

## Blessed Geremia da Valacchia (1556-1652)



he example and teaching of his parents – his father Stoika Kostist and especially his mother Margherita Barbato – had already forged Geremia in virtue by the time he arrived in Italy. Jon Kostist was born in Zazo, a small rural village of farmers and shepherds in Romania, on 29 June 1556. Earlier he had felt an powerful call to go to Italy “where there were good Christians” – as he had heard from his mother – “and where the monks were all holy and where there was the pope, the vicar of Christ.” The journey was in fact an adventure of difficult experiences. How could a young farm worker, who could not read or write and who only knew the dialect of his own country, adventure out on such a long and risky journey, without means or plan, and in such a radical detachment from his parents, unless by a special grace from the Lord? He himself used to say that in the journey from his homeland to Italy, he had to work at all trades, He worked as farm labourer, to hoe the earth and watch over animals; and he also worked as a doctor and a pharmacist. The only two jobs he never did were those of page boy and policeman.

After his arrival in Bari in Italy, as servant of the celebrated doctor Pietro Lo Iacono, he experienced the bitterest disappointment of his life. He found was something other than good Christians and decided to return home. Providence however wanted him a Capuchin friar in Naples, where he arrived during Lent 1578. To him the friars were “those holy monks” his mother had told him about. In the friary in Sessa Aurunca (Caserta) Jon received the Capuchin habit with the name Br. Geremia. After various roles in such different friaries as Sant’Eframo Vecchio in Naples and at Pozzuoli, in 1585 he was given the task of helping the sick in the large infirmary in the Friary of Sant’Eframo Nuovo, commonly called the friary of the Immaculate Conception. There he stayed for forty continuous years until his death on 5 March 1625.

In his forty six years of religious life his supernatural charism of charity and his gifts of the Holy Spirit shone inside and outside the friary. There was a common saying, “Who can achieve the charity of Br. Geremia?” He lived the full spectrum of virtue and all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.” Mercy was the vision and the characteristic of his life: God is all mercy; the Trinity is mercy; the Passion of Christ and the Body and Blood of Christ in Eucharist are mercy; the Virgin Mary in her quilted mantle of stars is the Mother of mercy; the Church is mercy; humanity is a gift of mercy; the universe, visible and invisible, is a continuous act of divine mercy.

Geremia was illiterate but when he spoke he was brilliant and insightful, uncomplicated, immediate. And so everyone listened to him eagerly. He was imbued with mercy and the afflicted sought him out. He could truly console. While so many sought him, on his part he sought those who were suffering, without distinction between rich and poor. He went to the houses of the poor and the *palazzi* of the noble, approaching each person with the same simplicity. The infirm and the suffering attracted him like a magnet. He was able to console them more with his care and “with simple, spiritual words” than could the learned and the preachers.

He was always prompt and happy. Purity, simplicity and love were the source of that joyfulness which radiated from his face. He always had

something to give, to donate. He concealed his concern about suffering, the heroism of his penance and his poverty behind his clowning, funny and joyful manner. Even in the friary he was like a pilgrim and stranger since he did not have any room for his own use. Instead he spent the night in the cells of the sick or of other friars. He used to say that he was so poor that he could even pay the rent for a cell.

Everyone knew about "Br. Geremia's broad beans." With them he hid his continuous abstinence. He nicknamed them 'fafanelli'. He spoke of them so highly that sometimes he even induced persons of authority in the city to ask for them out of devotion. However when the friars and the sick saw him go by with the beans in their shells they used to ask him for some and he would distribute them with great glee. Even the "stones of the friary" knew his charity, because "to exercise charity" he said, "was better than ecstasy." And yet he prayed sleeplessly and was enamoured of the Eucharist, the Crucifix and the Virgin Mary who is all mercy, whom he usually tenderly called "Mammarella nostra."

His vision of the Virgin Mary is famous. Br. Geremia saw her in effable beauty one night, probably on the eve of the Feast of the Assumption in 1608. He saw that the Virgin Mary, though Queen, was not wearing a crown. He asked why. "Here is my crown: my Son." This vision always remained on the face of the humble brother like a light that he could not manage to hide, as he confided to his close friend, Br. Pacifico da Salerno. News of this spread from friend to friend, both among all the brothers and outside the friary. The Virgin Mary of Br. Geremia became popular in the city and Kingdom of Naples. An artist represented this vision and etchings multiplied among the people like an icon.



This Marian experience further ignited Geremia's charity towards every kind of suffering where he recognised the splendour of that "crown", the face of the Son of Mary. For him the poor were lords to serve. For them the doors of the friary should be thrown open, and the garden gate too. His overflowing charity, however, severely tried the friary arrangements: the cooks, the brother gardeners and questors, and also some superiors complained to him. But he, with daring inspired by love, calmed them with a few simple, incontestable words: "Charity to the sick. They are in need." Often it happened that his collection from the questing in the city finished up in the hands of the sick or the poor whom he met along the way. Or: "Greed brings famine" because the brother gardeners, pestered by the comings and goings of so many poor people, had enclosed the garden with hedges. Geremia maintained that, "we should give as alms to the poor what we like and what we do not like to give, and give the best things."

In the friary he was tireless day and night. He was always on the move serving the sick, specially the most repugnant, with an incredible joy and relish. They were his paradise, his enjoyment, his best company. There were sick who were nauseating, crippled, covered with sores and foul smelling. He served them day and night as if they were his own children. He felt as though he was in a garden of flowers and roses. Like Saint Francis' bitterness among the lepers, that stench changed into sweetness

of soul and body. For him that bitterness seemed to give off a fragrance of musk, as he often said, when he was there to comfort and serve them as little creatures and feeding them like so many little chicks.

F.S. Toppi writes, “He was not ashamed to beg meat from the butchers for the sick poor. He busied himself to collect clothing for those who had nothing with which to cover themselves. He defended servants mistreated by their masters. He applied himself to place the unemployed in honest work. He saw to obtain dowries for orphaned girls or who were in precarious circumstances so that they might marry properly. He went to the jails to visit the prisoners. He was extraordinary in extinguishing enmity and restoring peace to souls driven by hatred ... He was a living and busy image of the mercy of the Lord.”

To ease the burdens of the other friars he also helped in the domestic duties. He would even wash their feet with water scented by fragrant herbs, take the broom from their hands or wash their underwear and habits. It was said in the friary that Br. Geremia was everyone’s right hand man. His ambition was to serve everyone and not be served. For this reason he could honestly pray, “Lord, I thank you because I have always served and have never been served. I have always been subject and have never commanded.”



A recurring image is that of maternal love. He served as a mother does her children. Such was the case that at his death all his confreres mourned him for a long time, as if they had lost their mother: “We cried so many times as if he had been our mother!” He died a victim of charity and obedience, to a visit a sick person at Torre del Greco.

The radiant light of the charism of the true Capuchin “lay brother” shines out in his witness. Therefore the most frequent and significant depositions made during the processes came from lay friars who, during the initial and apostolic processes, often related their recollections with frank simplicity. These recollections can be read and strengthen Capuchin life, to inspire it to yet further heights. John XXIII proclaimed Geremia’s heroic virtue on 18 December 1959 and John Paul II elevated him to the honour of the altars on 30 October 1983.

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