

Saint Francesco Maria da Camporosso (1804-1866)



Giovanni was born in the small village of Camporosso, near the town of Ventimiglia on the west coast of the Italian Riviera, on 27 December 1894. He was the fourth of the five children of Anselmo Croese and Maria Antonia Gazzo, farm workers. He attended school for a little while and was a less than enthusiastic student. So at seven years of age Giovanni began to work with the family. He used to lead a small cow to pasture, a guarantee of something to eat for the family. He helped work in the fields – small parcels of land where the family could produce some oil, wine and vegetables. Marian devotion was strong in the family. When he was a little more than ten years old he fell seriously ill. He was taken on pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Lake, near Nice. This impressed him deeply and he began to visit the Franciscan Friars and knew one of the friars, Br. Giovanni, quite well.

His vocation matured slowly. On 14 October 1822 he entered the Conventual friary at Sesti Ponente as a tertiary, with the name Br. Antonio. Life here, however, was more comfortable than at home and the young man was dissatisfied. He longed for absolute poverty and for a deeper meditative prayer. He decided then to take the Capuchin habit. Unable to get the consent of his superiors for a transfer, with the agreement of Br. Alessandro Canepa da Genova, a Capuchin he knew, he fled Sestri one morning in late autumn. He was accepted at San Francesco di Volti, a Capuchin hermitage where he received the name Br. Francesco Maria. He remained a postulant for nearly three years. He was outstanding for his spirit of charity, even to the point of giving his food to the poor, and contenting himself with the leftovers, as one witness testified. However such deeds were not new to him. Since he was little he was used to them. It is said that during a trip to Mentone, where his father was trying to set up a small business, he gave away a newly acquired piece of his clothing to a boy his age dressed in rags. In a temper his father gave him a sound slap. The young Giovanni replied by offering his other cheek, earning from his father a hug of admiration.

The experience at Voltri, in reality, completed that of Sestri. So at the end of 1825, with the authority of the Vicar Provincial, Antonio da Cipressa, Br. Francesco Maria left for the hermitage friary of San Barnaba in Genoa to do his novitiate year. On 17 December he received the novice habit and his master, Br. Bernardo da Pontedecimo, had to moderate the young man's fervour. However, his companions who shared that experience with him, remembered his goodness and cordiality. He had chosen to be a lay friar and would confide later that, he did so after the example of Saint Francis: "it is preferable to be humble and obedient."

One year later on 17 December 1826 he professed his vows into the hands of Fr. Samuel Bocciardo da Genova. He had just turned twenty but his spiritual maturity convinced the superiors to assign him straightaway to the main friary of the province, that of the Immaculate Conception in Genoa. He will remain there for the rest of his life. This friary was a focal point of many religious and social activities. Apart from the usual friary observances and apostolate, the friary also included the provincial curia, the infirmary, the "lanificio"¹ for the clothing of the friars, a pharmacy that

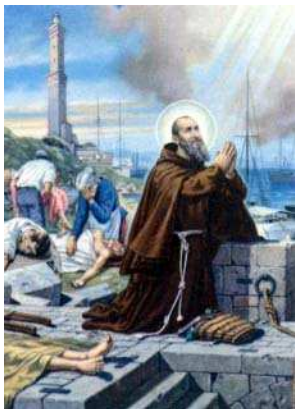
¹ A facility for spinning and weaving their own fabrics, traditionally in wool ('lana.')

also offered health care to the public, the supervision of the public weigh scales and the distribution of firewood from the port bridge of the Immaculate Conception. The new arrival was given various tasks: first in the office, and then in an initiation to various humble services such as infirmarian, cook, gardener, sacristan. The processes say that he was “always tireless and calm.” Almost five years passed uneventfully, but his charity grew ever more refined, so that in 1831 when the old rural questor, Br. Pio da Pontedecimo could no longer continue. Br. Francesco Maria became his companion. His vocation and mission that would make him the most famous questor of his province was now beginning to take shape. He travelled about the little valley of Bisagno for around two years, visiting the various ‘villas’ of the farm workers. This was a precious apprenticeship that taught him his style of life and one of his ways to relate with the public with words of faith, patience, charity, humility and devotion.

The outstanding results of this rural questing urged the Guardian to entrust to him the city questing. The people, who had already intuited his holiness, will come to depend upon him. They were so accustomed to see him along the streets of the city that they felt the need to do so. After attending some Masses very early in the morning he used to walk through the streets of the city with his sack slung over his shoulder and always with a child carrying a small bag around his neck to receive alms of money. He chose Saint Felice da Cantalice as his protector. However, it would not be possible to tell the story of his life now



without first saying something about the history of the city of Genoa in the nineteenth century. It was fermenting with tensions and hesitant steps of the *Risorgimento*. He listened to everyone and people of all kinds, whether small and great, entrusted him confidently with their own day-to-day concerns. There are countless ‘fioretti’ about this, which are often charming and miraculous, and that translate realistically and exactly the scene of this new development of the city. Its main narrators were the mothers at home, the shop keepers, the sailors, the handlers on the wharves, the little children with their little problems, the merchants who asked advice, the sick whom he went to visit even when requiring great sacrifice on his own part, the incarcerated who sought greater justice. The Lord endowed him with special gifts when he answered questions that had not yet been expressed or when he spoke of things far away or in the future. His fame spread even outside the city, beyond the little streets that he frequented. With great effort he had to answer the many letters he received, a massive correspondence which has been almost completely lost.



One date, 1840, represents the great regard for his service, even among his confreres. The superiors made him “capo-sportella”, or the chief questor, the guide and co-ordinator of the group of questor friars. He substituted the sack slung over his shoulder with the wattle basket or *sporta* woven according to a uniquely Capuchin technique. This basket he carried on his arm. He was authorised to beg for the more refined kinds of food needed by the sick and could enter the port area where valuable goods were sold.

In the friary he organised a storeroom to collect goods there and then distribute them, as well as administer the Mass alms and assign the various questor friars to different areas of the city. These new authoritative responsibilities allowed the “holy father”, as the people already called him usually, to provide more timely and ongoing help, even financial help, for families and individuals in difficulty, especially the families of those who had emigrated to America, or the families of sailors away from home for prolonged periods. Among his benefactors there were also protestants, Jews and non-believers who willingly contributed to his collection, certain that the proceeds would go to the poor. His superiors also authorised him to do that. They trusted his prudence and balance, a trust that overcame simple objections during the process of beatification.

The lamp of his piety was replenished above all in the silent hours of the night. He sought to find time for his prayer in many ways: by frequent visits to churches along the city streets, meditations particularly upon the sufferings of Christ, and faithfulness to the liturgical life of the fraternity. And penance: he was extremely strict with himself, sleeping only on bare planks. He was content with a few crusts of bread soaked in hot water and would only wear threadbare and patched habits. He always went about barefoot. For years he only ate once a day and made constant use of a hair shirt and the flail. However he was ready in obedience and with freedom of spirit to use greater care, as can be read in the depositions of his process, spreading a truly attractive kind of holiness. With the people his spirituality assumed that popular touch of immediacy and spontaneity, but also with a missionary ardour, so vibrant in the Church at that time and which he desired so much. “Oh to be young again. I could go with our missionaries!” He also concerned himself with fostering vocations and to set young men without means on the road to the priesthood.

Popular iconography portrays him as tall, thin, austere, inseparable from that basket, and always accompanied by a boy with the offering box. His generous help for the people he met in his daily questing made him well known in every quarter of the city. In the evening, when he returned to the friary, he found an ever growing number of people whose needs were well beyond his strength. These he invited to entrust themselves to the intercession of Our Lady. This is a particular aspect of the Francesco Maria’s spirituality that is expressed in the statue by G. Galletti and dedicated to him by the people of Genoa. In it the saint is represented inviting a vagabond, a mother with her dying baby, and a dock worker to invoke the Blessed Virgin.



In the final years of his life he employed even harsher mortifications and continued in his commitments despite a grave infirmity that affected his legs. His simple spirituality found its focus in the offering of sacrifice, nourished by faith and hope. His letters express this. He either wrote them himself with tremendous effort, or would dictate them. The most representative image of him, traceable to a picture painted by Fr. Donato and given to Pius IX, shows him in the act of giving his life for the salvation of the city of Genoa. In 1866 in fact, when the port city was struck by a cholera epidemic and Francesco Maria was unable to help the sick due to the precarious condition of his health, he offered his life for the defeat of the sickness. He died from the sickness three days later on 17 September

1866. According to some contemporary sources, the number of cholera victims started to diminish at the same time.

His body, covered with quicklime, was first buried in the cemetery at Staglieno where a monument was erected to him by public subscription. His remains were later transferred in 1911 to the friary church where he had lived. After his death, the faithful continued to turn to him with devotion. Graces and miracles began to occur which were attributable to his intercession. After the initial stages, his cause was introduced in Rome on 9 August 1896. The decree recognising the heroism of his virtue was signed on 18 December 1922. Pius XI beatified him on 30 June 1929. John XXIII canonised him on 9 December 1962 at the conclusion of the first session of the Second Vatican Council. The city of Genoa has erected a monument in the port district.