo, Ostra, Ancona, S. Elipidio and particularly in Montolmo (Corridonia), but above all in Ascoli Piceno where he remained longer than anywhere else and where he met sister death on 12 October 1604. Ascoli is his adopted city, the place privileged by his sanctity. For this reason he was called Br. Serafino d'Ascoli many times. Furthermore the numerous and very reliable testimonies came from friars and citizens of that town. They had experienced and kept alive the fragrance of his holiness.

However the chronology of these and other longer or shorter residences is difficult to establish. The testimonies at the processes are very vivid but lack chronological precision. However there is one secret that is known,

revealed by the holy friar himself under obedience and reported in one of the depositions given by Br. Angelo da Macerata in 1627. He was in the friary at Civitanova and there was always a great throng of people looking for Br. Serafino. The superior obliged the holy brother to reveal "the means by which he acquired such perfection." The deposition goes on to say that Serafino then "told how he, being a person who was unable to do anything, was greatly amazed about being accepted into the Order and then admitted to vows. A little later he was taken from the novitiate and sent as a professed friar to a place where there was a guardian who wanted everything in the friary to run like clockwork, and that the lay friars serve the priest friars, according to our practice. Br. Serafino explained how he did not really have much ability in any chores. In whatever work the guardian gave him, he never did it properly. Therefore the guardian gave him many penances and mortifications. To these things should be added a particular temptation from the devil that produced such anxiety in Br. Serafino that he thought he should leave the Order. One particular day he began to pray in the church in front of the Blessed Sacrament and complained greatly to the Lord. He said, "These friars have also seen my life. If I was not suitable for profession, they should not have admitted me, but since they did admit me, why do they afflict me with so many mortifications?" Then he heard a voice from the Blessed Sacrament that said to him, "Br. Serafino, isn't this the road on which to serve me, who have suffered so much for the redemption of mankind?" The voice terrified Br. Serafino. Helped by the Holy Spirit he began to enter himself and decided to conquer himself. Every time something would be done or said against his own idea, he would say a decade of the Rosary. And that is what he did. He was very devoted to the Rosary. After giving himself to such prayer for some time he heard another voice again before the Blessed Sacrament. "Br. Serafino, since for love of me you have overcome and mortified yourself, ask of me whatever grace you want. You will receive it from me."

Self-denial and self-abasement is the secret of his holiness. The graces he received were so super-abundant that one brother guardian commanded him to stop the prodigious signs. The miracles blossomed around a simple and humble friar. The records of his process are uninterrupted lists of such signs. A kiss to his mantle, a touch from his hands, even the invocation of his name was enough to make stubborn infirmities vanish and to resolve hopeless cases. At his hands, write modern biographers, everything became phenomenal: bread, oranges, herbs, wheat, lettuce - but especially the rosary made from fennel stems and bits of pumpkin. The people had more faith in his rosary than in all the doctors of the town.

Two external things were always observed and were part and parcel of the man: the little brass Crucifix and the rosary. This is the traditional representation of Serafino da Montegranaro. His devotion to the Crucified and to the Blessed Virgin was very wise and flowed with heavenly wisdom that



sometimes left theologians and the learned amazed completely. He always carried the Crucifix in his hand and offered it to everyone to kiss: a clever ruse so that they would not kiss his hand or his habit. He was totally a humble and humbled man - and in the charming way of the Capuchins and the Marches - always joyful and spiritually radiant.

A perfect observer of the rule of poverty and utterly conformed with the penitential, contemplative and apostolic spirituality of the Order he knew how to transform the chapel into his cell. He usually spent more time in the chapel, especially at night, than in his cell. If someone saw him, and he was aware of it, he would pretend to be asleep- snoring loudly. "My little saint," he answered jokingly to someone who pointed out to him his irreverence, "I sleep more in the chapel than in the refectory."

He literally had a great thirst for Masses, for the Eucharist, for the Sacraments, for prayer, for sufferings. He was in love with the mystery of Christ and of Our Lady. He was enthralled to meditate on them and would go into ecstasy. He would have liked to be in the fraternity at Loreto or in Rome to be able to serve as many Masses as possible each day. This was the source of his zeal to work with Christ to save souls; for his brief and penetrating spiritual exhortations; for his extremely fruitful vocational apostolate; for his veneration for priests; for his compassion for the sick, the troubled and the poor; for his courageous commitment to make peace in society and in families; for his missionary enthusiasm and his desire for martyrdom. Although he was almost illiterate he could speak about the things of God with extraordinary ability and unction. When he was obliged by obedience to give a sermon in the refectory, his words in commenting on the psalm *Qui habitat in adiutorio Altissimi*, or the sequence *Stabat Mater dolorosa* were so full of feeling that he used to reduce everyone to tears.

The people who knew him portrayed him in concrete and photographic detail: "His beard and hair were always ruffled ... his breath smelled dreadful ... his habit, covered in patches, always slipped down a little on his left side, making his hair-shirt visible ... his neck was always covered with a burning rash or eczema ... he never ever wanted to be touched on the shoulders ... he had a great love for flowers and children." It is a fact that children are always privileged by these very humble and human saints. It was in fact the children who alerted the town of Ascoli to the death of Br. Serafino in the afternoon of 12 October 1604. They cried, "The saint has died! The saint has died!"

Translation from COSTANZO CARGNONI, *Sulle orme dei santi*, 2000, pp.247- 254