

*Battista da Varano (1458-1524):
A Survey of Her Life and Writing as a
Poor Clare Visionary*

Battista da Varano's writing represents a high point of the Poor Clare tradition with its emphasis on the following of the poor and crucified Christ and mystical espousal with him. One variant, which is exclusively hers and not found in St. Clare, is her stress on the inner sorrows of Christ's passion and the need to suffer the evil ("il mal patire") that had befallen him. She thus joins the chorus of the singers of the Passion (so many of whom were Poor Clares): Colette of Corbie (1381-1447), Catherine of Bologna (1413-1510), Eustochia Calafato (1434-1485), Veronica Giuliani (1687-1727), Maria Maddalena Martinengo (1687-1737), Chiara Isabella Fornari (1697-1744), Colette du Sacr Coeur (1857-1905), Angeles Sorazu (1873-1921), Camilla Celina del Divino Amore (1902-1926), Maria Teresa Marani (1907-1943).

Critics have identified four major works as definitely her own: *I dolori mentali di Gesu nella sua passione*, her best-known work (1488); the *Vita spirituale* (1491); *Pregheiera a Dio* (1488-1490?); *Ricordi di Gesu* (1483-1491); three brief hand-written compositions: a letter (sixteen lines) to her brother-in-law, Muzio Colonna (1515); *a Memoria*, a note (sixteen lines) recording her first encounter with the Benedictine-Olivetian monk Antonio di Segovia (1492); *Transito del beato Pietro da Mogliano*, a eulogy in honor of the death of the Observant Franciscan Pietro da Mogliano (1491). The remaining writings considered authentic, some reworked by later copyists, consist of brief prayers, letters, poems, tracts and revelations. She wrote in the dialect of the Italian Marches, using Latin for scriptural quotations and in several other instances, including a poem.¹

Battista, born on April 9, 1458 and named Camilla, was the illegitimate daughter of Giulio Cesare da Varano, lord of the small but flourishing dominion of Camerino in the Italian Marches. She was raised by Giovanna Malatesta, Giulio Cesare's wife.² Both Giulio and Giovanna were especially fond of her, and she grew up amidst the prestige and splendor of a Renaissance court, receiving an education, which included grammar and rhetoric, appropriate to her status.

Battista reports in the *Vita spirituale* (the main source for what we know of her life) that when she was 8 or 10 years old, she heard, one Good Friday, a sermon delivered by the Observant Franciscan Domenico da Leonessa, who was subsequently to serve as one of her many confessors. This friar had concluded his sermon by exhorting his hearers to shed "one teardrop ("una lacri-muccia sola ") in memory of Christ's passion (VS, Ch. 3, 10). The sermon made such an impression on Camilla that the memory of it never left her. When she was a little older, she vowed to God that on every Friday she would shed a tear for love of the passion of Christ.

This shedding of a teardrop initiated Battista's spiritual life. At the beginning, she found it very troublesome to do so. As soon as she had managed to squeeze out a tear-and sometimes to her great chagrin no tear came-she would quickly jump up and run away to laugh and play. She had no stomach for anything or anyone that had to do

with the spiritual life, such as devotional books, or friars and nuns, of whom she would make fun (VS, Ch. 4, 15). Nonetheless, she persevered with her vow, and one day she came across a booklet that contained a meditation on the passion of Christ divided into fifteen parts to be recited like a Rosary, one of the many such devotional works in circulation at the time (VS, Ch.4, 12). Every Friday, she read this meditation on her knees before the crucifix and began practicing other penances such as fasting on bread and water, keeping night vigils, with the effect that her tears began to flow more freely. But she also continued to spend time in "playing music, singing, dancing, promenading, and other youthful and vain pursuits" available in abundance at the court (VS, Ch. 4, 15).

She was partially liberated from what she refers to as "her imprisoned heart" (VS, Ch. 4, 15) when, during the Lent of 1479, she heard the preaching of another Observant Franciscan, Francesco da Urbino, "the trumpet of the Holy Spirit." His words, she says, struck "like thunder and flashes of lightning in her soul." Following another sermon by this same friar—with whom she also secretly (for "fear of scandal") corresponded - on the vigil of the feast of the Annunciation, March 24, 1479, Battista took the vow of chastity; she was twenty-one years old. During this period she also claims hearing, increasingly closer and louder, inner voices insisting that her only hope for salvation was to become a nun. After a long and bitter inner struggle and amid "the sneers and back-talk" (VS, Ch. 4,14) of her courtly entourage, the vehement opposition of her "powerful father," who clearly had other designs for her, and after a confession of her sins, this time to a certain Fra. Oliviero, on the octave of Holy Saturday, April 17, 1479, Battista decided that she would enter the Poor Clare monastery in nearby Urbino.

During the next two and a half years before she actually entered the monastery, she reports that "wildly and furiously, [she] poured out and focused the love of [her] heart on [her] dearest spouse Christ" (VS, Ch. 9, 26). "The cataracts of heaven" opened and she received many divine visitations, but it was a period that was also marked by seven months of severe physical illness and depression.

It was during this time that Battista recalls receiving from her divine spouse the gift of "three fragrant spring lilies" (Cf. Song of Songs 2:16): "an intense hatred of the world," "a heart-felt humility," and "a burning desire to suffer evil" ("mal patire"), (VS, Ch. 3, 30-31)." She also composed her first written work, a Lauda, celebrating the joy of knowing herself loved by Christ. Furthermore, during this period, as a response to her desire to see Christ, much to her surprise, he did show himself to her, but only his back as he walked away (VS, Ch. 10, 34-35).

On November 14, 1481, she reports that she was "freed from the slavery of Egypt" (her metaphor for the world), and "from the hands of the powerful Pharaoh" (her metaphor for her father and Satan), "crossed the Red Sea" (her metaphor for the pomposity and vanity of courtly life), and was placed in the desert of holy religion, (her metaphor for life in the monastery), (VS, Ch. 11, 35-36).

During the two years of her stay in the monastery in Urbino, she wrote a brief work entitled *Ricordi di Gesu*, a meditation, in the form of a letter from Jesus woven around the theme of "mal patire." In her prayers she intensified her meditations on the

passion of Christ, "entering," as she put it, "in the most bitter sea of the mental pains in the heart of Jesus, and in that place to drown in it if [she] could." For it is there, "in the vermilion heart of Jesus," that she had been shown, "written in large and ancient letters of gold: I love you Camilla" (VS, Ch. 12, 38).

Towards the end of 1483, Battista made her religious profession which she calls a "bitter" moment, a comment she does not explain except to say that this event "disturbed and shook the entire religious world and well beyond it, that is friars and nuns, lords and lay folk" (VS, Ch. 12, 41). It seemed that it had to do with the swirl of political and religious crosscurrents agitated by her decision to become a Poor Clare of the Strict Observance.

Her father, for instance, had not yet played his last card in his attempts to control the destiny of his daughter. He bought and renovated a monastery owned by the Olivetans and located just a few steps from his castle. It was to this monastery that, on January 4, 1484, the conceivably reluctant Battista came, accompanied by eight other Poor Clares from Urbino. They were greeted by the Vicar General of the Observant Franciscans, Domenico da Leonessa, who had played an important role in negotiating Battista's change of residence. In this new monastic setting, under the strict rule of St. Clare, Battista spent most of the remaining forty years of her life.

Among the most significant points along the path of her spiritual life is her vision, lasting fifteen days, of St. Clare. At first Battista could not make out who was "this beautiful sister of our Order, wearing a black veil over her head, with rays that emanated from lovely eyes as she spoke graciously and lovingly to her." It was only after the heavenly visitor had disappeared and "her love and devotion to the glorious mother St. Clare had intensified" that Battista no longer could doubt that it was she who had appeared to her (VS, Ch. 14, 48-50).

A few days after the St. Clare visions had faded, Battista reports that two angels—a Seraphim and a Cherubim she was later to realize—appeared to her, and for two months, almost continuously and amidst her usual activities, they held her soul aloft at the bleeding feet of the crucified Christ (VS, Ch. 15, 51). Following this, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, she obtained a vision, "an extraordinary light of God's ineffable love, "one without order and measure," for his creatures. "O madness, O madness," was the only appropriate response she could think of (VS, Ch. 15, 52-53). Immersed, as a result, in an awareness of her unworthiness, she implored and received the grace to remain prostrate at the feet of the crucified Christ for the rest of her life (VS, Ch. 15, 3). The five years that ensued were ones, she reports, of deep peace. Inwardly, nonetheless, she felt "a searing immaterial fire," "more fire than light" (Vs, Ch. 16, 57), she said, and this fire, "worse than the pains of hell," lit a desire in her "to leave the prison of her body to be with Christ" (VS, Ch. 16, 55).

In 1488, the thirty-year-old Battista felt inspired by God to write her most famous work, / *dolori mentali di Gesu nella sua Passione*.³ Presented as the narration of an anonymous nun to her abbess, it was the fruit of her long meditations on the "sacred chambers of the mental sorrows of Christ." It consists essentially of Christ's own presentation of his sorrows, eight of them: the damned, the elect, his mother, Mary Magdalen, the apostles, Judas, the Jewish people, and the ingratitude of all creation.

After the writing of *I dolori mentali*, Battista suffered a spiritual crisis that lasted some

five years. Some of the details of this "cruel battle" are described in the two final chapters of *Vita spirituale*. In dramatic tones, Battista depicts this period of abandonment and desolation as one of being driven "to the bottom of an infernal abyss" where the devil, "a venomous dragon with open jaws, roared with such violence and frenzy," that he seemed about to swallow her (VS, Ch. 18, 61-62). In the midst of her despair she is haunted by obsessive compulsions to rebel against God and his goodness, and to disbelieve the veracity of the Scriptures. To sum up her experience she repeats a refrain, which is interwoven throughout her entire narrative, "O you who pass along the way of divine love, consider and see if there is any sorrow like unto my sorrow" (Lam. 1,12)(VS,Ch. 18, 64; also, Ch. 1,7;Ch. 12,39;Ch. 14, 50).

It was in the midst of "this mighty storm," between February 27 and March 13, 1491, that Battista composed the *Vita spirituale* in the form of a long letter to Domenico da Leonessa, the preacher who had encouraged the initial teardrop and who now ordered her to write her story. Battista felt deeply indebted to this friar. At the beginning of the *Vita spirituale*, she writes: "You should know, dear and most beloved father, that my entire spiritual life has had its origin, beginning and foundation from you and not from any other" (VS, Ch. 3, 9). In the same year, her most beloved confessor Pietro da Mogliani died, and she movingly laments him ("his death tore me apart") in the *Vita spirituale* (VS, Ch. 18, 62-64). In honor of his death, she composed a eulogy entitled the *Transito del beato Pietro da Mogliano*, which she sent to the duchess of Urbino, Elisabetta Gozaga-Montefeltro.

Although Battista believed that the *Vita* would be her last testament before dying (VS, Ch. 19, 65-66), she was to live on for more than thirty more years, a period that can be summarily characterized by her maxim "doing good and suffering evil" ("far bene e patir male"). In 1492, Battista met Antonio di Spagna, an Olivetan friar, who, for the four years during his stay in Camerino, was her spiritual director and in whose honor she wrote a brief note in thanksgiving for his assistance. In 1501, Pope Alexander VI, a Borgia pope, excommunicated her father, who was accused, among other things, of hosting enemies of the pope and assassinating (never proved) his own cousin. Subsequently in the Spring of 1502, when Camerino fell into the hands of the papal forces led by the terrible Cesare Borgia, Battista had to leave and find shelter in Abruzzo in the Kingdom of Naples with the Duchess of Atri, Isabella Piccolomini-Todeschini, with whom she remained until the latter part of 1503. During her exile, she learned that her father and three of her four brothers had died violently. In the latter part of 1503 with the setting of the Borgia star, she returned to Camerino. Nothing of these events appears in her writings.

During these final phases of her life, Battista's role as spiritual mother came to the fore. She was repeatedly elected as abbess of her monastery (1500, 1507, 1513, 1515) and once vicar (1488). In 1505, she was sent by Pope Julius II to direct the formation of a monastery of Poor Clares in Fermo, where she stayed one or two years. In 1512, through her intervention, the municipality of San Severino (in the Marches) decided not to exact capital punishment on a certain Napoleone of Camerino, guilty of murder. In 1515, she writes to her brother-in-law Muzio Collona asking him to spare the inhabitants of Montecchio during his military expedition against Fermo. In 1521-22 she was instrumental in the reformation of another Poor Clare monastery, this

time in San Severino. In 1521, she wrote a letter in Latin to the then Vicar General of the Observant Franciscans, Giovanni da Fano, to whom, during the same year, she dedicated a brief treatise entitled *Trattato della purita di cuore*. This was her last written work. Battista died in her monastery in Camerino on March 31, 1524 during a plague. She was sixty-four years old. Her cult as blessed was confirmed by Pope Gregory XVI on April 7, 1843.

Battista's spiritual life, begun with a ritual shedding of a single tear, had welled into the "high seas" (*Lauda delle visioni di Christo*, 404) of "the most secret thalamus of the myrrh-soaked heart of Jesus, the true and most bitter and envenomed sea, unnavigable for any angel or human intellect, and . . . one without bottom or end" (VS, Ch. 12, 39). Finally, as she puts it in the conclusion of the *Vita spirituale*, she no longer wished "to acknowledge Easter or Christmas or any other feast of the Church," but rather desired that "all the days of [her] life would be a Good Friday," in which "ever to weep the most bitter Passion of Christ so that at [her] death he may appear to [her] in his risen glory" (VS, Ch. 17, 59).

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Notes

1. Besides those mentioned in the text, the authentic writings are as follows: *Lauda della visione di Cristo* (1479-1483); *Preghiera a Gesu* (1488-1490); *Visioni di Santa Caterina da Bologna* (1502); *Versi spiritual! a una religiosa* (1506); *Lettera a una suora vicaria* (1513); *Lettera al medico ser Battista Pucci* (1515); *Trattato della purita del cuore* (1515); *Novena alia Vergine* (1515); of dubious authenticity: *Considerazioni sulla Passione di nostro Signo Gesu*; *Preghiera alia Vergine*; *Preghiera a Gesu Eucaristia*; *Distid latini a Gesu crocifisso*; *Sonetto a Maria*; apocryphal writings: *Istruzioni al Discepolo*; *Dichiarazione sopra i capitoh della Regola di santa Chiara*; *Lettera a Giovanni da Fano*. Pietro Luzi, author of one of the more recent studies of Battista and whose lead we follow in the choice of authentic writings, does not include several pieces considered authentic (e.g. *Istruzioni al Discepolo*) by the earlier Bocanera (*Camilla Battista da Varano: una spiritualita fra Papa Borgia e Luxero* [Turin: Piero Gribaudi Editore, 1989], 107-126. It is quite likely that some of Battista's writings have been lost. The edition of Battista's writings used throughout is by Giacomo Boccanera, *Beata Camilla Batista da Varano: Le opere spirituali* (Jesi: Edizioni Francescane, 1958). For the English translation of the *Vita spirituale* (abbreviated as VS), I have used Joseph Berrigan's version, *My Spiritual Autobiography* (Toronto, Can.: Peregrina Publishing, Co. 1986), but I have provided my own translation whenever a more correct or literal rendition was called for. All other translations from Battista's writings are my own.

2. Little is known about Camilla's natural mother, a certain Cecchina, but documents attest that she married a nobleman, Venanzio Maligni, and died in 1504 when Camilla was forty-six years old. She is never mentioned or alluded to in any of Camilla's (Battista's) writings. See Pier Luigi Falaschi, "La signoria di Giulio Cesare da Varano," in *Camilla Battista da Varano e il suo tempo* (Camerino, Centro Stampa O.R.A.C., 1987), 26-27; also, Luzi, *Camilla da Varano*, 138-39.

3. *I dolori mentali* was printed, anonymously, the same year of its composition in Venice (1488) and a year later in Naples, unbeknownst, apparently, to Battista (Boccanera, *Biografia*, 15). The noted Italian scholar Massimo Petrocchi writes: "*I dolori mentali* contains the deepest and most powerful pages of fifteenth century Italian literature. It contains pages also of primary importance for the more general history of the religious sentiment, spirituality, and piety of modern Europe" (*Storia della spiritualita Italiana* [Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984], 178. *I dolori mentali* is available in a translation by Joseph Berrigan, *The Mental Sorrows of Jesus in His Passio* (Vox Benediaina, vol. 3, no 1, 1986).