

Newest Franciscan Saint St. Camilla Battista of Varano

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ON OCTOBER 17 OF THIS YEAR,
A POOR CLARE MYSTIC FROM CAMERINO, ITALY, WILL BECOME THE NEWEST FRANCISCAN SAINT.

I discovered Camilla Battista of Varano (1458-1524) about six years ago while on retreat with the OFM Franciscan Friars of the Marches, Italy. I was privileged to meet the Poor Clare sisters who now live in a convent in Camerino (30 miles east of Assisi) where St. Camilla Battista's relics are preserved. My wife and I developed a lasting friendship with them due to their overflowing hospitality and generosity. A year ago, they asked us to translate her writings into English, since it had been announced that she would be canonized. In the process, we learned a lot about this holy Poor Clare nun.

Camilla was the name given to the girl born (*illegitimately*) on April 9, 1458 to Giulio Cesare of Varano, the powerful duke and lord of Camerino. Just the same, she was loved by the duke's wife who raised her together with her own children. As a child, she was vivacious and playful. She grew up immersed in the high culture typical of the splendid Renaissance court. She was exposed to poets, historians, philosophers, and painters; learned Latin, and read the classics; learned how to dance, paint, and play musical instruments. Her future was destined to an arranged marriage to strengthen the family dynasty, but when Camilla was eight years old, her life took an unexpected turn.

A Franciscan friar preached a sermon during Lent exhorting his listeners to shed a little tear on Good Friday in memory of Christ's Passion. An enthusiastic little girl, Camilla vowed to shed a tear every Friday, a devotion she maintained for many years. By doing so, the Holy Spirit entered her soul and she began to perceive something in the Cross of Jesus much more valuable than the worldly pleasures and intrigues around her. She later discovered a booklet with a meditation on the Passion of Christ. She prayed and meditated, fasted frequently, mortified her body, confessed often, and met friars for spiritual direction.

In 1481, Camilla entered a Poor Clare convent despite the objections of her powerful father. She donned the veil in Urbino, 50 miles north of Camerino. There the Poor Clares lived a more ascetic life associated with the Franciscan reform of the Strict Observance. Camilla made her profession and took the religious name, Battista (Baptist). Two years later, Sr. Camilla Battista returned to Camerino to found a Poor Clare community of the Strict Observance.



She spent the remaining forty years of her life in her native city praying and meditating deeply within the enclosure where at times she served as Abbess. However, after a political squabble involving her father and the pope's son (*from the notorious Borgia family*), her father and brothers were assassinated. Sr. Camilla Battista was forced to flee south to the Abruzzo region for safety. With the election of Pope Julius II, she was allowed to return to Camerino, where she remained until her death from the plague in 1524. Despite the cruelty of these crimes, she makes no mention of them in her writings; and always maintained steadfast obedience to her superiors and Church authorities.

As a mystic who spent much time focusing on the cross, it is fruitful to read her works after periods of prayer and even fasting. Her best known work is the *Mental Sorrows of Jesus*, in which she narrates the various sufferings of Jesus. She wrote, *Memories of Jesus* ten years after her novitiate as if Jesus were speaking to her while she was a novice. She wrote an in-depth letter to a spiritual director, in which she recounts her life story; this is now known as her autobiography.

Camilla Battista was beatified in 1843. Although there are many miracles attested to her intercession, the miracle approved for her canonization involved the healing of a child named Clelia Ottaviani in 1877. Afflicted with rickets, Clelia's bones were severely deformed and she could not walk. A relative brought her to her tomb of Camilla Battista for three consecutive days of prayer. On the third day, the little girl straightened her legs, stood up unassisted, walked, and then ran almost two miles to her home. A local doctor who examined her condition before and after the intercession documented that there was no medical explanation for her healing. However, due to powerful anti-Catholic masons in Camerino, his examinations were kept secret until finally released many decades later.

For more information visit: www.saintcamillabattista.it