

Blessed Maria Celeste Crostarosa (1696-1755)

Homily ¹

1. Saint Pierre Favre, one of the founders of the Company of Jesus together with Saint Ignatius de Loyola and Saint Francis Xavier, used to say that the saints are “God’s masterpieces, which He made with His own hands”. ² They are lighthouses that light up the dark night of human life with hope. Saints are not “men of sand”, ³ lacking substance, that crumble like children’s sand castles on the shores of the sea. Saints are strong and courageous people, who honour humanity by renewing the flavour and power of life every day. Created by God, Saints have the solid robustness of an humanity restored by grace.

The existence of Blessed Celeste Crostarosa shows the tenacious perseverance of this woman in realising her own vocation in obedience to the will of God which became clear to her through a thousand vicissitudes and obstacles.

Let us look at the main outlines of her life. Giulia Crostarosa – this was her baptismal name – was born in Naples on 31st October 1696, as the tenth of twelve children, into a religious and wealthy family. As a little girl, spurred on by curiosity to explore the adult world, and with the complicity of the domestic servants, she had the vanity to wear fashionable clothes and learn profane songs. Later on, however, she had such a repugnance for all of it that, at the age of eleven, on the day of St. Joseph in 1707, she went to the church of St. Thomas to make a general confession which liberated her from this “burden” of conscience.

2. This was the starting point of her spiritual journey. It was a true conversion. She became more recollected, learned to do mental prayer and to meditate on the Passion of Jesus. Struck by the wound in His side caused by the lance, she took spiritual refuge in the bleeding Heart of Jesus. In Eucharistic Communion she received consolation and inspiration from His holy life. And also, reading the lives of the Saints contributed to confirming her in goodness. And so, little by little there developed in her the desire to donate herself entirely to the Lord by means of religious consecration.

Thus began a complex journey of seeking the will of God, which was similar to the wandering of the people of Israel in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Consolations and desolations followed each other like waves on the shores of the sea. The stages of this long journey from Campania to Puglia included Marigliano near Naples, where, on 21st November 1718, she put on the Carmelite habit, receiving the name of Sister Candida of Heaven; and then Scala, near Salerno, where she put on the habit of the Visitandines with the name of Sister Maria Celeste of the Holy Desert; then Amalfi, Pareti, Roccapiemonte and finally Foggia, where she remained for the last seventeen years of her life (1738-1755). ⁴ The choice of Foggia was an inspiration from on high: “Go to Foggia”, an interior voice told her, “because there I want the foundation to be made”. ⁵

¹ Given in the Sanctuary of the Crowned Mother of God, Foggia on 18th June 2016.

² PIERRE FAVRE, *Memoriale*, n. 74.

³ CATHERINE TERNYNCK, *L'uomo di sabbia*, Vita e Pensiero (The man of sand), Life and Thought), Milan 2012.

⁴ Sr. Crostarosa was always accompanied by her two sisters, Sr. Illuminata and Sr. Evangelista.

⁵ *Positio, Summarium*, p. 45.

3. In the meantime the reputation of our Blessed had grown ever more and better amongst the clergy and the religious Sisters, passing beyond the problematic judgement of her as a *deluded nun* and the prophetic one of an *inspired nun* so that finally she became known as the *Holy Prioress*. And undoubtedly, in this regard, there was the influence upon her of Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori. A biographer states that: "[In this regard] the documents are few and brief, but sufficient to be able to say that Saint Alphonsus and his Congregation were in communion with her; and they even considered her foundation as a true foundation of the common Redemptorist Institute".⁶

And thus in Foggia, in this southern part of the region of Puglia, of the most ancient Christian tradition, blessed by the millennial protective presence of St. Michael the Archangel and, in more recent times, also blessed by the figure of one of the greatest miracle-workers of the Church, St. Pius of Pietrelcina, there matured the sanctity of Sister Celeste Crostarosa, an extraordinary woman, strong and courageous, whose fame has survived the centuries and remained intact until our own days: "In contrast to St. Alphonsus, Mother Celeste never had anyone among the Redemptorists and the Redemptoristines who gave testimony to her holy life, even after her death. And yet all the people of Foggia, right from the day of her death on 14th September 1755, proclaimed her "the Holy Prioress".⁷

In the biography of St. Gerard Majella, who died in Materdomini in the Province of Avellino on 16th October 1755, one month after Mother Celeste, a prophecy has been handed down to us. On 14th September 1755, Gerard turned to a lay Brother and said: "Today in Foggia Mother Maria Celeste has passed away to enjoy God." He was not speaking for no reason, but out of the conviction that Mother Celeste had died in the odour of sanctity.⁸

4. A fascinating portrait of our Blessed was drawn exactly twenty years ago by a great Saint of our epoch, St. John Paul II. The unforgettable Pontiff, on the occasion of the third centenary of the birth of Mother Celeste (1696-1996), writing to the Nuns of the Monastery of the Most Holy Redeemer, summarized in five different ways the spirituality which our Blessed had lived to sanctify herself and what she left as her legacy to her spiritual daughters.⁹

In the first place there is the centrality of *devotion to the Word Incarnate*, which the Holy Spirit incessantly activates in us, changing our lives into His own. In the same way Christ, Sr. Crostarosa tells us, "can thus be reborn in the world in the souls dear to Him".¹⁰ Everything in the Christian life is founded in Christ and derives from Him, and the virtues are nothing else than the expression of our own existence in Him.

We must then understand Mother Maria Celeste's referral to *the Eucharist* as the source of every spiritual transfiguration. For it is from the Eucharist that the Crostarosan project of religious life flows, and it finds in the community the sign and witness of the love of Christ. Every moment of the consecrated life, both in its apostolic dimension and in its longing for perfection, is a gift of grace, which unifies and sanctifies everything. This is the reason why Sr. Crostarosa invites the

⁶ Positto, *Biografia critica* (Position, Critical Biography), p. 258 ff.

⁷ Positto, p. 261.

⁸ Positto, p. 262.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter* of 31st October 1996.

¹⁰ CELESTE CROSTAROSA, *Autobiography*, edition edited by B. D'ORAZIO, Casamari 1965, p. 133 ff.

Redemptoristines to imprint within themselves “the life and true similitude of the Redeemer”, becoming His “inspired living portraits on earth”.¹¹

A third characteristic of Crostarosan spirituality is *contemplation*, so that we may let ourselves be irradiated by grace and transformed by it, in such a manner that we become a transparent sign of it for others: “The assiduous contemplation of the mystery of Christ”, say the Redemptoristine Constitutions, “will develop in us the characteristic of a smiling and radiant joy, a clear simplicity and true fraternity which is specific to our community” (n. 10). From this comes their generous commitment to give their neighbours pardon from their hearts, the mercy of understanding and consolation in their afflictions.

A fourth element of Crostarosan spirituality is *fraternal charity*, which is born of contemplation and Eucharistic communion. We can never overdo charity, which is the central virtue of the Gospels, lived in an heroic way by the Blessed, overcoming, like Christ, the many temptations of the enemy of all good. Charity is the fragrance of authentic holiness.

Finally, the Blessed Mother invites her Sisters to *fidelity*, which requires firmness and perseverance in goodness. The nuns of today are aware that their presence and witness are a precious contribution to the Church’s mission in the world. Their form of life is not only not obsolete, but is the best expression of a simple and generous life and meaningful for the men and women of today. Recollection in the spirit exalts humanity and makes it more authentic and fascinating.

5. Is there also something that the Blessed Mother Maria Celeste Crostarosa suggests today to all of us priests, lay people, and consecrated men and women?

Yes. I believe I ought to repeat the words of our supreme Poet: “Consider your seed: made not to live as brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge.”¹² And also Christ’s exhortation: “Be perfect as your Father is perfect, who is in Heaven” (Mt. 5:48). It is an invitation to live a holy life, and this invitation is not addressed just to priests and consecrated men and women, but to all Christians, and even the laity, who are also called to sanctity.

How do we do so? In her Rules, Mother Celeste offers us new advice about the Christian life. The nine rules refer to the nine months of gestation which every human being has in the womb of its mother. The nine counsels, therefore, are there to regenerate our lives and make them rise up again in goodness.

Here is the list of them: mutual charity, poverty, purity, obedience, humility, recollection, prayer, sacrifice and a love of the Cross.¹³ They are evangelical teachings, capable of giving families, communities and society a heightened quality of human and evangelical life, forming persons who are made, not of sand, but of the best human and Christian material.

Blessed Celeste Crostarosa, pray for us!

¹¹ *Spicilegium Historicum CSSR*, 16 (1968) p. 18.

¹² DANTE, *La Divina Commedia. Inferno* (The Divine Comedy. Hell), XXVI, v. 118-120.

¹³ *Le Regole di Maria Celeste Crostarosa, ieri, oggi, domani* (Maria Celeste’s Rules, yesterday, today and tomorrow) edited by EDGARDO LONGO, Foggia 2012.