

ON THE 250TH
ANNIVERSARY
OF THE DEATH
OF ST. IGNATIUS
OF SANTHIÀ

ROME, 22 SEPTEMBER 2020

TO THE CAPUCHIN FRIARS OF THE PROVINCE OF PIEMONTE,
AND TO ALL THE FRIARS OF THE ORDER

PROT. N. 00629/20

DEAR BROTHERS,

On September 22, 1770, in the infirmary at the Capuchin friary of Monte di Torino, Br. Ignatius of Santhià, born Lorenzo Maurizio Belvisotti, died at the stroke of midnight. When the father guardian, who was praying at his bedside with the words of the rite, repeated: «depart, O Christian soul from this world ...», Br. Ignatius obeyed and took his final breath. He left a deep impression as a Christian and a friar by evangelically abandoning everything while having a special fondness for living a life of obedience to the will of God and leading men back to the Lord. Two hundred and fifty years have passed since that holy death, but the memory of St. Ignatius remains very much alive, obviously among the friars of Piedmont, but not only there.

Knowing that it's sometimes good for us, and for everyone, to retrace the steps of our holy brothers who have preceded us, we together

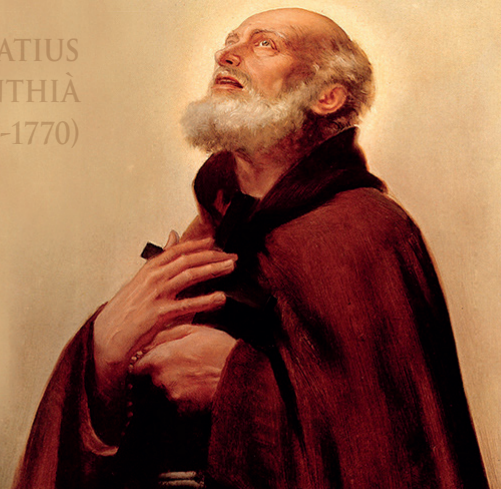
gladly take the opportunity on this centenary to obtain the encouragement and light that we need for our journey. Let us help each other in a spirit of active commemoration according to the invitation of our Constitutions, “to safeguard and lovingly develop the spiritual heritage of our Brotherhood.” (Const. 6.1) “Let us ensure that we are familiar with [...] everything referring to our brothers renowned for their holiness, apostolic work and erudition.” (Const. 6.2)

Let us begin, then, by briefly recalling the earthly steps of St. Ignatius.

1. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lorenzo Maurizio was born in Santhià, in the Province of Vercelli on June 5, 1686. He was the fourth of six children. Having lost his

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OF SANTHIÀ
(1686-1770)



father at the age of seven, he was entrusted by his mother to a priest who took care of his education. He was thus able to acquire a good literary education combined with a genuine piety that led to a ripening of his response to the Lord and his request to be admitted to the seminary.

After completing his theological studies in 1710, he was ordained a priest and shortly thereafter was requested by the aristocratic Avogadro family of Vercelli to be the tutor of their children. Having quickly gained the esteem and affection of the entire city, he was awarded the title of canon at the collegiate church of Santhià and was appointed parish priest at the parish church of Casanova Elso. But even this did not satisfy sufficiently the desire that more and more animated his heart: to focus on nothing but doing the will of God.

Thus, in early May of 1716, the Provincial Minister of the Capuchins of Turin were approached by Don Lorenzo, now thirty, and presented with his request to be admitted to the Order. The Province of Turin at that time had a good number of friars and there was certainly no shortage of vocations. Therefore the Minister Provincial took the liberty to illustrate to him at length the austere lifestyle of the friars, and presented him with the difficulties he would encounter with fraternal life in common, knowing that he had lived independently all his life. Perhaps he was aiming to dissuade him, and only at the end asked him candidly about the reason for his request to embrace the life of the Capuchins.

On the contrary, Don Lorenzo's response was immediate and succinct, a sign that he had already thought it all through, and that it was neither a whim of the moment nor a desire to escape responsibility by taking refuge in a friary. He then got on his knees and replied

to the Provincial Minister thusly: "Up until now, I have done my will; but to truly serve the Lord, I have to do his will; and in order to do this, it will be necessary to put me under obedience."

From that point forward, obedience would be his emblem. On May 24, 1716, in the friary of Chiari, he began his novitiate year and received his new name: Ignazio da Santhià. A name that refers to fire - from the Latin *ignis* - and can only be, as Saint Francis sings, «beautiful and playful and robust and strong», and at the same time capable of illuminating the night. Now a Capuchin friar, fire and light would soon radiate from Br. Ignatius vigorously, with an ever-growing obedience and humility as its humus, and it would soon make him shine with great love for the Lord and total adherence to His will.

At the end of his novitiate, Br. Ignatius was sent to Saluzzo, as custodian and head of the church. He then was sent to the novitiate in Chieri, to be an example to the novices, then to Turin-Monte and shortly thereafter again to Chieri. In 1727 he was recalled to Turin-Monte again as prefect of the sacristy and confessor, but in September 1731 he was transferred to Mondovì as the master of novices. There he spent 14 years, forming no less than 120 friars with his simple, clear and effective pedagogy: to love and serve as the Lord Jesus loves and serves.

In 1744, Br. Ignatius was called back to the Turin-Monte friary to be cured of a strange disease that had suddenly struck him. It was strange and unknown to the other friars, that is, but not to him! A missionary who was previously his novice, Br. Bernardino da Vezzo, had written to him from the Congo about how he was losing his sight; Br. Ignatius then asked the Lord to heal him, offering himself in his place to bear his brother's illness.

This bout of precarious health did not curtail his commitment to obedience; so much so that, shortly after his arrival in Turin-Monte, even though burdened by the disease, he agreed to be included in a group of military chaplains requested by King Carlo Emanuele III for the assistance of services to the injured and infected. Two years were thus spent between Asti, Vinovo and Alessandria.

In the spring of 1746, he was able to return to Turin-Monte and took up the ministry of confessor, preacher of retreats, spiritual director; he spent whole days listening to and supporting sinners and the poor. After 22 years of fruitful ministry, he was hospitalized in the friary's infirmary, where he spent the last two years of his life in humble submission to God's designs and to the friary's guardian. Yet, he held on to an expectation that those words of the Church for the dying might be pronounced, «depart, O Christian soul ...», before he should leave this world.

Of him, Pope St. Paul VI would say on the day of his beatification: “The church greets him today as a religious admirable in every aspect of his Franciscan life. Every moment of his Franciscan life and every manifestation of his apostolic activity demonstrate this versatility for every internal and external virtue, which he can make exemplary for all.» (St. Paul VI, Homily for the beatification, April 17, 1966)

To this brother of ours we can securely apply the words that our Seraphic Father Saint Francis placed at the end of his Canticle of the Creatures: «Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility», because the life of obedience and humility lived by St. Ignatius of Santità was a continuous action of thanksgiving to the Lord and faithful service to his brothers.

2. ST. IGNATIUS OF SANTIÀ FOR US TODAY

The few, simple features of the life of Saint Ignatius are sufficient for making us understand where the greatness our brother lies: the constant quest to obey God rather than self, enabling him to subject his will to the legitimate superior and to fraternity; the willingness to do any office or task entrusted to him, asking to be enlightened in regards to everything with prolonged prayer and commitment of self with alacrity and humility. How much value this testimony has for us today! If we would allow it to take hold, it could infuse us with greater vigor, more authenticity and Franciscan joy in bearing witness to our charism in the Church and in society.

Thus, Saint Ignatius reminds us that doing God's will through obedience to the provincial minister and the guardian - which God's very charity gives us as shepherds and guides - is a source of personal enrichment and of true, noble freedom. And this is exactly what our Constitutions say when, after recalling Jesus' obedience to the Father, it affirms that «obedience is a journey in which true freedom is gradually attained.» (Const. 158.1); and adding that obedience is «the fullest expression of living 'with nothing of [one's] own' [and is] the foundation of communion with God, with the Church, with the brothers, with all men and women, and with every creature.»(Const. 158.4)

Perhaps some burdens which weigh us down and at times make the consecrated life in fraternity intolerable, for oneself and for others, would be more easily addressed and even taken away when our adhesion is truly heartfelt, and not just a façade, and when it involves our interior willingness, made ready and effective in real terms.

St. Ignatius' life as a friar can then be characterized by assiduous prayer and generous domestic and apostolic work. They are essential elements that translate the Holy Gospel into life and tell how Christian discipleship is carried out in the manner of St. Francis of Assisi. It is assiduous prayer and work that ensure the constancy of true obedience over time; they are things not subject to the fleeting nature of good intentions or passing moments of favorable circumstances, but are well-rooted in and entrusted to divine goodness.

Prayer and work, carried out in fraternity, at the same time demand and bring to bear gratuitousness. It is obeying not because we expect a return, an advancement, or an immediate restitution, but simply because they are part of the wellspring, or even the very source of obedience: that of Jesus Christ, who «appeared in human form, humbled himself by becoming obedient even to death, death on the cross» (Phil 2: 6-8). And where do you learn the obedience of Jesus, and find the strength to follow in his footsteps with humble gratuitousness? The 'place' is mainly and properly prayer: whether liturgical prayer, prayer of praise, of thanksgiving, of adoration. These are times in which the Church directs us and gifts us, and to which we have freely committed ourselves with our profession, because, by marking our day, we remember that our actions are guarded by the grace of God who works within us.

Without prayer, our entire commitment to action would certainly suffer detrimentally. On the one hand, we would perceive committing ourselves generously as being something useless, because we would not see immediate and concrete results that are equal to our efforts. On the other hand, contrarywise, we

would believe that what we do is the result of our, and only our, very hard work! In both cases, God is excluded and our life becomes sad and fruitless.

Dedicating time to prayer, personal and liturgical, and to work is an expression of obedience in that it serves the glory of God in a gratuitous way, and at the same time serves humanity in its need for comfort and concrete gestures of charity.

There is yet another challenge that the life of St. Ignatius of Santhià throws at us and that I'd like to emphasize: it is the sense of finitude, of the finite man or he who is defined by a frame of time, rightly perceived as a gift from the loving power of the Lord. With this perspective, finite being is no longer considered from the point of view of what we lack, almost a theft against our freedom, but it becomes the very possibility of opening up to infinity. The sense of finitude thus understood brings us to a state of spiritual sobriety or levelheadedness, a vital value for the Christian and even more so for the Capuchin friar minor: are we not called to make the practice of sober simplicity our lifestyle?

We continue to learn from St. Ignatius: why did he distinguish himself as a friar who did everything, that is, obediently making himself available for any service asked of him by his provincial minister or guardian? Because, aware of having received great and precious gifts from God, like a good administrator he generously disposed himself at the service of his brother, of man, of the world and of creation as a whole. He thus makes an act of restitution «to the Lord God Most High and Supreme of all good, recognizing that all good belongs to him and to all, giving thanks since they proceed from Him» (St. Francis of Assisi, Rule non Bollata, XVI).

This restitution comes from one who knows that as an administrator, he does not own the goods that are given to him. He knows that they are to be used in a levelheaded and responsible way; that is, as a gift that must be returned, poured out and given again. Only with this movement of restitution, which calls into account our freedom, can the gift bear fruit. This quality of sobriety, therefore, is a virtuous disposition of those who do not waste the gifts received, but return them in obedience, receiving in return the same creative power of God, who generates communion with the brothers and with the whole of creation: «a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion» (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 76).

IN CONCLUSION

Dear brothers, Saint Ignatius of Santhià is part of that great, authentic treasury within our Order, which in its almost 500 years of history has been able to produce, foster and multiply a large group of saints and blessed who have responded generously to the call of God and, in obedience and humility, announced the love of God to man and to all creation.

The memory of Saint Ignatius of Santhià today, two hundred and fifty years after his birth into eternal life, becomes for the Province of Piedmont a reason for vigorous renewal of sincere adherence to the Lord, starting from the simple values that our saint has taught us with his life, which are perennially valid and are particularly so today.

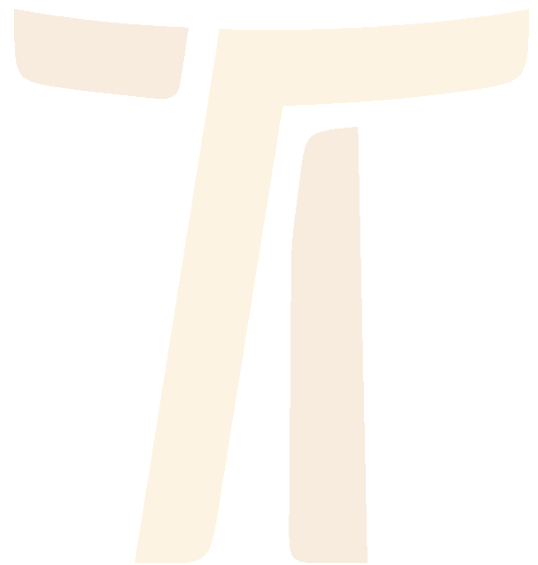
But may it also be an occasion for every friar in all parts of the world to rediscover and understand once again, that doing «**the will of God promptly, the beginning of our salvation**» (collect from the memorial) is

accomplished by obedient adherence to the form of life of our charism, to the vows we professed, to the challenging yet beautiful life of fraternity, realized by faithful prayer, generosity, humble work and simple actions that render to God and to the brothers that which is theirs.

For us Capuchin friars and for all of humanity we invoke and ask that «**your love, O Lord, reign in every human being and in all creation**».



BR. ROBERTO GENUIN
GENERAL MINISTER OFMCAPI



ROME, 22 SEPTEMBER 2020
MEMORIAL OF SAINT IGNATIUS OF SANTHIÀ