



From Worldly Princess to the Foot of the Cross

*The Life and Writings of
Saint Camilla Battista Varano, OSC*

Translations and Introduction by
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INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE OF SAINT CAMILLA BATTISTA DA VARANO (1458-1524)

Camilla was the baptismal name that Duke Giulio Cesare da Varano gave to the girl born to him on April 9, 1458. Giulio was a powerful seigniorial Renaissance overlord of Camerino, a small but flourishing city in the Marches of Ancona. He was married to Giovanna Malatesta, with whom he fathered three children. Camilla, however, was one of the duke's six illegitimate children; her mother was a noblewoman, Cecchina di maestro Giacomo. Giulio loved Camilla deeply, and he and the duchess raised her at court together with their three legitimate children. Such family situations were not uncommon in Renaissance noble families then, when marriages were often politically arranged, rather than entered into.

The duke was a competent ruler who strove to keep the nobility in his favor without neglecting the lower classes, including peasants whose support he needed in case of war. Further, he cared for the sick and pilgrims to whom he gave alms in front of his palace and in hospitals he restored. He was generous also to the religious Orders and local churches.

Growing up in the Renaissance court, young Camilla was surrounded not just by political intrigue (Machiavelli was a contemporary of hers), but also by high culture, pomp and splendor. Rivaling the Medici family palace of Florence and the papal residences in Rome, her father's castle boasted some 69 rooms (many ornately frescoed), 4 loggias, 3 cellars, a library, and a stable capable of keeping up to 40 horses. Illustrious poets, historians, philosophers, and painters often passed through as guests of the court. Camilla learned Latin and read the classics; she learned to paint, play musical instruments and dance.

What we know of Camilla comes mostly from her Autobiography, the "Spiritual Life." She grew up vivacious, playful, and passionate for the courtly life. She was sincere, dedicated, and independent to the point of being stubborn. She loved beautiful and pleasurable things. According to her father's plans and desires, Camilla should have been destined to an arranged marriage like her sisters, in order to strengthen the family's power. However, she chose a different path.

Her conversion began during Lent of 1466 when she heard a sermon by an Observant Franciscan friar in which the priest exhorted his listeners to shed a little tear – just one (*una lacrimuccia sola sola*) – each Friday in memory of Christ's Passion. Camilla was only eight years old, but something within moved her to make a promise to do what that friar told her – she actually took a vow. Even though she was just a girl, she was precociously aware that the pleasures of the court would never truly satisfy her soul. She began to see that there was something much more powerful and significant in the cross of Jesus than the intrigues and superficial pleasures around her. And in that penitential devotion of shedding a little tear, her conversion began.

Her new devotion was not without a struggle, though, and she found it difficult to be both faithful to her vow and be present at the court with its worldly pleasures. She said that she would often go into the chapel and squeeze out a tear, then "quickly get up and run away." She also recounts that during this period she was averse to devotional writings, as well as priests, nuns, and friars. Her spiritual life progressed after she discovered a booklet containing a meditation, divided into fifteen parts, on the Passion of Christ. She said it was as if it were designed for "a person who did not know how to meditate." Every Friday, she performed this new devotion on her knees. Then the tears flowed abundantly and her conversion deepened. She began fasting on bread and water on Fridays, reciting the rosary, and scourging her body. Nevertheless, she recounted that she still felt "imprisoned."

It was not until hearing a series of sermons that she was freed. During Lent of 1479, she heard a sermon by a friar from Urbino named Francesco whom she called the "Trumpet of the Holy Spirit." She said his words were like "thunder and lightning that struck her soul" and caused

her to fear God. At that point she began to fear Hell and she said she felt freed from her imprisonment of the soul. During this time she made a lifelong vow of virginity and felt the calling to enter a cloistered convent. At this point, she received from God the three lilies described in her autobiography: a hatred of the world, humility, and a desire to suffer badly (*malpatire*).¹

Her next struggle was with her powerful father, whom she described as her Pharaoh. He clearly had other plans for Camilla. However, she persisted in pursuing her vocation and after a continual deepening of her spiritual life through prayer, confession, and spiritual dialogues with various Franciscan friars, she decided to enter a convent. In 1481, she entered the Poor Clare monastery in Urbino (roughly 50 miles north of Camerino) in the same region.² The Poor Clare monastery in Urbino was associated with the Strict Observance within the Franciscan Order; i.e. a reform movement among the Franciscans seeking to ‘observe’ the original austere Franciscan way of life without privileges or exemptions that had been granted over the centuries. Camilla compared her own story to that of the Jews who were enslaved by the Pharaoh in Egypt. She recounts that God freed her from “the worldly slavery of Egypt” (the secular world) and from the “hands of powerful Pharaoh” (her father). Then she “crossed the Red Sea” (left the world and entered the monastery) where she took the name Battista (Baptist).

She stayed in Urbino for two and a half years where she made her lifelong religious profession. Apparently there was much controversy about which she did not elaborate. It may have had to do with the fact that her father did not want her to be so far from him; or that he, a worldly lord, did not want her to be part of such an austere and penitential movement. Thus, the duke purchased a monastery from the Benedictine Olivetans near his castle in Camerino and, with the approval of the pope, founded a community of Poor Clare nuns. With the encouragement of the Franciscan provincial minister, on January 4, 1484, Camilla returned to Camerino with eight other sisters to reside once again in her native city.

Camilla spent most of the remaining forty years of her life in Camerino with just a few exceptions. Pope Alexander VI, from the Borgia family (in Italy this family name is virtually synonymous with the corruption of Renaissance-era papacy), had divided the lands of the Papal States into fiefdoms, which he subsequently distributed to his (natural-born) sons and nephews. On March 1, 1501, the pope excommunicated Camilla’s father for allegedly guarding enemies of the pope and for assassinating the pope’s cousin. This caused Duke Giulio to forfeit his feudal rights over the city. In an effort to expand the Papal States, the pope’s son, Cesare Borgia, promptly sought to annex Camerino in the spring of 1502. Camilla was forced to flee and seek refuge in the Abruzzo region which was in the territory of the kingdom of Naples. Then Cesare Borgia marched on Camerino with his army, imprisoned Camilla’s father, and ordered him strangled to death. The duke’s sons met the same fate, with the exception of one. Camilla remained in exile until the Borgia pope’s death in August, 1503. With the new papacy of Julius II, Camilla’s family was restored to power in Camerino and she was free to return home. Her only surviving brother, Giovanni Maria, was named duke by the pope.

After returning, Battista’s role as spiritual mother came into play. She served repeatedly as Abbess in 1500, 1507, 1513, 1515 and once as vicar in 1488. In 1505, Pope Julius II sent Camilla to found a monastery in Fermo where she stayed for two years. Later, in 1521 and 1522 she traveled to San Severino Marches to spiritually reform a community of nuns that had just adopted the Rule of St. Clare. She died in her monastery in Camerino during a plague on March 31, 1524 at the age of 64. Her relics remain there today.

Camilla’s spirituality was focused on offering and uniting her sufferings to Christ with him

¹ The Italian word, *malpatire*, was not common in old Italian. By adding a suffix *mal* “bad” to *patisre* “suffer,” Camilla created a word meaning “to suffer intensely or greatly.” It is translated “to suffer badly” throughout.

² Hereafter, the word “monastery” will be used to describe the religious house of the Poor Clares instead of “convent.” In the Italian language, *convento* is used for either men’s friaries or women’s convents, as long as it is not cloistered, while *monastero* is used for the religious houses of either men or women as long as it is cloistered.

“at the foot of the cross.” However, she did not skip over loving service towards her neighbors beginning with her sisters in the monastery. In her writings and other sources, Camilla emphasized living the virtuous life, faithfulness towards her vows, and service towards others as essential to a healthy spirituality. However, she placed a great emphasis on the constant meditation of Christ and his sufferings. In “Spiritual Life,” she said that she had engaged in severe penances before becoming a nun, but after entering the monastery, she no longer practiced them; she chose instead to meditate on Christ and his wounds. In “Instructions,” she claimed that one reaches God better and faster by thinking constantly of him as opposed to ascetic actions. Also, in “Mental Sorrows,” she claimed that many people meditated on Christ’s physical sufferings, but by contemplating Christ’s mental sufferings (particularly distressing in the Garden of Gethsemane), one could reap more spiritual benefits.

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