

Blessed Benedetto da Urbino (1560-1625)



hen Gabriele da Modigliana and Bonaventura da Imola published the *Leggendario cappuccino* (Venice- Faenza, 1767-1789) they included the life of Benedetto Passionei da Urbino (1560-1625), though his remains had not yet been found. In obedience to the Church who forbade public veneration of the Servants of God not yet been beatified, the friars had secretly changed the location of his tomb which had always been thronged with pilgrims. Consequently his remains were not identified until two centuries later in 1792. For this reason the canonical and apostolic processes only began at the end of the eighteenth century, between 1793 and 1795 and later between 1838 and 1844. This is an uncommon case in the history of Capuchin hagiography. Because of this the testimonies included in the manuscript volumes of the processes can only testify to the Benedetto's uninterrupted reputation for holiness among the friars and among the laity. They nearly all refer back to a manuscript biography compiled by Br. Ludovico da Rocca Contrada (†1654) immediately after Benedetto's death.

That biography is the one and only actual contemporary witness. It is has an enormous documentary value thanks to its reliability and the seriousness of the information gathered from the most direct sources which the author often consulted personally. And the author was, moreover, guardian of the friary of San Giovanni Battista in Fossombrone. He was present for the happenings at the end of his holy confrere's life, and was present at his deathbed. Therefore his account is very detailed in its telling of Benedetto's final sickness and death and of the uninhibited expressions of popular piety regarding Benedetto's body.

It can be striking today, too, to see a scion of one of the richest and noblest families of Umbria give himself to strenuous manual work in various friaries as a lay brother. He was sensitive to the poor and full of compassion for them, without distinction. He wanted to preach only in insignificant little towns. He abounded in piety and devotion, poverty and penance, humility and simplicity. He was indeed a 'classic' Capuchin friar.

Born on 13 November 1560 in the duchy of Urbino, he was the seventh of the eleven children in the noble family of Domenico Passionei and Maddalena Cibo. He was orphaned while still young and led his life in Cagli where he did his first study at home. At seventeen he then went to Perugia and onto Padua for higher studies. On 28 May 1582, at just twenty two years, he received a degree in civil and church law. His career began in the Roman court of cardinal Pier Girolamo Albani. He found this disagreeable.

Marco Passionei (this was his baptismal name) returned to the Marches and settled in Fossombrone where his family had meanwhile taken up residence. He was nourishing a secret call of the spirit and longed for the humble and austere life of the Capuchins. Above Metauro the Capuchins had built a devout hermitage. However it was not easy for him to get permission both from the family and from the friars until the new provincial minister, Giacomo da Pietrarubbia who, according to the wish of the chapter, admitted him to the novitiate of San Cristina in Fano. His fragile health made his novitiate year difficult. In fact, after a few months, he became ill to the point that his superiors had him leave Fano to go to the friary in Fossombrone. After three months it was considered to send him

home but his indomitable will won out in the end. He said that he had been clothed in the habit to live and to die as a Capuchin: "If they had sent him out from one door he would have come back in again through another." He entrusted himself to prayer and obtained the grace of healing. And so he was able to make his religious profession at the end of May 1585, much to the consolation of the poor who, on the occasion, benefitted economically. He continued his religious formation in Ancona. By 1590 he was already a priest, a humble preacher, in various friaries such as Fano and Ostra.

In 1600 the General Minister, Girolamo da Castelferretti, included him in the mission band led by Saint Lorenzo da Brindisi to spread the Order in Bohemia and reinforce there the Catholic faith. Although he had not asked to go he was ready to leave immediately. Exemplary and capable men were needed and the General Minister, also from the Marches, knew him well and considered him suitable for the difficult undertaking. Benedetto confided his difficulties to a letter. However he was very obedient under the guidance of Lorenzo da Brindisi. He had to endure many injuries from heretics who hated him. At the end of the triennium (1602) he was called back to the province where he travelled around various friaries as preacher, superior and as a simple friar. He also went questing, both in the city and in the countryside. He said, "It is better to carry the weight of bread rather than sins." He was so humble, and loved silence so much, that he seemed naïve and uneducated. When he was guardian in the friary in Pesaro the duke of Urbino went to visit him. Accustomed to help in the kitchen after lunch, Benedetto let the illustrious visitor wait until he had finished washing the dishes.

His devotion was carefully organised around night and daylight hours of prayer which extended beyond the pious exercises of the fraternity. As all his biographers relate, he used to begin his day with one or two hours of prayer in the church before the community recitation of matins. After the office he returned to his cell to rest for half an hour. Then he would be in the church again where he prayed the rosary on his knees. After the rosary he did the discipline and then immersed himself in mental prayer until dawn. He never tired of prayer. Each day he recited the Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as well as the seven penitential psalms, the Office of the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Cross, many decades of the rosary and Our Fathers. He spent most of his time in spiritual reading, making the Stations of the Cross, visiting the tabernacle and the Our Lady altar. Frail, emaciated and weak he seemed to derive his strength from prayer. If sometimes he arrived late to meditation, he would turn the hour glass the recoup the time for prayer. In this he was very exacting, even with the others. As superior he never dispensed the friars from the two hours of mental prayer each day. Even when he was not in the friary he maintained his strict and austere style.

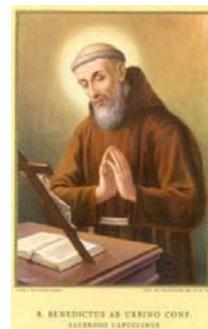
For his preaching he said he preferred the towns that had a public clock that struck the hours day and night. In this way he was able to organise his practices of prayer and penance as he did in the friary. He was enamoured of the Crucifix, the Passion, the Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin who he affectionately called



“mamma.” He invented many gestures of love, such as an hour of prostration on the ground, his “prayer in the garden” with his arms open and face down on the floor. His continuous meditation on the Passion filled his heart with an intense contrition which urged him to go often to confession, as often as three times a week. His confessors however did not see sufficient matter for absolution.

Austere and heroic in his bodily penance he never gave into himself in anything. He was emaciated and weak in appearance, with hunger pangs and kidney stones that prostrated him. His first biographer noted that “he seemed to suck in his breath through his teeth, as they say. But as for his spiritual exercises he seemed like a man of steel.” Always on his feet in his frequent preaching, he had to drag himself along with annoying wounds on his legs. He had to undergo fifteen hernia operations. But he never stopped. He always started up again with courage.

He did not like big cities. If, rarely, he had to preach in Pesaro (1612), and in Urbino and Genoa (1619), he preferred those remote, humble and “little places” hardly mentioned on the general maps. More than once he took on the task of building or restoring churches, as in Barchi and Castelleone. He did not write his talks. He confined himself to brief schemas on scraps of paper. His preaching came from the heart, like a humble exhortation for the humble, but nonetheless all was the word of God, able to move and convert. He preached his last Lent in Saccorvaro.



The journey was all on foot and he had to stop in Urbania due to starvation. After about ten sermons in Saccorvaro he had to stop. He was taken to Urbino and then to Fossombrone. He had to undergo yet another hernia operation which this time brought him to the end of his life. He had a crucifix placed on a little table. He kept his gaze fixed on it, his spirit focused there. If anyone blocked his view he immediately gestured that they should move. He remained silent in this way as if he were resting quietly, so much so that the friars barely realised when his life faded like a gently quenched candle on 30 April 1625 in the light of the Passion which he wanted read to him. He was nearly sixty five years old, and had lived forty one years of religious life.