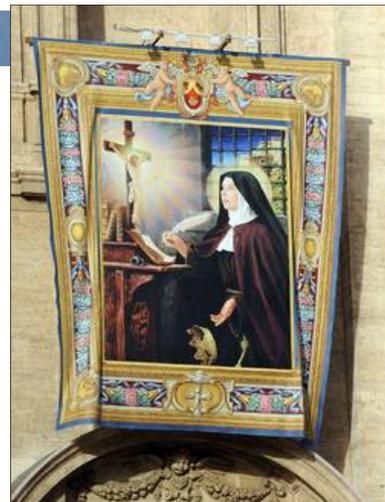


THE POOR CLARE SISTERS of San Severino and Camerino, Italy

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On October 17, 2010, Camilla Battista Varano (1458-1524), a Poor Clare mystic from Camerino, Italy was one of six people declared a saint by Pope Benedict XVI. I was honored not only to be present in St. Peter's square during her canonization, but I was especially privileged to be one of just several hundred people seated near the Holy Father throughout the ceremony. (*TAU-USA Winter 2010, Issue 69*)

As I looked up the huge banner of St. Camilla hanging on the façade of St. Peter's my mind flooded with memories on how I came to know this little-known, but powerful saint.

Seven years ago I met the Poor Clare sisters of San Severino – a quaint hill town in the picturesque Marches region of central Italy – while on pilgrimage with my wife in this area rich in Franciscan history. We immediately developed a bond with the sisters, which blossomed into a deep and lasting friendship. Several sisters later moved to nearby Camerino to live in the same monastery where St. Camilla lived five centuries ago and in which her body remains today.

Their mission was and continues to be to serve as guardians of the saint's relics and memory. Over the past few years, we helped them translate some of Camilla's writings into English. And in the process, I learned a lot about this great saint. But the sisters themselves, humble servants of Jesus and faithful followers of St. Clare, taught me a great deal also about Franciscan spirituality and history. Even though I have a certificate in Franciscan studies, I learned much more about Franciscanism through the lives and stories of these holy women than through any book or course.

I was struck that the sisters lived a "traditional" cloistered life – full habit, chanting the office, periods of silence, fasting, etcetera; yet when they welcomed our group into their community, they broke out the bongos and acoustic guitars, told jokes, and served a delicious meal followed by homemade desserts and local liqueurs. The sisters beamed with joy as they shared their life and community with us, which they routinely did with diverse groups.

Their life seemed such a contrast and I became fascinated with their community's history. I wondered why they were so joyful and were attracting vocations (almost half of the community is under 40) while most religious communities in Italy were dying out.

The Abbess, Sr. Rosella Chiara, told me that huge changes were made over the past 40 years as a result of the Second Vatican Council. Back in the 1960's and '70s, some of their sisters had the opportunity of learning from eminent Franciscan theologians, some of whom were present at the Council itself.

A deep study of the Council documents led to a fertile season of revival and period of new formation for their community. Sr. Rosella said that the friars helped them move from the pre-conciliar period – characterized by a strong focus on religious observances and devotions in the form of exterior and legalistic perfection – to the renewal promoted by the Council above all through the *rediscovery of the sources*.



After the Council, many original Franciscan writings were published in Italian as the “*Fonti Francescane*”

(Franciscan Sources – in English, the *Omnibus*), which gave them the possibility for the first time to get to know the writings – and thus, the original charism – of Saint Francis and the first Franciscans. Effectively, the Council promoted the value of the person over exterior practices.

And in this transition, the community did not escape conflict (as has been the case in the larger Church). But in time a new serenity came over their community as continuity with the past was conserved while moving towards renewal and transformation.

So if before, their prayer life consisted in “reciting” Latin psalms and “saying” devotional prayers, after the Council they rediscovered the value of the interior life by connecting their hearts to the liturgical life, and not separating life’s ordinary activities from prayer. The devotional practices that had been considered the primary form of prayer were gradually supplanted by liturgical prayer, the prayer of the universal church – the liturgy of the hours.

At the same time, they passed from merely “assisting” during the Holy Mass, to becoming active, aware, and fruitful “participants” in liturgical prayer.



Regarding work, the sisters desired to strengthen an authentically contemplative life. Whereas, previously work had taken up most of the day, they now chose the primacy of prayer at fixed intervals.

Further, they admitted all the sisters to prayer, while in the past, the sisters had been separated between “choir sisters” (those who knew how to read & were able, therefore, to pray the breviary) and “converse sisters” (those who were illiterate, and performed manual labor inside the community).

Besides the re-establishment of the daily prayer schedule, the community established periods for retreat – both for the entire community and individual sisters. Their re-discovery of the baptismal consecration and of the equal dignity of all the baptized allowed them to move away from the sense of feeling “privileged” that had characterized religious life before the Council. As a result, they came to understand the enclosure in a new way.

Whereas before, it had served as a kind of “fence” to separate themselves from the public and protect the sisters’ virtues, after the Council, it became considered a means of defining their sacred space and enabling them to enhance their sense of intimacy and spirituality within.



Thus, in the visiting parlors, they removed the heavy iron grates and curtains, which they replaced with waist-high railings allowing for freer exchange between themselves and visitors.

During the Lenten season, they will temporarily suspend group meetings and turn inward in prayer and reflection. As they prepare for the great feast of Easter, they will deepen their listening to the Word of God by “*Lectio Divina*” meditations prepared by some of the sisters. They will participate more intensely in the liturgical life by learning new Lenten songs.

They will spend more time in silence, adoration, and personal prayer. They will also fast by renouncing evening dishes and Friday dinners; their sacrifice will be offered on the altar of the Mass at the Last Supper of Holy Thursday for the poor, above all in the missions.

For more information on St. Camilla’s canonization visit:

www.saintcamillabattista.it



You can also visit their community website in Italian at

www.clarissesanseverino.it

