



**O**n the 20 of March, 2016, the 5th centenary of the death of Blessed Baptist Spagnoli, known as the Mantuan, began.

To celebrate the event, a pilgrimage was made, that went from the Chapel of the *Incoronata* in the Cathedral of Mantua to the Carmelite shrine in San Felice del Benaco, carrying the mortal remains, (that for us are important relics). The choice of the place was not a matter of chance: Blessed Baptist in fact stayed in that house, proclaiming in his verse the beauty of the surrounding nature that offers a magnificent view of the *Lago di Garda*.

The body, which has undergone a natural process of mummification, speaks to us, of him and of his way of life; a robust physique, 1 metre 67, tall, he used to practice various forms of physical mortification, as was the

widespread custom at that time. His teeth were almost perfect, no fractures, no bone tumour... but of course these facts do

not give much of the great man that was the Mantuan, both for the world of humanists and for the ecclesial world of his time.

# BLESSED BAPTIST SPAGNOLI

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## WHO WAS BAPTIST SPAGNOLI?

We might share the view of the English poet William Shakespeare, "Ah good Mantuan, those who do not know you do not love you!"

Baptist was born in Mantua - hence the name the "Mantuan" - on the 17th of April 1447 to the nobleman, Pietro Modover, of Spanish origin - hence the name "Spagnoli" - and Costanza Maggi from Brescia. The noble family, deeply Christian, educated him not only in the highest culture of the time, but also, and most of all, in the faith, passing on to him the values that in the future would determine his decisions.

In Mantua, the young Baptist, was entrusted to two tutors of very high standing: Gregorio Tifernate and Giorgio Merula. They taught him Greek and Latin, and the best of humanist culture. Later on, in Padua, at the school of Paolo Bagelardi, he studied philosophy. The student environment that he found there was very different from the cotton wool environment of his home and he wrote to Pietro, that he had found himself among the companions of the devil and that he lived with them badly...".



The age, the promiscuity, the easing of the rigid control of his family, certainly led to a certain relaxation in his behaviour: this is not any different to what may be found among adolescents of the present day.

After this short period of straying, Baptist developed the desire to consecrate himself to God. He had just reached sixteen years of age when he entered the Carmelite novitiate in Ferrara, as an aspirant choral friar (i.e. destined for priesthood). The house in Ferrara belonged to the so-called Mantuan Congregation of the Carmelite Order, that was begun by a group of Carmelite friars from the north of Italy who had decided to take on a more rigorous life, more directed towards the spiritual life; they made a promise to observe strictly the vow of poverty, and to be attentive to prayer, meditation and personal sanctification. In relation to the Order their status was one of semi-independence. They had their own Vicar General, yet there was no hostility or competition between the two expressions of

Carmelite spirituality, nor any desire to be separated.

Baptist, in a letter to his father, defined the Carmelites as the "chosen soldiers of the Great Mother of God." This definition gives us a hint of the reasons for his choice: a love for the Virgin Mary, Mother, sister and teacher. It is enough to remember that the name of the Carmelite Order is the Order of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel to understand his life plan. In this young man's choice there was very likely the influence of the fact that the Order, even with all its austerity, was still very much part of the Renaissance and very open to the culture of the time.

Baptist found himself at home in the new way of life and to show the joy of being a Carmelite he wrote in Latin the dialogue *De vita beata*, showing his desire for solitude, the will to remain in the presence of God, to love him and faithfully keep the Rule.

At the end of the canonical year, Bro. Baptist professed the three vows of obedience, chastity and poverty. He was sent straightaway to the house

in Bologna, to complete his studies in philosophy and theology at the university that were required for ordination to the priesthood.

His ability to speak, and his human gifts, were noticed and appreciated very soon by his superiors, who in 1466 invited him to give the official address at the Chapter in Brescia, convoked for the renewal of the offices of the Mantuan Congregation.

In 1469 he obtained his bachelor degree in theology, and in 1475 he became a Master of Theology. In the meantime he had received minor and major orders leading to his ordination to priesthood in 1471: he was twenty-four years old and fully prepared to work zealously in the vineyard of the Lord.

In 1471 he had become the Prior in Parma, then professor and rector of the faculty in Bologna, from 1479 to 1481, prior of the house in Mantua and then, went higher still, until he was elected five times as Vicar General of the Mantuan Congregation (between 1483 and 1513) and finally Prior General of the whole Carmelite Order in 1513.

His involvement in the universal Church was just as intense: he joined in all the work of reform of the Church; as Prior General of the Carmelite Order he took part in the 5th Lateran Council, called by Pope Julius II; he was a peace enjoy between Frances I, the king of France and Massimiliano Sforza, the Duke of Milan, through the appointment by Pope Leo X, but his efforts may not have had the desired effect.

This humble friar had an uncommon genius for literature: in addition to all he did for the Order and for the Church, he



had a very considerable literary output in Latin.

That was how Baptist became famous both for his art and for his holiness of life. He was the author of over fifty thousand verses on the most varied of topics (wars, the important figures of his time, popes, saints, the Virgin Mary) and was enormously appreciated by his contemporaries, so much so, that of his work, *Bucolica seu adolescentia in decem aeglogas divisa*, there are some one hundred and fifty editions, of which over one hundred were produced in the 16th century. On the basis of this text different generations of students, including English and German students, learned Latin. Moreover, his, *De calamitatibus temporum* was reprinted some thirty times between 1489 and 1510. Some consider it to be better than Ovid, but most of all, people honour him as the Christian Virgil (bearing in mind that Virgil also was born in Mantua): That is the way Sabbadino degli Arienti and Erasmus of Rotterdam, the great humanist and reformer, spoke of him. In Shakespeare too, in the comedy *Love's Labour's Lost* there is a reference to the *old Mantuan*,

where one of the characters recites a verse from one of his eclogues.

Most certainly the prose and the poetry of the Mantuan were capable of satisfying the tastes of his contemporaries, bringing together a Christian content and a classical form: not to mention his command of the Latin language, they said of him that he knew Latin as well as if he had been born in the time of the Emperor Augustus. Baptist Spagnoli had numerous friends among the humanists of his time: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), Pomponio Leto (1428-1498), Gioviano Pontano (1429-1503), Filippo Beroaldo il vecchio (1453-1505), the goldsmith and sculptor Gian Marco Cavalli (who produced a bust of Spagnoli, which is kept in the Berlin museum today) and the great painter and engraver Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506).

Princess Isabella d'Este (1474-1539) in the Gonzaga castle hosted the "Accademia de Santo Pietro", (St. Peter's Academy), in which our Carmelite, Baptist Spagnoli, took part, and when they were in Mantua, Baldassarre Castiglione and Matteo Bandello would also be there,

the latter who told many of his stories in that place, (he even quoted Spagnoli in one of his less reverent tales).

In order to get a proper grasp of the historical and cultural context in which the Mantuan lived, we have to remember that that was the century of the Renaissance, marked by the flourishing of letters and the fine arts, science, culture and civil life. The Greek and Latin classics were known and read with new eyes, more attentive and aware. The Popes of the period (Innocent VIII, Julius II, Leo X) even though they might not have had a reputation for virtue, they were certainly great patrons and the Mantuan, while praising them for this, never failed to pray and exhort the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to return to the life of grace.

On account of the positions he took, he enjoyed some of the fate of being thought of as a precursor to Martin Luther (1483-1546), especially on account of the eclogue, *De moribus curiae romanae*, in which he vigorously condemned the vices and the corruption of the curia and of the people in his time. The speech he gave in the Vatican Basilica (1489) in the presence of Pope Innocent VIII and the cardinals, was just as hard-hitting. Certainly, Luther, as he said when he wrote to him, as a child read first the eclogues of Spagnoli, and only afterwards Ovid and Virgil. Indeed, in 1571, the Protestants in Nuremberg printed an anthology of sayings taken from the works of Baptist of Mantua. Martin Luther and Baptist Spagnoli both saw the moral and spiritual decay of the clergy and the people, but responded each in his own way: Spagnoli condemned the sin, following the way of the Gospel, by continuing to love the Church, even in its sin. Luther preferred to take another route.





On his return to Mantua, after a period spent in Rome, in the winter of 1516 Baptist fell ill. He accepted his illness with a cheerful spirit, but on the 20th of March he died, "with a universal reputation for holiness". In death the Mantuan returned to be, for the faithful who had known and appreciated him, the Carmelite father, good, humble and holy: the chronicles of that time tell us: With a reputation for holiness, he left this earthly prison and went to heaven... A great number of people were present when he was laid to rest, who considering him to be a saint, loved him as a father... in the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin, in a place prepared for that, to which many people came to visit his remains, as we can see from the many tributes that they left."

Some years after his death, Baptist Spagnoli was already being called Blessed, even beyond the boundaries of the city of Mantua: the first attestation came from Giovanni Chizzolo, in a work of his that was edited in Bologna in 1586; then came that of the Spaniard, Filippo di S. Giacomo in 1593, and yet another in 1619, in a work in French edited in Paris.

From Pietro Lucio Belga, a Carmelite, author of the *Bibliotheca Carmelitana* edited in the year 1593, we know that Spagnoli's body was transferred to a very noble burial place on the wishes of the people of Mantua, and exposed for public veneration at the side of the

altar dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

In 1610 Francesco Gonzaga, bishop of Mantua, gave a list of the bodies of the saints that were the object of public veneration, present in his diocese: "In the Carmelite house in Mantua people venerate the body of the Blessed friar, Baptist of Mantua, who was the Prior General of his Order, very learned and of a most holy life."

And again, in 1649, the bishop, Maseo Vitali testified to the effective intercession of Blessed Baptist, (to which we should add that of his illustrious confrere, Bartolomeo Fanti), in obtaining the "eris serenitate" for the city of Mantua, after a period of very bad weather.

Many other miraculous events were reported as time went on, principally the integrity and incorruptibility of his body, certified by numerous documents.

As early as the year 1616, a century after his death, it was reported that his body was "entire and beautiful, as if he was dead for only a short time". Then again in 1662, they said that his body is entire and gives off a pleasant perfume. In 1779, two hundred and sixty three years after his death, the body was still entire and in-corrupt, giving rise to great veneration among the people.

On account of the uninterrupted veneration, Pope Leo XIII, he also a Latinist and poet, on the 17th of December, 1885,

declared him officially Blessed Baptist Spagnoli. In 1886, the bishop of Mantua, Giuseppe Sarto (who later became pope and saint under the name of Pius X) asked the Pope, and was granted, that the Office of the Mass of this Blessed be extended to the whole of his diocese, defining Spagnoli as "a heavenly Patron, invoked by Mantuans, who were very devoted to him.

Today, five hundred years since his death, we can confirm that his body is entire and incorrupt, but does not give off a pleasant perfume. It rests in a beautiful tomb, topped by a marble bust of him, in Our Lady's chapel: as one who sang her praises, he could not have desired anything better.

To all who turn to him he continues to bring down graces, from God and Mary, whom he knew as the dispenser of all graces. While his body was in the Shrine of San Felice del Benaco, many pilgrims and visitors stopped to pray at the urn. One woman, a mother whose son was suffering from glaucoma, and had almost entirely lost his sight, attracted by the unusual presence in the shrine (of a mummy of the 16th century) went up to the saint's urn and stroked it three times praying for a cure for her son. Even though the young man did not regain his sight, the woman's life changed: more than 15 years had gone by since she last entered a church, as she was a Jehovah's Witness. Some days later she went to confession...

God, through his saints, will always find the way to talk to his children, especially the ones that are far away and more in need of feeling the warm embrace of the love of God.

Let us remember Blessed Baptist Spagnoli, poet, and saint, and we will never be disappointed.

