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BARTOLOMEO "THE MADMAN OF CHRIST"

Bartolomeo Garosi The hermit preacher of Petroio, known as Brandano, between charity and patriotism.

A rooted and consolidated popular tradition, especially between Siena and the Val di Chiana, has fueled for centuries a rich hagiographic literature on the figure of the "hermit" and "prophet" Bartolomeo Carosi (or Garosi), better known as Brandano and sometimes as "the Madman of Christ." There are numerous testimonies from contemporaries and memories from later generations about his actions and prophecies, but they must be understood with a critical approach, as the official documentation concerning him is quite scarce.

First and foremost, he cannot be defined as a hermit in the sense of an anchorite, as there is no evidence that he preceded his missionary journey with a contemplative experience that would keep him away from the temptations of the world. However, it is certain that in his youth, he worked hard as a farmer near Montefollonico - not far from Petroio, where he was born in 1488 - to support his wife and children, and he lived in poverty until the age of thirty-eight, cursing his own destiny.

After his conversion during Lent in 1526, Bartolomeo radically changed his life and, having become a widower, left his daughters in the care of his brother. He joined the ranks of itinerant preachers and prophets, without sacred orders or any legitimacy from the ecclesiastical authorities, always traveling from one city to another, barefoot and dressed in a sack like St. John the Baptist, delivering fiery speeches and threatening disasters to populations that did not repent of their sins. His case was not isolated and without precedents, as the phenomenon of "prophecy" with apocalyptic content had been observed since the late 15th century, spreading even more during the second decade of the 16th century, coinciding with the moral crisis of ecclesiastical institutions and the "Italian Wars," fought by European powers to gain full hegemony over the principalities and republics of the Peninsula. There were, of course, other preachers from Siena and southern Tuscany who had been active mainly in central-northern Italy, even before Brandano's appearance. For example, there was the memory of a certain "Giovanni Novello" from Siena, who in 1487 had traveled barefoot and dressed in wild animal skins, with a long beard and a cross in his hand, along the roads between Forlì, Bologna, and Ferrara. In 1513, Brother Francesco from Montepulciano had preached in Florence's Santa Croce church, making dark predictions that even affected a little-impressionable man like Niccolò Machiavelli. Between 1516 and 1517, strong criticism had been directed towards religious orders and ecclesiastical institutions, both in Milan by Brother Girolamo from Siena and in Bologna by an unknown Sienese, probably a layman, who proclaimed himself "sent by God," dressed in gray and barefoot, living on alms.

During the same years, in 1516, the Fifth Lateran Council, presided over by Pope Leo X, severely condemned those preachers who used catastrophic prophecies to deceive the simplest people. This prohibition was reaffirmed at the provincial council of Florence in 1517, just as Martin Luther began his protest against the "sale of indulgences," which would soon extend to the dogmas, precepts, and rites of the Church, shaking its foundations and marking the religious history of Europe and the political relations between Emperor Charles V and European rulers.

It is impossible to know if Brandano, at the beginning of his mission, was genuinely informed about these epochal events and the activities of the Sienese and Polizian preachers. Still, his belonging to an ecclesiastical reality detached from the needs of the humble classes, governed by well-established power methods, and dominated by aristocratic families constantly defending their privileges is indisputable. His original diocese, Pienza, was founded in 1462 by the humanist Pope Pius II and was still under the patronage of the Piccolomini family, from which another pope, with the name of Pius III, had emerged and reigned for a few days between September and October 1503. Additionally, the nearby Montepulciano, directly dependent on the Holy See, boasted prominent families such as the Cervini, to which Cardinal Marcello belonged - an able curial and skilled diplomat who briefly ascended to the throne of Peter in April 1555, taking the name Marcello II.

Clearly, Brandano's rural origins emerge not only from the well-defined horizon of his early preaching "throughout the Val di Chiana" but also from his aversion to profit-oriented activities. He was entirely devoted to extolling the gifts of nature and the efforts of men in cultivating the land, which naturally "yield abundance." In the late 1520s, as he came into contact with urban environments, starting from the confusing and troubled one of Siena, he became convinced that the poverty of many and the wealth of a few resulted from an exaggerated pursuit of profit, both in trade, especially when it involved essential goods for survival, and in financial operations carried out by bankers and businessmen, leading to the grave sin of usury, which he denounced in his first speeches.

His unwavering aversion to Pope Clement VII also gained some resonance beyond Italy. From the statue of Saint Paul in Rome, he launched infamous accusations against the pope on Holy Thursday in 1527, just as the pontiff blessed the faithful in front of St. Peter's Basilica. Bartolomeo was also imprisoned for this incident but was later released during the sack of Rome, which he had previously prophesied as divine punishment for the sins of the Curia. The sack was carried out a few days later by the Landsknechts, who had the merit of freeing him from captivity. Brandano's belief was that Clement VII acted against sacred scriptures and pursued a policy that combined political power with the use of money, leading him to identify the pope as the Antichrist.

Brandano's commitment to condemning economic and social inequalities was evident during his travels across Europe and might have been influenced by the atmosphere of "rebellion" stirred by the spread of Protestantism, such as the widespread peasant revolt that erupted in 1525 in some regions of Germany. In Siena itself, during the 1530s, the Bardotti company emerged, strongly contesting the existing social order and particularly the inequitable distribution of property. Bartolomeo did not hesitate to demonstrate his determination. For instance, in 1531, in Saragossa, not receiving enough alms to feed the poor, he overturned many baskets of bread and threatened to loot the belongings of the religious and wealthy until he was arrested and imprisoned. In 1532, in Bologna, he collected money ostensibly for financing the local Monte di Pietà but, in reality, distributed it secretly to the needy.

The period between 1539 and 1554, the year of his death, "The Madman of Christ" spent mainly in Siena, where he was welcomed into the lay company of Sant'Antonio Abate and had the opportunity to dedicate himself to acts of mercy, both in the city and in the countryside. This consolidated his popularity, as he could rely on donations from wealthy citizens to provide food for the needy. Moreover, he was granted the privilege of preaching in the cathedral for some time until he even received a public monetary allocation from the government of the Ten Conservators of Liberty. They adopted the same formula "For alms and love of God" previously used to grant a more substantial contribution to the Sienese friar Bernardino Ochino, with

whom Bartolomeo shared a special devotion to the crucified Christ, although the religious and human journey of the famous Capuchin preacher, later turned Protestant pastor, would take a very different turn.

Brandano's last years of life, especially from 1547, were not only marked by his commitment to preaching and charitable works but also by a strong patriotic sentiment. He had the courage to oppose the chief representative of Charles V in Siena, Don Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, and the construction of a fortress intended to accommodate imperial occupation troops, not hesitating to engage in violent behaviors that landed him in prison. Nevertheless, his fellow citizens considered them acts of heroism. Influential Sieneese, starting with the chronicler Alessandro Sozzini, judged him to be a "truly good person with great abstinence and holy customs." Some, like the banker Agostino Bardi, protected him from further persecution, ensuring his release and enabling him to escape the city. However, he chose to return to Siena to spend his last days, which were dramatic, preceding the siege, and this further increased his popularity, culminating in the attribution of a miracle upon his death, leaving him "in the scent" of sanctity.

It should be noted, in conclusion of these brief notes, that the most recent historiography has been able to reconstruct, with careful evaluation of documentary sources, many aspects of Brandano's human and religious story. Although it denies the character the sainthood fame that has been conferred upon him for centuries by popular tradition and hagiographies, it recognizes his peculiar charisma and appropriately situates him in the complex reality of his time, taking into account the cultural and political transformations that marked the dramatic transition from the late Middle Ages to the early modern era in Europe, and especially in Italy.

Bibliografia / Bibliography

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