

# *General Curia of the Capuchin Friars Minor*

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*Blessed Virgin of Loreto*

## The Blessed Bernard of Offida (1604-1694) on the sixth centenary of his birth *Message*

To the Friars of the Marches province  
and to all the Friars of the Order

As we read in chapter XLII of the *Little Flowers*, “In days of old, the Marca d’Ancona province was, like a starry sky, adorned with saints and exemplary friars who, like luminaries of the heavens, enlightened and adorned the Order of Saint Francis and the world with examples and learning.” After Serafino of Montegranaro, whom we remembered in a letter written to commemorate the fifth centenary of his death, another one of these stars draws our attention and shines a special light in the firmament of our domestic holiness, almost pulling us towards its brilliance. Indeed, this year marks the sixth centenary of the birth of the Blessed Bernard of Offida, dating November 7, 1604. Travelling back with our memory to a such a remote past must be for us like a eucharistic celebration, for the saints are not deceased, but are very much alive, relevant, present and at work in the journey of our life. That is what I want to do with you in this fraternal message, for our consecrated life can shine only in the mirror of holiness. We must all find our reflection in this mirror, to meditate on our Franciscan and Capuchin charism, to verify it and bring it into our daily choices, to rectify our behavior, to confirm the joy of evangelical life in our heart.

Who was Bernard of Offida? I would like to trace back with you the fundamental stages of a life, which, in its simplicity, is a truly great lesson for us all.

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Bernardo Peroni of Offida (Ascoli Piceno) was born in Villa d’Appignano, near Offida, on November 7, 1604, on the same day that Saint Serafino of Montegranaro died - almost a handover. Of all the Capuchin blessed and saints, Bernard is surely the one who lived longest; indeed, he died in Offida on August 22, 1694, at the age of 90.

Domenico - which was the name his father Giuseppe gave him at the baptismal font - grew up healthy and strong. He became a shepherd and a farmer, and nourished his faith with the book of the cross and his devotion to the Virgin Mary. The beautiful and austere life of the Capuchins that had established themselves in Offida in 1614 appealed strongly to him, but he waited a few more years before taking the capuchin habit in Corinaldo on February 15, 1626, and his religious vows in Camerino a year later.

True to his vow of obedience, Bernard of Lama, which is the more exact place-name of the more familiar Offida, accepted his first destination, Fermo. For almost twenty years, he remained in this convent, in silence. His name is not mentioned in any document: it was the time the Lord took to prepare him for his mission: “starved for souls”.

After a short stay in Ascoli - almost as if to drink from the holiness of Serafino of Montegranaro - he returned to Offida in 1650. Here, for almost 45 years, he gave praise to the God of mercy, worshiped Christ in the Eucharist, served the Body of the Lord in the poor and the sick.

He led a simple, hidden, humble life made of the ordinary services of the Capuchin friar: he was cook, gardener, nurse, begging friar, doorkeeper. His life was all about charity, prayer, praising the Lord.

He was enamoured of the Eucharist and took no heed of time, of the flies that pestered him, of the eyes of the friars and of the people who watched him, of the noise that surrounded him. The days of solemn feast were days of even greater joy for him because he could spend the entire time serving Masses, burning with ardor from consecration to communion. He was so accustomed to showing his love for the Lord through passionate expressions of love that he often forgot other people were watching.

The love that transpired from his face induced people to prayer. The love he received in the Eucharist he returned by carrying the heavy loads of the tired wayfarers he would meet on his path, by settling arguments between people who forgot they were brothers, by relieving the pain and weariness of those who lay sick in bed. No-one could resist his candor, his goodness, his passionate cry: "Stay with God! Fear God! Love God! Refrain from sin! Be good!"

After a hard and tiring day, his well-deserved rest consisted in collecting his thoughts in prayer for long hours before the tabernacle, the image of the Virgin, or the altar of Saint Felix of Cantalice.

Here, he would find the strength to go back to serving, multiplying charity with his hands. No-one who knocked on his door ever left empty handed; no-one who was sick and sought comfort from him was ever disappointed; no-one who asked him for his prayers ever failed to receive the Lord's grace. There are notarial records that bear witness to the fact that he returned living children to their mothers, cured sick people, and that document many other episodes and extraordinary facts that occurred through his intercession. Charism and gift of the Lord that Brother Bernard concealed with the oil of the lamp that burned at the altar of Saint Felix of Cantalice.

Not even in the last years of his life, when he was sick, bent and paralytic, did he give up spending long hours in front of the tabernacle. To do this, he had two crutches made for him that would keep him standing upright during prayer, since he could no longer kneel as he once used to.

When he reached the end of his earthly life, at the age of ninety, old and weak, but shining more than ever in the spirit - so much so that those who met him would say that "there was so much joy in his eyes and in his words that he did not look sick at all, but that he seemed to be enjoying every minute" - he wanted to give back everything he had, asking his guardian, "charity", that he be allowed to keep only his habit.

When he received the sacraments, almost in ecstasy, he recommended to his brethren that they observe the Rule, peace, love for each other and their neighbor, and to pray for the benefactors. He passed away on August 22, 1622, at the break of day.

Graces and miracles flourished, but the journey that would lead him to the glory of others was long and hard and ended only on May 19, 1795, when Pope Pius VII listed him among the blessed. Six days later, his beatification was celebrated in the Vatican basilica.

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Here is the mirror of his life, which sheds light upon some fundamental values of our Franciscan and Capuchin charism: interior prayer, which springs from a deep love of the Crucified Christ and the Eucharist, shrouded in filial devotion to the Virgin Mary and numerous virtues such as poverty and humility, austerity and laboriousness, fraternal love filled with mercy, simplicity and popularity.

I have already discussed in various ways, with different fraternal letters, poverty, prayer, work, and other important aspects of our life. I would now like to reflect with you on an element that is perfectly in line with the contemporary Church, which is celebrating a Special

Eucharistic Year; I am referring to the love of our Blessed Bernard for the eucharistic mystery.

The image of our blessed gazing at the tabernacle for hours, day and night, after having served as a begging friar and having worked inside the convent for the friars and outside of it for the poor and the sick, remains a fundamental icon for our Order. And just as Francis, at the end of his life, manifested his experience of God as being entirely concentrated in the Eucharist, likewise “amid our questions and difficulties, and even our bitter disappointments” (cfr. John Paul II, Apost. Lett., *Mane nobiscum Domine*, n. 2), in the complexity of the contemporary world that we live in, the Eucharist, the tabernacle, Holy Mass, help us to rediscover the joy and beauty of our vocation and of our mission. For indeed if the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the mission of the Church,” it is also the source and summit of our Franciscan and Capuchin life and of our mission.

We should therefore cherish the words of the Holy Father that speak of “the example of the Saints, who in the Eucharist found nourishment on their journey towards perfection.” That is what our blessed Bernard did.

The Holy Father insists that all of us, priests and consecrated people, must “celebrate Holy Mass each day with the same joy and fervor with which [we] celebrated [our] first Mass” and “willingly spend time in prayer before the tabernacle ... spending a certain amount of time in dialogue with the Eucharistic Lord”; he goes on to add: “*Consecrated men and women*, called by that very consecration to more prolonged contemplation: never forget that Jesus in the tabernacle wants you to be at his side, so that he can fill your hearts with the experience of his friendship, which alone gives meaning and fulfillment to your lives.” (*Ibid.*, n. 30).

In this light, which shines forth from the life of the blessed Bernard of Offida, we find the secret of his holiness and the modernity and freshness of his message. My wish is that, despite our busy and deafening day-to-day life, we may find this eucharistic intimacy, and that, through the intercession of the blessed Bernard, we may receive the gift of adoration and silence to “patiently hear his voice and, as it were, sense the beating of his heart. 'O taste and see that the Lord is good!' (*Ps* 34:8) ... Let us deepen through adoration our personal and communal contemplation, drawing upon aids to prayer inspired by the word of God and the experience of so many mystics, old and new” (*ibid.*, n. 18), as is our humble Bernard, who burned with love.

May the blessed Virgin Mary, “eucharistic woman” (cf. Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 53-58), who, with the holy rosary, which is so strongly recommended to us by the Church and by the Holy Father in the apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, “prove a particularly fitting introduction to Eucharistic contemplation, a contemplation carried out with Mary as our companion and guide” (Lett. Apost. *Mane nobiscum Domine*, n. 18) and with the shining example of the Blessed Bernard of Offida.

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