

The Celestine Mystery

Quirino Salomone

**Historians of the time
wrote that the death of**

**St Celestine was a wondrous event, a blissful
ecstasy. Several centuries later, however, a
perforation was found in his skull, and the
suspicion arose that he may have been mur-
dered.**

**It is impossible to be rid of this character,
no matter how retiring he seems.**

**At every human crossroads he is present,
each time traffic jams because someone did
not give way.**

**A discreet and understated voice of con-
science, yet no amount of clamour can drown
it out.**



Pietro Angelerio

Pietro Angelerio was born in about 1210, in Molise (**Isernia or Sant'Angelo Limosano**), of a numerous family, eleventh of twelve children in a family of poor, simple farmers.

Pietro's childhood quickly filled with marvellous legends that ought to have been omens of the extraordinary and esoteric life to come. His religious vocation emerged immediately and after serious thought he knocked at the door of the Benedictine monastery in **Faifoli**, where he was admitted to undertake monastic life. Young Pietro was disappointed. His spirit aspired to a more rigorous ascetic/contemplative discipline. Even though he had joined monastic life in 1231 and had admirably observed the rule amongst many pious monks, after only a couple of years he asked to leave the monastery to become a hermit. In his dreams, infamous **Maiella**, with its awesome slopes and terrible grottoes, said to be inhabited by all manner of devils, witches and evil spirits. This was where he wished to go, to forge his spirit and fight the supreme battle against diabolical powers. Several companions of the noviciate were attracted by the idea and decided to follow suite, but once on their way they were forced to stop at Castel di Sangro, due to a tremendous snowstorm. The companions were

so frightened they refused to continue the adventure. Pietro was now alone and he awaited spring in a refuge near Scontrone, where the remains of an important monastic complex, dear to Brother Pietro and to the devotion of local people, can still be noted.

Having reached Maiella, he stopped at a grotto on Mount Palleno, then known as Porrara, now called the **Madonna dell'Altare** sanctuary, in the commune of Palena. Here he really started to live as a hermit. The first hints of temptation and the first celestial portents. Fear of the dark and the company of angels. People noted the extraordinary presence and began to seek out Brother Pietro: everyone wanted to meet him, to speak to him. Admiration grew and many asked to be confessed by him, but Pietro, inclined to humility, had decided not to become a priest: he preferred a secular life. Certainly the example of the poor friar of Assisi loomed close by.

It was the people of Palena and of the surrounding area that begged him and convinced him to become a priest so that he could better care for the spiritual needs of all those turned to him for help. At little more than twenty years of age Pietro began to study at Fossacesia and then continued in Rome. In 1237 he was ordained a priest and immediately went back to Morrone to resume his reclusive existence. Word of his goodness and wisdom rapidly spread. There was



talk of conversions, of prodigies, of healing: a saint. Pietro had to escape these public acclamations. He sought tougher, more solitary places. He crossed Mount Morrone and penetrated the more imperious areas of Maiella. He settled in a troglodytic grotto that he named **Santo Spirito**. Other hermits had also attempted to live in these places, between the eighth and ninth centuries but they had desisted, discouraged by the excessive difficulties of the terrain and of the climate.

Here Pietro established the stronghold for his mystical ascetics and for spreading the word of his Congregation of followers. Yes, for in the meantime Brother Pietro had found himself followed by hundreds of men who wished to share his experience and to have him as their spiritual leader. It had not been his intention to found a congregation, yet he did so and called it the Penitent Brothers of the Holy Spirit (**Celestinians**). He dictated a rule and defined the rigid discipline.

Maiella became the most important school of spirituality of the period, whose teachers included several devout Franciscans, including Clarenò and Olivi, who would reach Santo Spirito or Sant'Onofrio under cover of the night (because they were excommunicated and persecuted).

A Special Kind of Hermit

The Hermit of Maiella did not mature solely through theology, meditation and contemplation. The continual movements, the countless social contacts, the creation of structures such as hostels and mills, lead us to deduce that Pietro of Maiella's concept of hermit life was not the codified and widely held idea of aversion to reality, removed from the historical context, disinterested. The Hermit of Maiella entered into social dynamics through a style of evangelisation that aimed, for instance, at freeing the poor from oppression.

Through these primitive forms of co-operative the poor discovered friendship and consequently the prosperity that gave them autonomy, right at the outskirts of their towns.

So, Brother Pietro was well known for his sanctity and his thaumaturgical virtues, and most people knew him personally. Wherever he went people asked him to remain and helped him to build his monastery to ensure his presence. All of this was not limited to the Maiella area, as might be easily believed: it spread much further, from Lazio to the Gargano, from the north to the south of Italy, in France, in Germany, England, Malta. An adventurous journey on foot to Lyon to plead the cause of his Congregation, which risked



dissolution, together with numerous other latter day congregations, on the agenda of that particular council, made him the pole of admiration of all the council fathers and of Pope Gregory X. On his return he passed through Florence and here stopped to help the plague stricken city which never again forgot Brother Pietro, so much so that they ran a palio in his honour. Not only the poor knew him, but also devout princes and monarchs, with whom he built up diplomatic relationships and pleaded the cause of the weak.

The Brotherhoods

A decree issued by the Bishop of Isernia, Roberto (1289), announced that ...a number of Isernia's citizens, united by a spirit of charity, with the work and help of the monk Brother Pietro of Morrone, founded a Brotherhood or Fraternity. They called each other "brothers" ... for the doctrine they learned from the Hermit Saint and for the example they admired and imitated, gave the impression of being truly God fearing. Other such brotherhoods were founded after that of Isernia: Sulmona, Ortona, Lanciano, Vasto, Apricena, Scontrone, Castel Di Sangro, Popoli, Chieti, Guardiagrele, Roccamorice. Several groups reached as many as a thousand people.

Brother Pietro himself defined the statute:

1. Give alms to the needy,
2. Say several Our Fathers for the living and the dead,
3. Abstain from mortal sin,
4. Love one another,
5. Visit the sick,
6. Provide basic necessities for needy brethren, dowries for poor women, protection for widows and the oppressed.
7. Act charitably according to one's own possibilities

Celestine must be re-read in this context.

Otherwise we will never be able to understand why, for instance, in no more than two to three years the Gargano underwent a transformation, infiltrated by a network of monasteries centred at the **Abbey of San Giovanni in Piano**, the agricultural and pastoral economy flourished and a project arose for exploiting two salt lakes for breeding fish. Brother Pietro, a sower of hope, beloved by the masses of poor folk.



Such a Man to Become Pope

The 13th century embraces an extraordinary number of events and personalities in the history of Christianity.

Three Ecumenical councils were held: the 4th Lateran (1215), the Lyonese (1245), the 2nd Lyonese 3(1274). Saints such as Francis of Assisi, Dominic of Guzman, Bonaventura of Bagnoregio, Alberto Magno, Anthony of Padua, Thomas Aquinas. Manfred was defeated and killed at Benevento (1266), Conrad, defeated at Tagliacozzo was executed in Naples (1268).

The imperial line of popes was replaced by the Angevin line. Aspirations of liberty, heretical ferment, curial corruption, the College of Cardinals divided, an *Ecclesia carnalis* in opposition to an *Ecclesia spiritualis*, all sorts of difficulties. The Conclave of Cardinals, gathered for over two years at Perugia, was unable to elect a successor to Pope Nicholas IV, who had died in 1292.

Finally on July 5, 1294, Brother Pietro of Morrone was elected pope. Sensational news.

At that particular moment of Christian history there was a fleeting impression that the prophecy of Gioacchino da Fiore had come true:

a *Pastor Angelicus* for the era of the Holy Spirit. There were a number of truly convincing signs such as the stigmata of Francis of Assisi and the fact that finally a pious Pope sat in Peter's throne. It cost Brother Pietro dear to accept, yet he did so, and he asked to be crowned at L'Aquila, before the Basilica of Santa Maria of Collemaggio, which he himself had built and dedicated to the Virgin of the Assumption.

Several passages of the inaugural speech betray why he had accepted, his programme of reform and his Pardon.

«Celestine Bishop, servant of the servants of God, sends his greetings and apostolic blessing to his Venerable Brothers, to the Archbishop of Ravenna and to Suffragans.

Such is God's wondrous judgement that if we mortals seek it we will realise how tremendous and stupendous it is, for it exceeds the feeble understanding of our stupidity, so that its light, intended for the contemplation of the greatness and wealth of His wisdom and of His immense science, surpasses all the boundaries of the Earth and neither can any human comprehension be such to reach it, nor can our abased fragile human senses draw away from it. In fact, He who is so terrible in his advice to the children of men, with His power dominates forever; and being spectator of all, and foreseeing all, since His never ending vision is always present, and



flows alongside the future quality of our acts and gently orders all with upright judgement and moderates with His eternal decisions every single thing created ... He founded the Sacrosanct Roman Church on the strong rock of faith, endowing it with the stability of apostolic avowal and although it seems to rock with each breath of wind, it will never be submerged by the terrible tempests that might bear down ...

Despite being wearied by the great repeated persecutions of worldly wickedness, it has never been abandoned by heavenly counsel on high, to guide it through similar tribulations, so that the joy of hope has never been lacking... The Roman Church has lamented the difficulties of widowhood for some time now. However, the Benign Spirit of Wisdom, raining down on the mountains from on high, with sudden speed and in order to give them merciful inspiration, uniting as one the hearts of these same Brothers (Cardinals) once in disagreement, has brought to completion almost immediately that which would hardly have been possible even in a great length of time.

These same Brothers once again were in agreement but only thanks to Divine Providence and to his wondrous acknowledgement of our humility, so elected us to the highest charge of the papacy.

WE, formerly BROTHER PIETRO OF MORRONE of the Order of St Benedict, received the Decree of the

completed election by hand of special envoys. And although the burden of such grievous weight was unbearable for our shoulders, (since we were of humble status, used to the solitude of retreat for some time now, and, having abandoned earthly concerns we had chosen to live solitary and unknown in the House of the Lord) we felt, however, that too long a delay in the substitution of the Pastor wreaked dangerous damage both to the church and to the Lord's flock, nor did we wish to appear resistant to the divine call, so we finally trusted in He who transforms the weak to strong, who gives eloquence to stammerers, who benevolently comes to the aid of those who fear Him and invoke His name, who wonderfully guides men's steps along His paths, never leaving deprived of counsel those who hope in Him. From Him we devoutly feel and humbly believe that our Calling springs, we accept the burden imposed on us and entrust all our imperfections to the hands of Divine Compassion, in the hope that our acts will be more kindly addressed according to His pleasure, that He may not leave us alone amongst the waves, inexperienced and weak in such high seas.

In the hope that He who has called us shall guard over us and over the Flock entrusted to us, to ever avoid scandal, reinforce peace, ensure the liberty of Holy Mother Church, may the Virtue of the Most High bring benefit where there was ruin, repair divisions, restore



what has been destroyed, confirm and increase the tormented Catholic faith...

For the rest, Brothers and Children, let us talk of you with the affection of charitable benevolence, offering to intercede with God for those aspects that concern devotion to your honour and you may safely turn to us, for in our soul there is the desire to promote your good and that of the church.»

The Bull of the First Christian Jubilee

«Celestine bishop, servant of the servants of God, sends his greetings and apostolic blessing to all those who see this letter.

Brothers, the solemnities of the Saints, the memory of St John the Baptist must be more solemnly honoured for He was born of the womb of a sterile woman, he was rich with virtues and eloquent witness of sacred truths. Voice of the Apostles, he concluded the cycle of Prophets. He announced with inspired speech and the gesture of a finger the presence Jesus on Earth, light in a turbid world, wrapped in the shadows of ignorance.

Thence his glorious martyrdom, mysteriously plotted by the wickedness of a shameless woman, and the conclusion this brought about.

We who received the insignia of the diadem placed on

our head in the Benedictine church of Santa Maria of Collemaggio in L'Aquila during the feast day of the Beheading of the Saint Himself, desire that He be honoured with greater veneration through hymns, canticles and devout supplications.

In order to ensure that the festivity of the Beheading in said church be exalted with extraordinary pomp and even more fervently with the participation of God's people, when the prayers of those who seek the Lord discover the gems of the Church resplendent in gifts of the Spirit that prefigure eternal tabernacles to come, for Almighty God's mercy and by the authority of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, each year we will absolve from all guilt and blame, for all sins committed since baptism, all those who, truly repented and confessed, have entered the aforementioned church, from vespers of the eve to that immediately following the feast day itself..

Dated L'Aquila September 29, first year of our pontificate.»

The Pardon was the first Papal act, exploded on the evening of the coronation, smacking of Joachimitism, right down to the terminology.

This is not just the remission of sins but also a true social reconciliation. In fact he ordered and achieved re-pacification between the town's factions and even persuaded King Charles II of Anjou to par-



don L'Aquila's rebels.

In current moral context where man is more inclined to see himself as a victim rather than as the guilty party, the Pardon is to be understood as a proposal of vertical and horizontal pardon (a reconciliation with God and with fellow men, with creation), an instructive thrust of conscience whose capacity is not only to offer but also to request forgiveness.

So this is not a simple concession of a privilege of indulgence but a peremptory request of a true moral commitment. We are called upon to decide whether we intend to be vain academics or vessels of Pentecost.

Why John the Baptist?

For Celestine, the **Baptist** is the tangible aspect of the voice that cries: prepare the path for your God in the steppe. Patron of hermits, man of the desert, Prophet, Forerunner. Celestine's hermit style then fits into that very tradition of the ancient Essens, men of penitence, wisdom and perfection, opposed to the official priesthood of the temple of Jerusalem. The desert: where nothing takes root, where

only God lives, (Maiella?). The imprisonment of John, (Fumone?). John's baptism of penitence, (the Pardon?). The scimitar over a John's head, (the tiara over Celestine's head?). Exactly on August 29, feast day of the Beheading. Both of them prophets and martyrs.

The Renunciation

On December 13, 1294, Pietro of Morrone was crowned Pope in L'Aquila with the name of Celestine V, yet after only 107 days of pontificate he resigned from the supreme role.

The day after the solemn Consistory of December 13, disputes arose regarding Celestine and his pontificate, about the meaning and the value of this **renunciation** that to several appeared folly and to others supreme loyalty to Christ's teachings and deepest humility.

Juridical and theological experts were disconcerted

An erroneous interpretation of Dante's famous verse "*the shadow of he whose cowardice brought him to the great refusal*" contributed in no small degree to denigrate the figure of the great hermit saint.

Francesco Petrararch, on the other hand, describes and honours



Celestine V's resignation as follows:

“Having put aside the supreme pontificate as a burden that led him towards death, he returned with such eagerness to the ancient solitude, it was as if he had been released from hostile fetters..

Those who wish may attribute the act of this Solitary and Saintly Father to pusillanimity of spirit: I believe it to have been a deed of the highest spirit, the most free and unfettered by passions, so truly celestial, and I believe that only a man who sees human things for what they truly are could act in such a way. It is not a weak and cowardly heart, as many of this century's amateurs believe, that can despise wealth and be revolted by the honours that descend upon it. Some left their boats and nets, others trifles, others the moneychangers' table, some even kingdoms and aspirations of kingdoms to become saints and friends of God.

Yet the Papacy, the highest office, so desired and acclaimed, especially since it began to be so sought after, was never despised with a greater and more surprising spirit than by this Celestine. Desirous only of his former name and home and poverty, He who gazes at the sky and forgets the earth.”

He had walked amongst moneylenders, simoniacs and misrepresenters of all types and had remained himself.

In Naples, where Celestine had transferred the Holy See, King Charles II of Anjou trembled as he lost control of the situation. He put pressure on Celestine to make him desist from his intention to renounce. Charles arranged for a cortège of common folk, notables and clergy,

who proceeded to shout and implore beneath the Pope's windows, but all to no avail. The Pope was now irremovable. He had ensured that the Consistory hall was prepared well in advance.

On the morning of December 13 the Cardinals took their seats. The Pope entered, his expression serene and dignified, made his way to the throne, holding tight a rolled parchment. He looked around him and said: Many of you will be amazed by my decision of renouncing the pontificate but it is irrevocable... He rose to the throne, unrolled the parchment and read:

“I, Pope Celestine V, spurred by legitimate reasons, in humility and in the desire for a better life, obliged by conscience and also by a lack of learning, the weakness of my body and the corruption of the people (of these people), in order to recover the consolation of my former life, my lost tranquillity, from this moment on I freely and spontaneously abandon the Pontificate and expressly renounce the throne, the dignity, the burden and the honour that accompany it, allowing the Sacred College of Cardinals the faculty of electing and providing, according to canon laws, a Shepherd for the Universal Church.”

Matteo Rosso Orsini asked the Pope to issue a special decree, speci-



fyng that for a just cause the Pope did have the discretion of renouncing his supreme status.

It was a bureaucratic detail but it was necessary for avoiding that anyone, at a future date, could invalidate the election of the successor.

Celestine did not hesitate for one moment and immediately dictated to Orsini himself the text of the decree and then signed it.

So he rose from the throne, went to the centre of the room and here, midst general amazement, sat on the ground and began to remove the papal robes. He took the tiara from his head and laid it on the ground, then he removed the ring, the red cope, the stole and the cotta.

He got up and put back on his old, threadbare habit of Morrone days.

Austere, serene and head held high, Celestine crossed the hall, amidst the Cardinals in gold and purple, and left.

Fugitive, then Prisoner

So as he had openly declared, Celestine intended returning to solitude, to his refuge, on Morrone, in peace. Instead the most terrible chapter of his life was about to open.

Celestine set off behind the cortège of the Papal court that accompanied the newly elected Boniface VIII from Naples to Rome, but half way there he disappeared into the night. A handful of Boniface's armed men caught him on Morrone, exhausted and in prayer in his grotto. Moved by compassion they left him there and returned to the Pope without their hostage. Boniface was infuriated and the group one again set off for Morrone, but Celestine was no longer to be found. Following ancient shepherd tracks he reached the Gargano. He wanted to go east, escape definitively from political and religious intrigue. Boniface trembled for the fate of the church and for the legality of his election, which was already under dispute.

A schism was feared. The population, spurred by the religious, continued to recognise Celestine as the legitimate pope. Boniface intervened desperately by segregating Celestine and denying any possibility of communicating with him. Boniface's intervention was not directed at Celestine's person, whom he reputed to be pure and saintly,



but at the machinations of his enemies who upheld the invalidity of his pontificate by bandying the invalidity of the renunciation of his predecessor. A difficult page in the Church's history and one that has not always been interpreted intelligently, but rather with sour prejudice. Celestine and Boniface shared the same love for the unity of the Church. Boniface's action to avoid a material schism was not dissimilar to Celestine's intention of going as far as Greece, a land of hermits and recluses, where he could disappear without trace.

We cannot seriously compare Celestine to the Child fugitive in Egypt and Boniface to Herod.

I believe that the Church's subtle fear of Celestine, even today, is actually attributable to such historical misunderstandings which have impeded it from enjoying and rejoicing in one of its history's most splendid avowals of probity.

Imprisonment and Death

Celestine's flight was halted first by the stormy sea that stopped him setting sail for the friendly Gargano coast and then because he was caught by the soldiers of that other friend of his, King Charles.

After this man of God had arrived in Fumone castle he was locked up in the tower and there he gave thanks to God, saying: I DESIRED A CELL AND **A CELL HAVE I HAD**, AS GRANTED BY YOUR MERCY, LORD MY GOD.

And so he rejoiced greatly for having found such a prison. He asked that two of his monks be left with him to recite Holy Offices. Immediately this was granted. But these monks could not tolerate the prison and often they were changed due to illness and were replaced with two in health. Finally two were brought to him who stayed until his death. The tower was so narrow that where the holy man placed his feet to pray was where he laid his head to sleep. And since it was too miserable for his monks to remain in such conditions, he comforted them for their patience and their love of God. And never was he bothered by the narrowness of his gaol or by the immorality of the soldiers, his gaolers. He was watched, night and day, by six soldiers and thirty men. And no man, whoever he might be, could approach him and speak. And so for eleven months he remained in this cramped prison.

Boniface ordered that he be treated "With all respect", ordered for him "Every comfort". Celestine not only refused, but asked to be given a cell as small as that on Morrone. And Boniface ordered that



one be built to make the Saint content.

The Saint lived there with great joy.

Except that he was no longer allowed to communicate with the outside world. Yet this had been his deepest desire throughout his hermit life. In fact when he was on Maiella it was only charity of spirit that involved him in the problems that were brought before him, for they were an distraction to him. For three periods of fasting each year he had no contact with anyone. At Fumone, therefore, he obtained that which he always desired. So his stay there was quite happy and he left only when he left for heaven.

The hour of his death arrives

The Almighty wished to repay his patience and give him the repose he desired after sixty-five years of penitence. So it was.

The Saint traditionally spent the days from the Ascension to Pentecost in deep devotion and in the most fervent prayer in honour of the Holy Spirit. When these days were over, on Whit Sunday he celebrated Holy Mass, as was his habit, with blessed ardour.

On that same day he called the soldiers who guarded him and said to them: You have tired yourselves greatly for me, I hope in God, how-

ever, that you will soon be able to rest. And they replied: And why, holy father, do you say such things? And he replied: Children, you will know of me only till Sunday.

And from that day onward he began to suffer a growing infirmity. When the soldiers saw this they sent for a doctor who examined him and touched him and announced that he was sick to death. And he had already predicted this to his monks, for he had a kind of abscess on his right side that pained him greatly.

He asked for extreme unction and, certain of his death, asked his monks to let him rest.

Yet where could he rest? He lay on a board with a mat and a cloak.

He who had held the dominion of the world and of all else had stripped bare to gain Christ and now lay on a naked board, sick and old!

He began to pray and recite psalms and admonished his monks to pray. He lay thus for the entire week, until Saturday.

Together with his monks he spoke only of God and they praised and prayed.

The soldiers who guarded him referred everything to the Pope, and



to all others, that from Friday to the hour of his death, before the door of the room where he lay, a gold coloured Cross could be seen, not fixed to anything, but simply hanging in the air.

The monks who were there were bitterly afflicted by the condition of their father and refused to go out and look.

On Saturday, the last day of Pentecost week dedicated to the Holy Spirit, at vespers, after reciting the last psalm of the Psalter, with a feeble voice that could barely be heard, complaining continuously of the anguish of his body, he exclaimed: OMNIS SPIRITUS LAUDET DOMINUM. As these words echoed, he slept.

IT WAS THE EVENING OF MAY NINETEETH 1296.

The disciples wept for the death of their Master. The father of fathers, the shepherd of shepherds who conversed on earth as the angel of Gods, left us all.

We are poor wretches! What shall we do now? What shall we say now? In who shall we find help and salvation? Our help is gone, as is our salvation, and we cannot find beneficial counsel.

O poor of Christ, cry with us, for your succour, the father you have lost and whom you will never find again, was he who used to fill up

your empty hands.

He defended you from your oppressive lords, protected you from every adversity with all his strength, healed you and your sick.

If our Superiors afflict and oppress us, to whom shall we turn? He reprimanded our leaders and never let subjects be oppressed.

What do we do now? We poor abandoned orphans who have lost the help and counsel of such a father!

So here are your disciples, offended and oppressed in many places by many lords, and the wealth of the monasteries has been stolen, all since your departure.

The Canonisation

Pietro of Morrone is the new Church. The style of great, inimitable simplicity conceals an impassioned commitment to transforming the curial tissue: the church's high bourgeoisie for a monk's ragged vestments. Master of Example. Thaumaturge. After meeting the intellectual greats: Petrarch, Alighieri, Jacopone of Todi, Tommaso of Sulmona, Bartolomeo of Trasacco, Buccio of Ranallo, all of whom



were engrossed in the enigma of the renunciation, he remains splendid. It is humility that for the first time touches the threshold of Pietro and returns uncontaminated, humble.

Pope Clement raised him to the honours of the altars.

It was the year of the Lord 1313, when the Celestine silences were broken by a “voice”: that of the bells in Avignon who told the world that the man of the “renunciation” was now a saint.

From the play NOI CELESTINO by U. Cavalli-Q. Salomone. **CD**

Rom CELESTINO V E IL GIUBILEO OF THE 2000



The Celestine Mystery

The shadows in this mystery story will be illuminated. A natural resolution whose progress leads to the light, heavenward in the celestial direction towards Celestine.

Historical sources, precise and meticulous with regard to the facts of Celestine's last days and imprisonment, were never doubted. Two centuries after his death a suspect began to form that Celestine had been murdered by order of Boniface VIII, his successor.

The Facts

In an identification of Celestine's remains in 1610 the famous perforation was discovered. An eminent abbot of the Celestine Congregation, now buried in the floor of the Basilica of Collemaggio, in polemic with L'Aquila's ecclesiastical authority, cast an insulting **accusation at the ecclesiastical institution** by attributing it with the murder of its leader and master, St Celestine. This abbot, **Telera**, went to surprising lengths to prove his accusation, not only by pointing out that the wound had been produced intentionally, but also declaring

that he could produce the nail used to carry out the crime. I stated earlier that no doubts arose regarding the truthfulness and the authenticity of the historical documents that had related a natural and saintly death of the illustrious character imprisoned at the fortress of Fumone. Now Telera thought he could uphold his accusing theory by exhuming that ancient request made by the Angevins in France, who not only wanted Celestine proclaimed a Confessor Saint, but also a **Martyr**. It was as if he had unearthed the reason behind that request. So he hung on to a further justification constituted by the fact that in some frescoes Celestine is depicted holding the martyr's palm in his hand. The author, however, invites prudence, for if Celestine's disciples and writers contrary to Boniface did not mention this, the suspicion should be held to be unfounded. And he keeps his distance.

The first to hypothesise murder was the historian Lelio Marino Lodeggiano, Abbot General of the Celestinian Congregation, three centuries after the Saint's death, in his work "Vita e miracoli di S. Pietro di Morrone", of 1630. The author describes a death with the authority of sources presumed to be those of the early disciples and Stefaneschi, then he suddenly hints at "a probable plot" that he slips into a "very reliable testimony", for hearsay is that in 1597 an abbot had found a box walled into the church of Santo Spirito a Maiella



which contained a nail half a palm or more in length, stained with blood ... a nail called a 'bresciano' or 'quaranta'. It was taken to Collemaggio and measured in the hole in Celestine's skull, where it fitted perfectly. It is still kept today amongst the relics at Santo Spirito.

The historian Giuseppe Celidonio, author of "Vita di St Pietro di Morrone" - 1896, in reference to this states that all research has been in vain. Celestine's remains, kept in four urns, with abbots' seals, were taken to the cathedral of San Panfilo in Sulmona, but no nail was ever documented. Marino affirmed that there was also an ancient painting in the church of Santa Maria at Avignon, which depicts a story (of which I have not found confirmation) of the Saint's death in which a man hammers the nail into the skull.

Abbot Telera, despite allowing Marino's idea, said that the nail had been found, but in all honesty never said that he saw it and he, as abbot, would have had every opportunity, just as he had seen the hole in the skull. (Just imagine the scene! Celestine's hypothetical assassins going to the shrine at Santo Spirito a Maiella to take back a bloodstained nail which they had just used to commit the crime, handing it back to the saint's followers who devotedly took the nail, placed it in a box and walled it up. Saying nothing. It was then found after three centuries: maybe they couldn't remember where

they had hidden it!).

Marino does not conceal his polemical intention against Boniface but he is not coherent in this respect, first asserting that perhaps the action was carried out unbeknownst to him (Boniface) and immediately afterwards concluding that he had permitted it for fear of losing his pontificate.

The motive for the murder would have been to ensure that Celestine obtained the martyr's palm. The historian Petrus de Ailly (*Vita Beati Petri Coelestini*), a cardinal close to the French Celestinians, compares Celestine's incarceration to a martyrdom and compares him to St Stephen, protomartyr.

Now if imprisonment is deemed worthy of a martyr's palm, it will be even more so if a violent death follows. The French wanted a martyr for freedom and although they had requested and arrogantly imposed this, they never thought of making used of a bloody martyrdom as persuasion.

At this point we must indicate the most important figure in the entire story: Philip Le Beau, King of France, sworn enemy of Boniface VIII, whom he hated with satanic fury.

For Philip an exaltation of Celestine was the equivalent of humiliat-



King Boniface. The canonisation of Celestine would mean a sort of “damnatio memoriae” for Boniface.

The Papacy resided in Avignon. Philip Le Beau pressurised Pope Clement V who had canonised Pietro of Morrone, the Confessor. The King demanded the canonisation of Celestine. Not only the Hermit but also the Pope must be recognised, and not only as a saint but also as a martyr.

Here we have the heart of the entire problem.

For Philip Le Beau obtaining recognition of Pope Celestine’s saintliness meant recognition and confirmation of the validity of his Papacy, the invalidity of the renunciation, and therefore the illegitimacy and invalidity of Caetani’s election as Pope. To undermine Boniface, the French King made use of every political and diplomatic means, and in 1311 he attempted, unsuccessfully, to have him officially condemned during the Council of Vienne in the Dauphiné. He tried again, exploiting Celestine’s canonisation, and failed again, for the declaration of saintliness of the Pope Celestine did not come about until 1600, when it was added to the original canonisation of the monk, Brother Pietro, which had occurred in Avignon in 1313.

In the incandescent atmosphere of the anti-Boniface polemic and in

the spirit of the post-mortem trials, a more blatant and feasible condemnation of Boniface was that of making him appear as a persecutor, the persecutor of Celestine. Even more shocking if this persecutor also turned out to be a killer. The idea remained in consideration until it acquired some consistency in around 1327, when someone made this hole in Celestine’s skull. That year, after various burials, a curious stratagem was used to take Celestine’s bones from Ferentino to the Basilica of Collemaggio in L’Aquila. Here the monks had to put the relics back together. There is, in fact, a detailed description of how these relics were arranged in four gold and silver urns so that they could be solemnly displayed to the crowds of devout and pilgrims. I do not deem it possible that the monks involved in this delicate operation did not notice and take note of a hole in the skull.

I believe that this was the moment when the hole was made.

The intention was to create a supposition, buried proof, concealed for a future demonstration, should it be necessary, of Celestine’s martyrdom.

I was previously convinced that the hole had been caused by the French militia of Philip of Orange, who, in 1530, took possession of the urns containing the relics and strewed them around the floor of the church. I thought that someone had stabbed the top of the skull



to see if it contained gold, which was a popular credence of that time. It was, however, a hypothesis that I put aside since a reference to the perforated skull existed prior to this date. In fact the Celestinian writer Stefano da Lecce hints at it in his work **“Vita del Beatissimo Confessore PIETRO ANGELERIO”** towards the middle of the 15th century. Stefano died at Pratola Peligna in 1483.

So the hole would have been there before the Orange incursion. Nor could it have occurred after 1327, for subsequent to this date Celestine’s remains were solemnly displayed for popular veneration, with seals visible to the public. And also because after this period, the spirit of anti-Boniface polemic was gradually dying down.

In my opinion, the hole in Celestine’s skull was made during the period after the first burial, prior to 1327.

The first burial occurred in the church of the Celestinian convent of **Sant’Antonio Abate, in Ferentino**, on May 21 1296, the day after the funeral, attended by a crowd of faithful monks, King, princes and cardinals. The second occurred, for reasons of increased security, in the Franciscan church of Sant’Agata, within the city walls of Ferentino in 1299. The third is that of L’Aquila, where St Celestine’s remains were taken with a stratagem. The story goes that several Celestinian monks, disguised as soldiers, took turns to act as senti-

nels around the church of Sant’Agata, usually under the surveillance of a troop of guards. One night in February 1327 they took away the Saint’s remains and hid them in a mattress that was then taken by a woman to the monastery of Sant’Antonio, outside the walls, with the pretext of preparing a bed for the new abbot who had just arrived from a far away. When she reached the monastery the package was handed over to two monks, Brother Biagio of Forca and Brother Pietro of Rasino Aquilano, who loaded it onto a cart and took it to L’Aquila. The heart remained at Ferentino, deep in the burial place. The illustrious relic is kept and venerated in the convent of Clarissas at Ferentino.

The true dilemma is deciding whether the hole was made in Celestine’s skull when he was still alive, or on his remains.

Celidonio would say that this disquisition is not worth re-opening since most experts have abandoned it for it neither adds nor removes anything from the comprehension and admiration for this great historical figure. I feel uncomfortable having to reply to banal provocation. I am convinced that Celestine should be approached with humility and reverence, as a Lord of the spirit, extraordinary mediator with God.



Hypotheses of murder

- a. Once the suspicion of a violent death for Celestine had arisen, everyone felt authorised to formulate a theory on which method was used. Therefore some wrote: Whilst Celestine and his companions slept a deep sleep, someone tiptoed into the cell, placed a nail on the old man's forehead, hammered, killed him and slipped away. Let us finally realise what kind of culture we are dealing with. This first hypothesis lacks any concrete proof or common sense. The noise of the hammer, a lament from Celestine, the door opening and closing, would none of this have awakened the two monks? And even if they did not wake up, once they were awake, would they not have noticed the blood, their Master dead or dying? And why would they themselves tell us of a natural death following a week of serene agony, of ecstasy?
- b. Others said: the two monks were lured away with some plausible pretext, in the meantime the crime was carried out, the body arranged and, when all was in order, the disciples were called back. During the canonisation proceedings for Celestine both the soldiers and the two monks imprisoned with Celestine were interrogated separately and rigorously. The replies were identical for all of them. The monks affirmed, separately, that they had never left the cell. The soldiers, each one separately, affirmed that they had asked the monks to leave the cell to see the miraculous sign of a cross of golden light that had appeared

in the small corridor in front of their prison cell. Celestine had not allowed Roberto of Salle to follow him and keep him company in the Fumone prison. Roberto of Salle was his confessor and confidante, a holy and stable man. He had to stay and manage the Celestinian Congregation and, above all, check any possible reaction against Boniface VIII's measures, commonly and popularly termed unjust and offensive towards their beloved master. Not only Blessed Roberto's invitation to keep calm, but also a documented order from Boniface to treat Celestine with every consideration, contributed to avoiding open conflicts between the Celestinians and ecclesiastical authorities. Even the slightest hint of mistreatment of their master would have been sufficient to provoke an explosion of violence towards Celestine's successor. It would have been difficult to distinguish the force of the devoted from the ferocity of the fanatics. But none of this happened. No one had anything to complain about. No one charged with keeping Celestine company in gaol had to be replaced for health reasons because they were not sufficiently robust to put up with the penitential rigours they had volunteered to undertake in the damp, dark tower. Celestine's corpse, before and during the solemn funeral, was shown to the public. The innumerable testimonies spoke of the splendour of the face. This would not have been so if a nail had bored into the skull, penetrating and lacerating the tissue, with consequent swelling and bleeding into the left-hand orbital cavity. They would have had to cover the face. So why did the faithful and the monks who had come down from Maiella tell that they had been able to



admire the splendid, luminous face? If the face had been bandaged would not some follower's curiosity have been aroused and the bandage lifted to see what had happened?

The experts also established that:

“1) The origin of the aforementioned lesion can in no way be considered accidental, it must have been caused by a human hand with the aid of a suitable instrument; 2) in the event that such an instrument might be a common nail, the section that penetrated in depth should be considered to be about 5 centimetres”.

The Investigations

1888

In Santa Maria at Collemaggio, on August 29 1888, the Saint's skull underwent rigorous examination carried out by Prof. Luigi Gualdi and doctors Alfonso Torti, Giacomo Crespi, Giovanni Silenzi and Virginio Pensuti, who wrote the following report:

“In the most protruding part of the front left-hand bulge, halfway along the upper orbital margin, about four centimetres away from this, there is a **rectangular bore**, with straight margins, with no surrounding lesion of the bone. The horizontal side of the rectangle measures about 5 millimetres, the other, vertical side, about 9 millimetres. The hole penetrates deep and allows a clear vision of the three cranial layers, external table, diploe and internal table of the skull. The surface of the fracture is somewhat clearer than the external surface of the skull”.

1944

Investigation of 1944, 650th anniversary of Celestine's coronation as Pope. The then Bishop of L'Aquila, Carlo Confalonieri, ordered the remains to be gathered together in a single urn.

1972

Complete report of the investigation.

1988

Investigation after the theft.

All serious researchers and experts have definitively abandoned the hypothesis of a violent death for Celestine. The desire for a killer, however, has obstinately endured. Engendered by a culture of suspi-



tion and favoured by sensationalistic journalism that even when it accepts that the hole is not proof of a crime, wants a crime in any case, by poisoning.

This passage is fundamental for an important deduction. It could constitute the most efficacious evidence to demonstrate how the hypothesis of the nail is unfounded and arbitrary.

If the suspect of murder arose because of the hole in Celestine's forehead, it was the hole itself that nurtured controversy, denunciations, fantastic conjectures of murder. Although these conjectures do not find even a shadow of truth, a steadfast and fanatical suspicion persists.

Here lies the only reason for proceeding to a poisoning, far later in time, that is to say, exactly when the hypothesis of murder with the nail had collapsed. And let it not be said they are connected ideas, because one excludes the other.

So even if the poisoning did not work, literature would ensure the endurance of a never abandoned desire for the prophet's murder. Think of the denigration of Celestine V, deriving from a hardly illuminated critic that in an unfounded and slanderous manner interpreted Alighieri's work as a condemnation of Celestine V. He was

sent to Hell, therefore, not by Dante, but by commentators of Dante. The identification of Celestine in "*the shadow of he whose cowardice brought him to the great refusal*", is not merely an innocuous literary error. It is the attempted murder of one of the most elevated minds to have emerged from the history of mankind, as Ignazio Silone realised in his "L'avventura di un povero cristiano".

Poisoning? A reply was also found for this by subjecting the relics to toxicological analysis. **Here are the results.**

The Echographic Examination

Following a suggestion by Professor Ventura and Doctor De Paolis, sceptically supported by Professor Fiori, an echography examination of Celestine's skull was carried out, in the hope of obtaining further elements from the investigation to determine whether what had occurred was prior to or after death. At first sight Fiori did not hesitate to affirm that the perforation had occurred on dry bone.

During the echographic examination experts declared that nothing



important came to light.

During the **Peregrination of St Celestine's Holy Remains** prior to the 1998 Pardon, the Curia of L'Aquila issued a press release.

The press release said that the diskette had not recorded anything, but it would be more accurate to say that it had disappeared. The archives were ransacked, but to no avail. Someone had taken it. On the envelope someone had written: "Prof. Ventura's skull". This raised a laugh but the floppy disk, never did turn up

I am making an open objection: if, one day, someone turns up with an echographic image of Celestine's skull, it's only use will be that of tracking down the perpetrator of the theft rather than an intention of hiding the results of the analysis.

In Conclusion

*"... the elect always look to the Cross.
Their life passes through love with hope,
the desire to bask in the martyrdom of Christ.
One fine May day,
in the brightest sky
when evening spreads its stars and Fumone glows with*

*"pardon"
with life that dies on rock,
it is Celestine
who unravels the mystery,
behind the bars
that filter the sky"*

From the play NOI CELESTINO by U. Cavalli-Q. Salomone. **CD Rom "CELESTINO V E IL Giubileo of the 2000"**

Here ends this wearying journey in Celestine's footsteps

The opus neither enhances nor diminishes the charisma and splendour of this Humble Sovereign.

In this CELESTINE MYSTERY I have reflected light more than I have delved into shadows.

For your delight I call it a CELESTINE MYSTERY. For my own pleasure I prefer to call it a CELESTIAL STORY.

Table of Contents

The Celestine Mystery	1
Pietro Angelerio	2
A Special Kind of Hermit	3
The Brotherhoods	4
Such a Man to Become Pope	5
The Bull of the First Christian Jubilee	7
Why John the Baptist?	8
The Renunciation	8
Fugitive, then Prisoner	10
Imprisonment and Death	11
The Canonisation	13
The Celestine Mystery	15
The Facts	15
Hypotheses of murder	19
The Investigations	20
The Echographic Examination	21
In Conclusion	22