

General Curia of the Capuchin Friars Minor

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SAINT SERAFINO OF MONTEGRANARO **On the IV Centenary of his death** *A Gift to the VII Plenary Council*

Message

*To the Brothers of the Province of
the Marches
and all the Brothers of the Order*

Dear Brothers,

Despite the many varied events that claim our attention in the course of our service to the Order, we cannot pass over in silence such an important and encouraging anniversary as the *fourth Centenary of the death of St Serafino of Montegranaro*, which occurred on October 12, 1604.

Whether we are talking about the most recent saints the Church has given us, such as Pio of Pietrelcina, Bernard of Corleone and Ignatius of Santhià, or those that go back to the beginnings of our history, our saints are relentless in their challenge. Serafino of Monegranaro belongs to the latter group, and he was canonised by Pope Clement XIII in 1767. All of them help us to hope and to trust.

To speak of St Serafino of Montegranaro is like going up into the hills and finding cool, refreshing air after the stifling summer heat we have just endured. Amid the confusion of all the frantic activities that engulf the spirits our contemporaries, it is like finding again the *one thing necessary* of which the Gospel speaks, obliging us to concentrate on essentials. It is like immersing oneself into the charism of the Order, which shines out in all its authenticity in the witness of this brother's holy life. It is like rediscovering a history, at first sight so remote from us but which in fact is our own and has never been so relevant. A history that deserves to be revisited, constantly remembered and meditated on with grateful, affectionate attention, especially by the brothers of the Province of the Marches, where the Order, in former times, flourished and bore great fruit. They are the first to enjoy the grace of this Centenary, but they wish also to rejoice with their other brothers scattered throughout the world.

But what are we to say about St Serafino? Brother Giuseppe Santarelli recently published a book on the *Life of St Serafino of Montegranaro* (Ancona 2003), an excellent study of the historical and geographical context of the saint's life. I have found it most helpful and gladly refer you to it.

Born of a humble family in Montegranaro in 1540, Felice (this was his baptismal name) spent his early childhood as a shepherd boy, then as an assistant bricklayer, until he entered the Capuchin novitiate at Jesi at the age of 18. After overcoming a deep spiritual anxiety, self-denial brought him to perfect spiritual peace. Hence his total availability, and in the 64 years of his life he was constantly transferred from friary to friary,

from one end of the Province of the Marches to the other, until he ended up at Ascoli Piceno, where he remained longer than anywhere else and eventually met Sister Death.

He was not upset by this constant wandering. It was the fruit of obedience, poverty and humility because, while his simplicity rendered him unsuited for the various friary duties – though he was diligent in discharging them – his miraculous gifts attracted the people, disturbed friary life and unsettled the friars. His miracles multiplied, so much so that one Guardian ordered him to stop performing them. Amid these superabundant graces, Serafino defended himself by saying: “ All right, all right, little saint, calm down, calm down! It wasn’t me, it was Christ and your faith that healed you!” And whenever anyone mortified him he would cheerfully say: “Ah, little saint, little saint, may you be given a piece of white bread. I hope to be worthy of purgatory! I’m a sinner. I have nothing: all I have is the crucifix and my rosary, but with these I hope to be of some use to the friars and to become a saint.”

And that was all there was to it. This was the wisdom of Saint Serafino, his true iconography. Two external aspects, never missing and all of a piece with this unadorned, rugged figure of a man, were the little brass crucifix and the rosary in his hand. His devotion to the Crucifix and to Our Lady was full of a heavenly wisdom that often left learned theologians speechless with wonder. The crucifix was always in his hand and he offered it to everyone to kiss. Serafino was a profoundly humble man who had learned his true place, yet he was always joyful and spiritually radiant.

Perfectly observing the rule of poverty and totally conformed to the penitential, contemplative and apostolic spirituality of the Constitutions, he found a way of making the church into his cell, because he was, as a rule, more often to be found in church than in his cell, especially at night. He literally hungered for the Eucharist and the sacraments; he thirsted for prayer and penances. In love with the mysteries of the life of Christ and Our Lady, he delighted in meditating on them and would go into ecstasy as he did so. He would have loved to be assigned to a friary in Loreto or in Rome so that he could serve many Masses every day. This was the source of his zeal to work with Christ for the salvation of souls, of his short, penetrating spiritual exhortations, his vocations apostolate that bore so much fruit, his veneration for priests, his compassion for the sick, the troubled and the poor, his courageous work as a peacemaker in society and in families, his missionary zeal and his desire for martyrdom – here was a shining icon of the Capuchin charism.

Dear brothers, ever since the Church at Vatican II called on us to renew our consecrated life and rediscover the vigour of our origins by renewing our Constitutions and adapting them to the signs of the times, we have never ceased questioning ourselves about our identity as Capuchin Friars Minor. In the Plenary Councils of the Order, starting in 1971, we meditated on fraternal life, on poverty and minority, on prayer and our missionary life and activity, on formation for our life according to the gospel, and on living poverty in brotherhood. Now we are preparing for a systematic reflection on minority and itinerancy in the light of the theology of communion.

There is no doubt that the Order has achieved much in terms of its self-understanding, and certainly today we are much more aware of our specific identity and

of our charism in the Church. This was why the Pope, at the General Chapter of 1988, gave us this recommendation: “There is one decisive step you will need to take: namely, to imitate St Francis more closely in his concern not to remain on the level of words, but to move on to action. Commit yourselves, seriously and realistically, to this process of practical application at all levels, following the principles of life and hope that are already yours. Strive humbly and sincerely to embody the values that make up your charism, going as far as the ultimate consequences”. (*Analecta OFM. Cap 104 – 1988 – 163*)

In the face of this urgent appeal to “move on to action” we meet with an icon, a brightly shining mirror, in the life and holiness of Serafino of Montegranaro - this little brother, humble and unschooled, who yet studied God’s wisdom in the school of Christ crucified. “Here is the real book you should study if you want to preach to the people fruitfully”, he would say to preachers while taking the brass crucifix from his sleeve. Like a master skilled in the wisdom that comes from above, he teaches us the truth about our Capuchin life, fulfilling the dream that Francis of Assisi once had, of attending a General Chapter of all the friars where the learned spoke with simplicity and the simple with a subtlety and sweetness inspired by the Holy Spirit” (cf. *2Cel.* 191).

Mirrored in his life we find the masterly solution to our renewal in brotherhood, in poverty and prayer-filled apostolate. Here, too, we glimpse the underpinnings of gospel minority and itinerancy, which the Order is preparing to reflect on in the forthcoming Plenary Council and to translate into everyday life.

Saint Serafino invites us to rethink our relationships with one another, as a gospel brotherhood united by a shared charism; he challenges and pushes us to shape our lives according to the demands of evangelical itinerancy. From him we can learn that itinerancy implies detachment and poverty of spirit; it places us on the move and makes us actively aware of being pilgrims and strangers in this world, with nowhere to lay our head. More concretely, itinerancy moves us not to build our own nest where we settle comfortably amid the commodities of consumerism and the unfeeling indifference of secularisation, nor yet to appropriate any ministry to ourselves as our own personal preserve.

Positively, itinerancy opens us to the freedom of the children of God and widens our hearts to accept greater pastoral availability, so that we go in search of those who are far off or lost at heart. It arouses an apostolic disquiet within us, by which we rediscover the road, trodden by Christ himself who is our way, alongside which are found countless brothers and sisters for whom we are filled with the love of Christ when we remember that He died for them all. With them we share that loving obedience, and so become an itinerant brotherhood, that the world may believe.

Dear brothers of the Province of the Marches, may you rediscover in Saint Serafino all the spiritual force of your fruitful Capuchin tradition. He was indeed a contemplative brother, poor and austere, truly a lesser brother, a “people’s friar” at the service of his brothers and sisters, a friar in love with all creation. And so this Centenary becomes a grace, a gift of the Spirit for you and for the entire Order. Allow yourselves to be amazed and won over by his sanctity, and by that overflowing love for the Crucified

One of San Damiano who transformed the heart of Francis. We too wish to accept this “lived theology” of Saint Serafino of Montegranaro showing us his little brass crucifix, so that our hearts may be transformed by his merciful gaze and we may learn to embrace joyfully our conversion to minority, “as pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility”. And in this year of the Rosary proclaimed by Pope John Paul II, may his rosary, made of fennel stalk and pumpkin seeds, bind us all together in charity and root us in filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin, that gentle gateway into the mysteries of Christ and the Church.

Praying that St Serafino may intercede on behalf of the Plenary Council, I send my warmest fraternal wishes to you all.

Br. John Corriveau
General Minister OFMCap.

Rome, 21 September 2003.
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