

# The Canonization of St. Camilla Battista of Varano The Newest Franciscan Saint

by  
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It was October 17, 2010. I was at St. Peter's Square in Rome for the papal Mass to canonize six saints including St. Camilla Battista of Varano (1458-1524), a Poor Clare nun from Camerino, Italy. I arrived an hour early, and the scene was the usual mix of the sacred and profane when large throngs of pilgrims, tourists, and the curious come together for a huge papal event. A group of Australian pilgrims led by an Asian priest had cut in line, provoking a heated reaction from an American tour manager. Several Italian nuns in full habit and some young Italian friars and veil were squabbling with Vatican police over whether or not their document in hand should allow them special entrance; it apparently did not and they went away miffed. As the line finally began to move towards the metal detectors, shoving, elbowing, and jostling were widespread. A pilgrim next to me, observing the disorder, recalled Jesus's admonition that the first will be last. All the while, various pilgrim groups could be heard quietly praying the rosary or joyfully singing hymns, blissfully unfazed by (or peacefully ignoring) the rudeness and haste around them.



I was blessed to have received a special ticket granting me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to sit in the "sagrato" or seating area near Pope Benedict XVI. Just after I sat down, the former prime minister of Australia with his entourage was seated a few rows in front of me. Soon after, dignitaries, delegations, and royalty from all over the world were paraded in from within St. Peter's portico and seated nearby. Escorted by tuxedo-clad, elderly Italian gentlemen, they were splendidly dressed in ceremonial uniforms adorned with medals, sashes, coattails and hats.

On the opposite side of the "sagrato" dozens of cardinals and bishops soon processed in and filled the white travertine with a sea of red and purple.

By 10:00 a.m. the entire square and half the Via della Conciliazione were packed with people. Estimates put the crowd at over 100,000. Soon four Swiss guards came out from under the portico in full Renaissance uniform with helmet, lance and sword, and solemnly marched to their posts where they would remain motionless for the next two hours. Then everyone stood up as the papal procession began

from the square. Leading were the priests followed by bishops, archbishops, and cardinals with their tall miters—all in white chasubles. Finally, I saw Pope Benedict XVI elevated several feet above the crowd gliding gracefully along in his "popemobile." After incensing the altar, he ascended to his papal throne at the highest place in the "sagrato." Over the next two hours, the Mass was a magnificent liturgical blend of choir music, chant, prayer, incense, pomp, and splendor – all flawlessly orchestrated. I was there because of the Poor Clare nuns of Camerino who safeguard Camilla's relics and memory.

Over the past few years my wife and I had become close friends with them and they had given me the special pass. As the events wore on, I couldn't help notice that St. Camilla seemed to be the least known of the six saints: her biography was last in the booklet; her banner was positioned at the end of St. Peter's façade; and she received the lightest applause from the crowd when her name was announced. I compared her place to those pilgrims jostling to be first in line, and thought of the second part of Jesus's admonition: "The last shall be first." Surely Camilla would not have minded being last, as she was a follower of Francis and Clare who sought to be lesser servants of the least, in imitation of Christ.

A year earlier, I had been asked by the sisters to translate some of her writings into English. In that work I came to know her fairly well; in fact, she became like a spiritual director to me. Camilla played an important role in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a woman within the Strict Observant Franciscan reform. She was an ascetic and mystic who wrote religious meditations and reflections on the cross. Her love for Jesus was so intense that she wished to be with her beloved where He was – on the cross. She desired to enter the heart of God and drown in His suffering, and in this she was mystically consoled.

Some of her writings can be difficult to understand today, as our post-Vatican II Church has largely moved away from penance and suffering. Nonetheless, Camilla's writings remain powerful reflections and have been meditated on by figures such as St. Philip Neri and Cardinal Borromeo, former bishop of Milan.

**"Ask God for this wonderful revelation:**

**May He reveal yourself to you,  
may He make you know  
who you are,  
how much you can do,  
how much you know,  
and how much you are worth.**

**Without this revelation,  
no one can become a saint."**

**St. Camilla Battista of Varano**

One of her meditations has always remained with me: she wrote in *Instructions to a Disciple* that when someone offends us, we should be upset not because of *our* injury, but because of *God's* injury, and that they have put their own soul in danger. In Camilla I have gained not only an intercessor, but an example, a friend, a guide.

For more information on St. Camilla or the sisters of Camerino, visit [www.saintcamillabattista.it](http://www.saintcamillabattista.it)

For her writings (including her autobiography), contact me and I can email them to you free of charge.