

Devotion and Healing. The sick, miraculously cured, examined Body of Sister Maria Vittoria Centurione in Eighteenth-Century Genoa

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Abstract:

This research study aims to analyze documentation related to bodies, their definition and management. For this purpose, documents were used from a box entitled "Grazie" (n. 1355) from the Archives of the Diocese of Genoa, in which documents concerning miracles that occurred in the Diocese were kept. The nun Maria Vittoria Centurione of the Carmelite monastery of Saint Teresa was involved in a series of miracles studied by the Genoese ecclesiastical authorities between 1701 and 1705. In particular, she was healed from a form of *vertigen tenebrosa* with subsequent progressive paralysis through the intercession of St Teresa in 1701, and from another unknown disease through the intercession of St Pasquale Bailon, who appeared to her in her cell in the monastery. This study illustrates perceptions of the body in the monastery and in the Curia, notably through the theological books used by the ecclesiastical officials, as well as in the Genoese medical community.

The history of the Carmelite religious life for women in Genoa in the eighteenth century has been little studied up to now, research favouring the era of the foundation of monasteries and the spread of the Order. The disappearance, during the revolutionary suppression (1797-1799), of the archives of the Carmelite convents in Genoa makes the work of the historian even more difficult. The first monastery of Carmelite nuns founded in Genoa was named after Gesù Maria at the end of the sixteenth century. Another monastery would be built, that of St Teresa, where the miracle studied here occurred. In 1613, after fruitless

attempts, some noble Genoese families, considering the approaching canonisation of Teresa of Avila, suggested founding a monastery dedicated to her. From Rome they obtained permission to receive thirteen extra nuns at Gesù Maria to be sent to the new foundation, and a Genoese nobleman, Gabriele Adorno, set aside 22,000 scudos for the building of the monastery. The first stone was laid in 1614, and the construction was completed in 1619. On the history of the Carmelites in Genoa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we have very little information. After surviving the French Revolution, the two monasteries were finally discontinued; Gesù Maria in 1797 and that dedicated to St Teresa in 1810¹.

1. The first miracle: healing through ingesting

We come now to look at the facts at the centre of the present study - the miracles involving a Genoese Carmelite nun at the beginning of the eighteenth century.²

In 1701 a Carmelite nun from the convent of St Teresa in Genoa, Maria Vittoria Centurione, was the subject of a miracle. Ill to the extent that she was regarded as “incurabile” (incurable) and considered “disperata da medici” (a desperate case by doctors), she was healed on 23 January at around 10 p.m. by appealing to the intercession of the saint, founder of the Order and protector of the monastery, Teresa d’Avila, and ingesting a small amount of dust scraped off a statuette of the Saint, mixed with some earth taken from the Saint’s tomb. The miraculously cured nun and her religious sisters then appealed to the Archbishop of Genoa to prepare a case in which the nuns who had assisted Sister Maria

¹ For a more in-depth analysis of the history of the Carmelites in Genoa and their convents cf. G. Sommariva, “Monasteri carmelitani femminili a Genova”, in S. Giordano-C. Paolucci (dir), *Nicolò Doria. Itinerari economici, culturali, religiosi nei secoli XVI-XVII tra Spagna, Genova e l’Europa*, Genoa, Associazione Amici Biblioteca Franzoniana, 1996, 2, pp. 389-405; S. Giordano, *Contemplative sul monte. Le carmelitane scalze da 400 anni a Genova*, Alba, s.e. 1990. These works analyse the era of the foundation but do not extend to successive eras due to lack of documents.

² Three sources were used here: box no. 1355 of the Diocesan Historical Archive of Genoa, entitled *Grazie e Miracoli*, containing the documents of the two cases on the miracles regarding Sister Maria Vittoria of St Teresa Centurione that occurred between 1701 and 1706; a booklet of six pages entitled *Relazione del miracolo operato da Dio in Genova per intercessione della S. Madre Teresa di Giesv in persona della Rev. Svor Maria Uittoria Centuriona monaca professa nel Monastero delle Scalze di Santa Teresa*, Genoa, Antonio Scionico, in Vico del Filo, with the permission of the Superiors, 1702, kept in the Casanata Library in Rome which reports, on the basis of the case, the miracle of the healing of the nun on 23 January 1701; the lives of the nuns in question were reconstructed from the documentation of the Carmelite convent of St Teresa in Genoa, kept at the current Carmelite convent.

Vittoria and the doctors who had treated her would be consulted for the glory of God and the founder of the Order. On 31 October the Archbishop of Genoa, Giovanni Battista Spinola, gave orders to prepare the case. A form containing 28 questions was drawn up which would then be used for interviewing the witnesses. On 7 November 1701 the interviews began in the Archbishop's Palace. The first witness to be interviewed was the fifty-year-old doctor Paolo Lavagnino, son of the late Giovanni Battista, qualified physician (cc. 1r-4v). Lavagnino confirmed that he had known the nun since 1699 as he was the convent doctor. Sister Maria Vittoria had repeatedly suffered from "vertigine tenebrosa" (tenebrous vertigo) for two years.³ They had treated her with bloodletting and cupping; the bloodletting was done by the surgeon Giacomo Balestrino, who was unable to find more space in the jugular vein because of the wound that had formed there. Other doctors were summoned, Galerati from Pavia and Albertotti from Novi along with doctors from Genoa such as Antonio and Agostino Antonelli and Giovanni Ambrogio Bacciocco, who declared the illness incurable. It was feared that the nun would suffer a stroke so the bloodlettings were suspended because she was too debilitated. She then started to go blind and progressively paralysed from her hand to the whole of the right side. The nun had a fever and was so emaciated that Lavagnino suspected that she was "etica" (consumptive); moreover, she could neither eat nor sleep, and her fellow sisters helped to feed her. On 23 January she was in a particularly bad state when she consumed the powder of St Teresa which healed her. After this, she got up and asked for something to eat. Now healed, the nun herself met Lavagnino, who was amazed, in the convent, telling him how she had been delivered through the intercession of St Teresa. To the question of whether the healing could have a natural explanation, Lavagnino replied: "Per opera naturale, né de medicamenti né d'altro segreto, ciò non è seguito, ma bensì per opera miracolosa del Signore mediante l'intercessione di santa Teresa quale si è servita per instrumento di detta polvere" (this occurred neither through the work of nature, nor that of medicine, nor any other secret, but rather through the miraculous work of the Lord through the intercession of St Teresa, which was served through the use of that powder). This was deduced not only from the fact that the illness was incurable, but also from the speed of the

³ An illness attributed to an excess of liquid in the head, treated with bloodletting and diet, was called tenebrous vertigo; see G. Del Papa, *Consulti medici del signor dottore Giuseppe Del Papa archiatro della corte di Toscana, e pubblico lettore di medicina nella Università Pisana*, Venice, Sebastiano Coleti, 1734, II, p. 91.

healing, all the more so because the medicine, applied regardless of expense, had had no effect. From then on, Sister Maria Vittoria was completely cured.

On 9 November, Giacomo Balestrino, the sixty-year-old surgeon of the convent was interviewed (cc. 4v-8r) *in palatio* (i.e. in the archbishop's palace). He had treated the nun's illness, which had begun in 1689. Together with the doctors Paolo Lavagnino, convent doctor, Giovanni Ambrogio Bacciocco and Agostino Antonelli, he administered the usual treatments up to twice a day, such as "fire buttons"⁴ and bloodletting of the jugular a total of 45 times. As a result of this, there was no more space in the vein and her condition progressively worsened. Other doctors were consulted such as Galerati, while doctors Albertotti and Antonelli said that she was incurable. Despite feeling revulsion, the nun consumed the powder from the tomb of St Teresa and was healed. Balestrino, too, was amazed by the healing since, in his opinion: "ci voleva un miracolo per guarirla" (a miracle was needed to heal her) and the illness could not be cured naturally. He excluded the possibility that the powder could have natural curative powers, knowing that it had been taken from the tomb of the founder and that the nuns had given it to other people.

On 10 November, fifty-one-year-old Antonio Antonelli was interviewed, *in palatio*, by Giovanni Battista (cc. 8r-9v) who, after having retraced the course of the illness, like the others, attributed the healing to "un miracolo e non ad operatione alcuna naturale" (a miracle and not the action of anything natural). He knew that the powder had been taken from the tomb of the saint and confirmed that the nun was healed in a non-natural way. After 23 January, Maria Vittoria remained healthy, even becoming "rubiconda e carnosa" (plump and rosy-cheeked).

⁴ The 'bottone di fuoco' (fire button) could be a surgical instrument or a type of medication. According to what is written in F. Alberti di Villanova, *Dizionario Universale Critico Enciclopedico della Lingua Italiana*, Lucca, Domenico Marescandoli 1797, p. 131, it is an iron instrument which at the top has a 'pellet-like button'; when incandescent, it is used to burn (cauterise). The same definition is found in the *Vocabolario della lingua italiana già compilato dagli Accademici della Crusca ed ora nuovamente corretto e accresciuto dall'Abate Giuseppe Manuzzi*, (A-C), Florence, David Passigli and partners, 1833-1840. It is given, too, in N. Tommaseo, *Nuovo Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, Florence, Luigi Pezzati, 1830, which, however, also reports another definition, which evokes the old pharmacopoeia. According to the *Ricettario Fiorentino*, 'the fire button' would indicate a wrapping of thin cloth filled with rhubarb, Indian spikenard, "scropoli", left to soak and boil for medicinal use.

On 16 November, *in palatio*, the thirty-seven-year old Giovanni Antonio Bacciocco di Stefano was interviewed (cc 9v-11r). Bacciocco had visited the nun, ordered and administered the treatments himself. The nuns told him of the healing of Maria Vittoria after she consumed the powder. Neither the medicines nor the powder, affirmed the doctor, could have healed the woman in such a sudden way by natural means. For this reason, he continued: “Io stimo che la ricuperatione della di lei salute sii stata miracolosa” (I consider her recovery to have been miraculous), nor could one think of a natural healing of such an illness, rendered “contumace” (resistant) to any treatment.

On 6 December 1701, the fifty-six-year-old Prioress Teresa Maria di san Giuseppe was interviewed in the parlour of the convent (cc. 11v-15r)⁵. The Prioress confirmed the seriousness of Sister Maria Vittoria's illness and the ineffectiveness of the treatment. Vittoria herself asked that she be given the powder, which was put in a spoon with a little holy water while the nuns knelt to pray. The Prioress absented herself for a moment and then returned to see the situation. She found the patient still in bed but completely healed. Shortly afterwards, Maria Vittoria got to her feet, despite the numerous bloodlettings which, according to the doctors, should have prevented her from doing so.

The consumption of the powder was accompanied by Maria Vittoria being “raccolta in sé” (deep in contemplation). The nuns had received the powder from the Duchess of San Pietro, from the Princess of Avello and from the Carmelite fathers from Spain. Some statuettes of the founder were made of the powder and placed in different places for devotion. When necessary, a part was scraped off to give to the sick person. The Prioress confirmed that the earth in question had no natural properties. The earth delivered for analysis was, as the Prioress guaranteed, removed from one of the statues from which the powder given to Maria Vittoria had been taken.

⁵ Teresa Maria of San Giuseppe, lay name - Ippolita Maria Grimaldi, daughter of the Prince of Monaco, Ercole Grimaldi, and Aurelia Spinola, was born on 8 May 1644. She professed her vows on 30 May 1668.

On the same day, in the parlour of the convent, thirty-one-year-old Sister Teresa Maddalena di Gesù was interviewed (cc. 15r-18r)⁶. Like the others, the witness gave a description of the nun's illness. Teresa Maddalena was present in prayer in the patient's room when the latter consumed the sepulchral powder. The morning following the miracle, Teresa Maddalena found Maria Vittoria in bed and well. She continued with the story of the origin of the statuettes sent out around the world and explained how the scraped powder was given to patients, without however making reference to the princesses who procured it.

On 31 January 1702 the twenty-five-year-old Sister Anna of San Giuseppe⁷ was interviewed in the parlour of the convent (cc. 18r-21r). Having confirmed the story of the illness, Sister Anna recounted how she had learned from the Carmelites that the powder came from the tomb of the founder and was collected to make statuettes to send out for devotional purposes. Sister Anna did not know if the powder had natural healing properties, but she did know that it was given to the sick, who “alle volte per intercessione della Sta Madre sogliono ricuperare la salute” (sometimes, through the intercession of the Holy Mother, would regain their health). The powder sent to the judges was the same substance and the same amount as that given to Maria Vittoria to heal her.

On the same day, the twenty-seven-year-old Sister Maria Vittoria herself was interviewed in the parlour of the convent regarding her miraculous cure (cc. 21r-25v)⁸. The nun began by affirming that she had been in the convent for about 16 or 17 years, having entered at the age of eleven. For ten years she had suffered from vertigo and “giramenti di capo” (dizziness), which had however never hindered her from carrying out her normal convent activities; she had never taken medicine. After two years she had been purged and had taken medicines given to her by the doctors so that her bouts of vertigo had diminished. In the last two years, however, the bouts of vertigo has worsened so that by 1700 it was

⁶ Lay name - Maria Geronima Centurione, daughter of Prince Giovanni Battista and Giulia Maria Serra, therefore the sister of the miraculously cured nun, was born on 13 August 1670 and professed her vows on 24 August 1686, bringing a dowry of L 10,000, a *guarnile* of 2,000 and 200 of annual income. She died of tuberculosis on 24 June 1742. Cf. AMCSTG *Catalogo delle religiose professe* 5, n 29.

⁷ The correct lay name is Marianna of San Giuseppe, Paola Francesca daughter of Vincenzo Durazzo, who had been in the convent for about 15 to 16 years.

⁸ Our miraculously cured patient, Sister Maria Vittoria, had the monastic title of St Teresa. Her lay name was Maria Vittoria Centurione and she was the daughter of Giovanni Battista Centurione and Giulia Maria Serra. She professed her vows at 15 years of age on 30 August 1690. She died on 2 April 1731, many years after her illness; the healing had therefore been definitive cf. (AMCSTG) *Catalogo delle religiose professe* 5, no 31.

impossible for her to be present in the choir and to fulfil her other duties. She had followed the treatments prescribed by various doctors, particularly Paolo Lavagnino, the convent doctor, the late Giovanni Andrea Bacciocco, the Antonelli brothers, the doctors Peri and Faxiero and others. After various consultations, further opinions were heard from foreign doctors such as Galevardi (perhaps the same Galerati mentioned above) and Albertotti, who gave her some medicines which did not give her relief. The health of the nun continued to worsen, so that from September 1700 until January 1701 she hardly ever got out of bed. In December 1700 she was seized with a “gagliardissima” (an extremely strong bout of vertigo) so that not only could she not get out of bed but could not even raise her head from her pillow. Bloodlettings were performed from the jugular vein, which immediately proved of some benefit, but the bouts of vertigo soon returned and became more frequent with a sense of tightness to her head and, in the final days, a great heat in the “calvaries” (upper part of the cranium). She developed a slight temperature and her condition worsened further. She was given pills of various spirits, “applicativi e vescicativi” (applicative and vesiculative), and the “bottone di fuoco” (fire button) above the “calvaria” (the upper part of the cranium), all without any benefit. Only the bloodletting gave her some relief. In all, in the final months, it appears that she underwent 48 bloodlettings in the arms, legs and nose. The bouts of vertigo in the last two years had caused one finger of her hand to become paralysed, extending later to the whole hand and her arm and finally to the whole right side of her body. The continuous bloodletting had by this time rendered the jugular vein unusable so that the surgeon no longer injected, but left it open, closing and opening it each time.

The 23 January 1701 was the day on which Maria Vittoria took the powder from the founder. She had passed the night tormented by bouts of vertigo. At around midday she took a pill given to her by Dr Bacciocco without obtaining any results. At 3 p.m. her condition deteriorated. At 10 p.m., seeing herself reduced “all’estremo senza giovamento” (to an extreme state without improvement), she decided “su l’istanze che mi erano state fatte” (due to the petitions that had been made to her) to take the powder of the founder, although she was first perplexed by it. She then asked the Prioress and Mother Caterina di

Cristo⁹ to bring her the powder. All of the nuns gathered and even though Maria Vittoria could not see them due to the illness, she could hear them praying. The Prioress gave Maria Vittoria the powder dissolved in a spoon of water. She immediately recovered her sight and could move her head, which no longer felt either hot or heavy. She also reacquired the use of her arms. From then on, she began to feel as well as she was at the time of the interview. Having begun to walk around her room again the following day, she went to the choir to thank the founder for the grace she had received. The powder in question had never been taken before by Maria Vittoria, who had not even seen it. It was obtained “dal sepolcro della santa madre formandole piccole statue di detta santa dalle quali poi se ne rade qualche poca che si prende per divotione dall’ammalati in un poco d’acqua” (from the tomb of the Holy Mother; small statuettes of the saint were made from it and a small amount then scraped off to be consumed in a small amount of water as a form of devotion by the sick). What was given to her was taken from the statuette given to the nuns by the Princess d’Avello. About a month before, the nuns had given the powder to a man who had a sick daughter and she had been healed. According to Maria Vittoria, the powder did not have natural properties but worked through the intercession of the founder. The healing had not taken place naturally as the previous medicines and treatments had had no effect, but was to be attributed to the intercession of St Teresa.

The next step was to analyse the miraculous powder.

On 15 March 1702 it was decided to procure some of the powder used in the convent to heal Sister Maria Vittoria. Domenico Bovone was delegated to this task and on 16 March presented himself at the curlo (wheel) of the convent. As the Prioress was ill, Sister Maria Caterina di Cristo brought him a box with the collected powder (c. 26r). On 17 March a decree was issued by which the Vicar General delegated Giovanni Battista Varsi and Agostino Morando to study the collected powder to assess its possible natural therapeutic properties (sheet inserted between c. 26v and c. 27r).

On 24 March Giovanni Battista Varsi (46 years old), son of Giovanni Agostino, (cc. 26v-27r) appeared before the Vicar in the Archbishop’s palace. He confirmed that he had licked the

⁹ Caterina di Cristo is probably Chiara Maria Spinola, daughter of Alessandro Spinola and Cacia Sauli, who entered the Carmelite convent of Santa Teresa in Genoa on 1 February 1646. She professed her vows on 2 February 1647 and died on 16 August 1706.

statuettes in question and noted that they were composed of simple earth, called “tufo” (tufa) which “ha avuto qualche adustione leggiere, o sia essicatione” (had been slightly burned or dried). He excluded the existence of any natural curative property that might stop anyone from being affected by bouts of vertigo. The powder was “incapace di guarire qualunque malattia” (incapable of curing any illness). On the same day in the same place, the other expert, Agostino Morando, son of the late Michele (47 years old), appeared, confirming what had been said before by his colleague (cc. 27r-28r).

Salvatore Castellino, prosecutor and Vicar General, drew up a seven-page appraisal in which he examined the testimonies of the case in the light of the case law of the time. He made the point (referring to Pignatelli, p. 26) of how one might object to the possibility that the illness could be healed by the forces of nature or by previous treatments, or that the illness itself could have run its course, making it difficult to discern the origin of the healing.¹⁰

¹⁰ Consulting the bibliography of the Castellino era leads to “Aug Rocchi, de can sanct cap 23”, which probably refers to A. Ricca (1545-1620), *De canonizatione sanctorum commentarius, hoc est, De definitione, auctoritate, & antiquitate; deq. causis, & ordine iudiciario canonizandi Sanctos; de miraculis item ac de rebus, quae veram declarant sanctitatem, necnon de honoribus, qui Sanctis debentur; ... additis caeremonijs in ea obseruari consuetis, ac declaratis; sanctorumq. canonizatorum catalogo accedente*, Romae, Guillelmum Facciottum, impensa Ioannis Martinelli, 1601. A “Pignatelli 26 number 8, volume 5; consul 194 volume 10” referring to G. Pignatelli (1625-1698), *Iacobi Pignatelli ... Consultationum canonicarum tomus primus [-decimus]. In quo praecipue controuersiae de ijs, quae ad sanctorum canonizationem, ac sacros ritus; ... pertinent ... Opus omnibus vtriusque fori iudicibus, iurisconsultis, ... & aduocatis vtile plane, ac necessarium. Cum duplici indice, altero consultatuonum, altero rerum notabilium in fine quarti tomi apposito*, Venetiis, Paulum Balleonium, 1687-1696. A “Sibillano, Speculum peregrinorum quest decis ad 3 chap. 8 quest 5 ante med.” which is B. Sibylla, *Speculum peregrinarum quaestionum. Argentinae*, Gruninger, Johannes (Reinhardi), 1499.

The initial source of Salvatore Castellino was probably Pignatelli, who in point 8 (consultation 26 volume 5) affirms:

“Miracula vero sanationum, quae sunt tertiae classis indigent maxima probatione, et exquisito examine, ut admittantur, cum possint fieri per naturam, et multoties prouenire ex praecedenti applicatione remediorum naturalium, vel ex aliqua crisi, aut ex statu morbi vergentis in declinationem, ut inquiunt Anger Rocch. *de canon. Sanct. cap. 25*. Castellin. *d. resp. num. 4*. et Gaspar à Reyes Francus in *Elys. iucund. quast. camp. q. 24. num.2*. Quare Bartholom. Sybillan. in *Specul. peregr. quaest. Decad. 3. cap. 8. q.5. ante med.* Hoc a mortalibus incomprehensibile fatetur, cum difficillima in eis quandoque discretio sit, quae non potest sufficienter haberi ex consideratione circumstantiarum loci, temporis, opportunitatis, modorum faciendi, qualitate sanctorum, et finis.”

As one may note, Pignatelli refers here to the sources indicated by Castellini. The consultation 194 of volume 10 by Pignatelli is entitled *De miraculis diligenter etiam atque etiam examinandis in Canonizatione Sanctorum. De modo illa examinandi: Et quae necessaria sint pro sanctis in Ecclesia militante declarandis?*

But the evidence in the case examined was so great that “giustificano in ogni parte per miracolosa guarigione suddetta che non lascia luogo a dubitare” (each part justified the conclusion of the aforementioned miraculous healing, leaving no room for doubt). We come now for this reason to assess the conditions required for the recognition of a miracle, as developed by the consensus of theologians and contained in the seven criteria drawn up by Gaspar Reyos: ¹¹

- 1 che la malattia sia assolutamente incurabile o almeno difficilissima
 - 2 che questa sia grave
 - 3 che sia in stato di declinare naturalmente.
 - 4 che la sanità si recuperi dall'amalato instantemente
 - 5 che detta sanità sia assolutamente perfetta
 - 6 che ciò non proceda da effetto alcuno naturale procedente la medema come sarebbe crisi, o altra sorta di evacuatione
 - 7 che detta sanità sia decevole in modo tale, che non ritorni di nuovo a richadere l'amalato doppo il riauisto di essa .
- Quali conditioni tutte alla lettura del processo fabricato nella curia ecclesiastica d'ordine di Mons Illustrissimo e Reverendissimo Gio Batta Spinola arcivescovo di Genova.

- 1 that the illness is absolutely incurable or at the least extremely difficult to cure
 - 2 that it is serious
 - 3 that the person is clearly in a state of decline
 - 4 that the health of the patient was immediately restored
 - 5 that the patient is now in perfect health
 - 6 that this does not proceed from any natural effect, such as that of a crisis, or any other sort of solution or recovery
 - 7 that the patient's condition is such that the patient will not relapse after regaining his or her health.
- These conditions were all read at the proceedings of the Ecclesiastical Curia on the order of the Illustrious Mons. and Most Reverend Gio Batta Spinola, Archbishop of Genoa.

Taking into account again the requirements of Reyos, based on the evidence collected, Salvatore Castellino came to the conclusion that it was necessary to recognise that the miracle took place, and it remained only for the Archbishop, having considered the reasons set out, “ne ordini la pubblicazione a maggior honore e gloria del Signore” (to order its publication for the greater honour and glory of the Lord). This took place with the

¹¹ Castellino refers to “in camp elys, 24 n 1”, probably a reference to F. Gaspar dos Reys, *Elysius incundarum quaestionum campus, omnium literarum amoenissima varietate refertus*, Bruxellae, Vivien, 1661.

pronouncement of the Archbishop of 4 May 1702, which declared the miracle to consist of “de curatione miraculosa seguita in personam dictae R.S. Mariae Victoriae Centurionie” and authorised its publication for the greater glory of God. On 20 May it was decided to return the box with the earth to the Carmelites. In charge of this was Bovone, who in turn delegated Stefano Odino to perform the task.

2. The second miracle: healing through seeing

However, for Sister Maria Vittoria, the time of trials, illnesses and miracles had not passed. A few years later in 1705, a similar situation would present itself, of which we are informed by the *Processo della gratia ricevuta da S. Pasquale Baylone*, kept in the same file as the previous one.

A new enquiry (prepared in order not to hide the graces given by God through the saints, in the case of St Pasquale Bailon, on 19 September 1704 to Sister Maria Vittoria Centurione) was submitted to the Curia. On 15 October 1705 the start of the enquiry was approved and a commission established¹².

A regulation was drafted (16 October 1705), to which the commission had to adhere. First, the course of events was clarified. In 1704 Sister Maria Vittoria was ill for some time to the point of being considered a hopeless case by the doctors. The nun, “con poca fiducia e per obbedienza” (with little faith and out of obedience) made a novena to St Pasquale Bailon. On 19 September 1704, while she was resting in her cell, she heard three knocks on the wall, on which there was a picture of St Pasquale. Lifting her eyes, she saw a monk in the cell in the habit of the Alcantarine reform and heard a voice that said: “ancorché tu non vogli io ti voglio aiutare” (even though you do not want me to, I want to help you). The apparition disappeared and Vittoria felt delivered. The picture had been given to her by Dr Lora, who

¹² The first point to note is how the worship of St Pasquale (1540-1592) received a strong boost from his recent canonisation (1690). Popular devotion has always linked St Pasquale to the female universe, as a popular prayer reveals: «San Pasquale Baylonne protettore delle donne, fammi trovare marito, bianco, rosso e colorito, come te, tale e quale, o glorioso san Pasquale». (San Pasquale Baylonne, protector of women, let me find a husband, white, red and coloured, exactly like you, o glorious St Pasquale).

was treating her. From then on, Sister Maria Vittoria was always in good health. The Prioress, Mother Teresa Maria (probably Teresa Maria of San Giuseppe Grimaldi), was informed of the act of grace and called immediately to the cell by the miraculously cured nun.

At this point, the series of interviews began.

On 20 October 1705, *in palatio*, Giovanni Maria Lora (42 years old) was interviewed. He claimed that he was a “ritualmente” (professed) member of the clergy and that he had worked as a doctor since 1686¹³. Lora confirmed that he had known Maria Vittoria for some years because the nun’s father, Prince Giovanni Battista Centurione, had invited him to the convent some months before the feast day of St Teresa (which is celebrated in October) in 1704 to treat his daughter. On arriving at the convent, he entered with the permission of the Superior and in the lower corridor the sick nun came to meet him. He found her pulse to be irregular and asked her how long she had been tormented by headaches and bouts of vertigo: the nun answered that it had been for a few years; no-one had found a remedy for her illness. He had examined the nun in her bed, making the diagnosis that it was a:

“affettione malinconica costituita in una mala diatesi di sangue carico di acidità a segno che il sangue con questa sorte di impurità le quali infettavano il sangue communicate anche alli spiriti animali li mettevano in un motto vertiginoso con essere impediti da quella grossessa a poter scorrere per i suoi canali la lasciavano come impotente e incapace di potersi sostenere in piedi”.

“melancholic affliction consisting of poor diathesis of acidic blood so that the blood, infected by impurities, communicated also to the animal spirits, made her dizzy, being impeded by that thickening from being able to flow through her system and left her weakened and incapable of being able to support herself standing up”.

The thickening of the blood gave her a “restagnatione del capo” (stagnation of the head), from the weight of which she suffered discomfort so that she was threatened with apoplexy. This illness had begun many years before and ceased with the miracle of 19 September 1704. Many doctors before Lora (Lavagnino, Ferrari, Bacciocco, Galerati) had tried to “togliere l’impurità del sangue” (remove the impurity from the blood) to no avail. The

¹³ He had been baptised in the San Lorenzo Cathedral in Genoa and was the son of Benedetto Maria and of the deceased Bradancale (cc. 1r-5v).

bloodlettings performed had, for Lora, only worsened the state of the illness behind an apparent improvement. The numerous scars on her jugular aggravated the situation. The treatments administered by Lora, in his opinion, led to no improvement. The physicians in general, had no hope of obtaining any results. Lora had then treated the illness with a spoonful of “tintura di castoreo e di spirito di corno di cervo dal quale pure non hebbe alcun giovamento” (castoreum tincture and deer antler essence, from which she received no benefit)¹⁴. In the days leading up to the miraculous healing, he had given the patient only this drink so that the healing itself could not be attributed to any “medicamento” (medication) but was “prodigiosa” (prodigious).

A servant sent from the convent went in the evening to call Lora, who was alarmed, fearing the worst. The servant reassured him, however, saying that the nun had improved. As soon as he arrived at the parlour, Mother Teresa Maria Grimaldi told him of the “miracolo” (miracle) or “gratia” (grace) from God through the intercession of St Pasquale Bailon, for which the miraculously cured patient had been “vivamente” (strongly) recommended to pray. Maria Vittoria arrived at this point, thanking the doctor for having introduced her to St Pasquale by giving her the picture. Maria Vittoria said that on seeing the “piccola” (little) picture (and we are informed here of the dimensions of the picture) Lora had given her eight days before, she had had little faith, having had qualms, she confessed, about her behaviour. That night the illness had returned and in the morning, when the other nuns went to prayer, Maria Vittoria was sitting with her head against the wall when she heard the knocking and St Pasquale appeared, dressed in the manner of St Peter of Alcantara. St Pasquale told her that her behaviour was displeasing to him and that he wanted to heal her. She was immediately seized by fear and great anxiety, so much so that she was unable to speak. Lora had given the picture to Maria Vittoria at the request of Vittoria Serra,¹⁵ the

¹⁴ Castoreum is an oily liquid extracted from the gland of the beaver. For the antler, see N. Lémery, *Farmacopea universale che contiene tutte le composizioni di farmacia le quali sono in uso nella medicina tanto in Francia, quanto per tutta l'Europa, le loro virtù, dose, e maniere di mettere in pratica le più semplici e le migliori. E di più un vocabolario farmaceutico, molte nuove osservazioni, ed alcuni ragionamenti sopra ogni operazione di Niccolò Lemery, dell'Accademia Reale delle Scienze, dottore in medicina: tradotta dalla lingua francese*, Venezia, Hertz, 1735, p. 59.

¹⁵ This may refer to Vittoria del Carretto, who married Tommaso Serra in 1649, having two children. Vittoria distinguished herself through devotion and support for the convents. Widowed in 1675, she may also have thought of becoming a Carmelite nun, cf. P. Fontana, “Tradizione mistica e normativa sinodale a Genova nel secolo XVII. Un'analisi attraverso l'esperienza spirituale di Vittoria del Carretto Serra (1633-1714)” (Mystical tradition and synodal regulations in Genoa in the seventeenth century. An analysis through the spiritual experience of Vittoria del Carretto Serra (1633-1714), in G. B. Varnier (dir.), *Scritti di*

nun's maternal grandmother, saying that she had particular devotion to the saint for grace received through his intercession. The picture had been sent by Lora to the parlour in the presence of the other nuns, and Vittoria Serra had insisted on imploring the saint for help. The suddenness of the healing guaranteed, according to Lora, that it had taken place by means of “*attione soprannaturale o di gratia o di miracolo*” (supernatural action or by grace or by a miracle).

On 22 October 1705, *ad cratas* (through the grids), the sixty-one-year-old Prioress, Sister Teresa Maria di san Giuseppe, was interviewed (cc. 5v-8r).¹⁶ She confirmed that she had already known Maria Vittoria before she entered the convent and that she had visited her during the illness. The doctors gave the diagnosis of “*vertigine tenebricosa*” (tenebrous vertigo) and she was treated by Lavagnino, the convent doctor, and Lora, without benefit. Only the bloodlettings gave her some slight relief, but the bouts of vertigo immediately returned so that the illness was believed by the doctors to be “*incurabile e con nessuna speranza*” (incurable and hopeless). Lavagnino, seeing that it was a desperate case, in the end abandoned the treatments. The nuns decided then to turn to Lora, but he too was unable to obtain any positive results. Before 1704 she underwent bloodlettings and was given drinks, pills and baths but with no improvement - in fact, her condition continued to worsen. During the illness, Maria Vittoria appealed for the intercession of the saints, in particular St Pasquale. Maria Vittoria had not immediately given credence to the intercession of St Pasquale, despite praying to him, while the other nuns “*fecero particolari devotioni*” (made specific devotions) in order to obtain the grace of God. The vision and the miracle are recounted by the Prioress, as in the other versions. From then on, Maria Vittoria was in good health, observing the rule.

On the same day in 1705, the thirty-one-year old Sister Maria Vittoria di St Teresa Centurione herself was interviewed (cc. 8r-10v). She stated that she had been a nun for fifteen years and remembered being ill with vertigo in 1704. To treat her, the doctor

storia e diritto sinodale in memoria di Lazzaro Maria de Bernardis, I sinodi postridentini della provincia ecclesiastica di Genova, Genoa, Glaudo Brigati, 1997, pp. 109-133.

¹⁶ Teresa Maria di san Giuseppe, lay name - Maria Vittoria Durazzo, daughter of Vincenzo and Maria Francesca Morando, professed her vows at the age of 15 in September 1691.

prescribed “medicamenti, di bagni, cavate di sangue e qualche goccie per bocca”

(medications, baths, blood extractions and drops for her mouth), all to no avail.

Shortly before 19 September, after having gone to the convent to treat her, Dr Lora gave her the image of the Saint, telling her to implore him to help her, he being a saint of “gran merito” (great merit). Maria Vittoria did so more out of obedience to the confessor and the other nuns than from her own conviction. The morning of the miracle, she went out into the corridor of the convent, supported by a nun and then returned to her cell accompanied, among others, by Mother Teresa Maria (di san Giuseppe). When she got to her room, she sat on a chair, looking at the picture of St Pasquale on a small table. She then heard three soft knocks on the wall beside which the picture was. She had her eyes closed, opened them and saw “un frate in habito biggio con cordone grosso con groppo simigliante a quello de padri della Pace¹⁷ che pareva che avesse del lucente e maestoso” (a monk in a grey habit with a large knotted rope, similar to that of the Fathers of Peace, who appeared radiant and majestic). The nun heard the words uttered by the vision: “Ah tu mi fai così? A tuo dispetto ti voglio guarire e, immediatamente, spari et io restai confusa et alterata” (Ah, you do this to me? In spite of yourself, I want to heal you), upon which it immediately disappeared and I was confused and affected.” Maria Vittoria went to look for Sister Teresa Benedetta¹⁸ so that she could tell Mother Teresa Maria. When the latter arrived, Maria Vittoria was on the bed, affected but healed. From then on, she was able to completely observe the rule.

When Maria Vittoria heard the voice, she was alone in the room and only later did she speak of it to Mother Teresa Maria and the other nuns. For two days she did not speak of it, only making the healing known to her parents, Dr Lora and her confessor. From then on, Maria Vittoria healed completely and was also able to start reading again, which she did with a *Life* of St Pasquale, whereas before she had not even been able to read two lines. Maria Vittoria stated that she had really heard the knocking on the wall where the small table with the picture of St Pasquale was, and she did not feel that she had been deceived. When she saw St Pasquale, she was alone in her room; she felt some “consolazione interna” (inner comfort) from the vision but was left disturbed and affected to the point that she was trembling.

Before the healing, Lavagnino had said to her that there was no hope whereas now, after 19

¹⁷ The Convent of Peace was kept in Genoa by the Franciscans.

¹⁸ Teresa Benedetta di Gesù Maria, lay name - Chiara Maria Lomellini, daughter of Giacomo and Benedetta Salvago, professed her vows at the age of 16 on 3 February 1683 and died on 4 February 1730 (AMCSTG) *Catalogo delle religiose professe* 5, 27.

September, she was healed and was observing the rule. The illness had been growing progressively worse and she had been healed by the “pura gratia ottenuta per intercessione di S. Pasquale” (pure grace obtained through the intercession of St Pasquale).

On 2 November 1705, *in palatio*, Paolo Lavagnino, son of the late Giovanni Battista, was interviewed (cc. 10v-13r). The physician remembered having treated Maria Vittoria for various illnesses but particularly for “vertigine tenebrosa avvampante con dolore di testa e vertigini” (accentuated tenebrous vertigo with headache and bouts of vertigo). From the treatments administered not only did she not obtain any benefits but grew worse. She had consulted other doctors such as Lora. The healing was, for Lavagnino, a fact that was not usually “farsi dalla natura né possibile nel corso naturale” (obtained from nature nor possible in the natural course of events). Moreover, Lora had treated her with the attention with which he treated patients in the Genoese hospital of Pammatone. The nuns had said to Lavagnino that they had celebrated a novena to St Pasquale, and Maria Vittoria herself implored him for his help, although with little fervour. Lavagnino was not in the convent when the miracle occurred but was sent for by the nuns. After the healing, Lavagnino visited Maria Vittoria, finding her healthy, and did not consider the healing possible according to the natural course of the illness.

On 15 December 1705, *ad cratas*, Sister Marianna da san Giuseppe Durazzo (cc. 13r-14v; 15rv¹⁹) was interviewed. Sister Marianna described the illness of her fellow sister: applications of decoctions, deer extract and medications with “lilium convalium” were given to Maria Vittoria in addition to bloodlettings but, in the end, she was considered to be incurable. Seeing that Lavagnino’s treatments, by bloodletting, produced no results “si deliberò” (it was resolved) (by whom? The Prioress, the chapter, Sister Maria Vittoria? We do not know) to turn to Lora, who had the decoctions and other treatments administered, also to no avail. Lavagnino considered her incurable. Lora gave her some medicines to treat her but with no result, even though the doctor continued to hold out hope. Before the healing, the witness continued, Maria Vittoria was taking no medicine, just a decoction that did not help her. She could not remember if it was on 17 or 18 September that the medicine was given to Maria Vittoria. Not only did the medicine not give her relief, but she seemed to

¹⁹ Here, the numbering is no longer according to documents but to pages.

grow worse. She could not say if Maria Vittoria had made specific devotions during the illness.

Marianna da san Giuseppe saw Maria Vittoria in the dormitory and asked if she wanted to be accompanied to her cell but Vittoria declined the offer, saying that she would be “arrembata” (Genoese for ‘supported’) by the wall. On returning shortly afterwards, Marianna found her fellow sister healed. She was led not into her room but into that of Sister Teresa Benedetta di Gesù Maria. The healing had taken place, continued the witness, through the vision of St Pasquale, which Marianna reports in the same way as Maria Vittoria. For the witness, the healing was not due to the decline of the illness but to grace “gratia fattele dal santo” (bestowed on her by the saint). Maria Vittoria then told the Prioress Maria Teresa of her grace and all the nuns knew about it.

On 20 April 1706, *in palatio*, the Vicar General, Vincenzo Maria Pini, having heard the request advanced in the name of the miraculously cured nun by Pietro della Cella, published the evidence, a copy of which he sent to whoever requested it. On 16 September 1706 the canonical theologian, doctor *In Utroque*, Vincenzo Maria Pini, Vicar General of Cardinal Lorenzo Fieschi, Archbishop of Genoa, seeing the information collected, declared the miraculous nature of the healing, which took place through the intercession of St Pasquale Bailon “preterque providentiam humanam obtentam”, and published it for the glory of the saint (c. 15)²⁰.

2. A printed book about the first miracle: the *Relazione* of 1702

Another version of the miracle of the healing of Sister Maria Vittoria of 23 January 1701 was reported in a six-page booklet entitled *Relazione del miracolo operato da Dio in Genoua per intercessione della S. Madre Teresa di Giesv in persona della Rev. Svor Maria Uittoria Centuriona monaca professa nel Monastero delle Scalze di Santa Teresa*, in Genoa, for Antonio Scionico, in Vico del Filo, 1702, with the permission of the Superiors²¹. The text aims to celebrate the “amabile” (loving) divine omnipotence shown in St Teresa, while affirming

²⁰ The second miracle increased devotions to St Pasquale in the convent. On 30 March 1707 a “conversa” (lay sister), who died in 1745 at the age of 66, took the name of Maria Agnese di san Pasquale (AMCSTG) *Catalogo delle religiose professe* 5, 38.

²¹ Note the inversion of the use of u and v.

that it is enough to know of her life in order to be informed of this. For this latest wonder, the *Relazione* is based on the original case format in Genoa by order of the Archbishop, Giovanni Battista Spinola. The *Relazione* summarized the narrative of the facts. On 23 January 1701 Maria Vittoria, who was aged between 26 and 27, was “aggrauata” (seriously affected) by “uertigine” (vertigo), defined by the doctors as “tebricosa et essenziale” (tenebrous and essential), accompanied by paralysis of the little finger of the right hand extending to the whole right side, with frequent dimness of the eyes and total loss of sight, so that she was unable to turn around or move her head, complaining of there being a great weight and a great heat in her head above the “calvaria” (upper part of the cranium). This illness had begun seven years previously with short bouts of vertigo which impeded her from getting up in the morning, and with loss of sight for half an hour. This had been attributed to her having slept for many nights with the window open “sotto il lume della Luna, ed il giorno dimorato per molto tempo à i riflessi del Sole” (in the light of the moon, and to many hours of the day spent in the light of the sun). Doctors from Genoa and elsewhere were summoned but to no avail. Even though she received some relief from short emissions of blood (from three to four ounces), the illness returned. The total amount of bloodlettings between October 1700 and 23 January 1701 was between 10 and 12 pounds. The doctors feared that an apoplectic attack could occur “che l’incaminasse sicuramente alla morte” (which would certainly lead to her death). Sister Vittoria was judged by the doctors to be in a “disperato” (desperate) condition and to be “incurabile” (incurable), having proved resistant to treatments which were “potentissime, et efficacissimi rimedij” (very powerful, and effective remedies). The nun turned then with a “viva fede” (strong faith) to St Teresa and repeatedly asked the nuns who were helping her for some of the powder taken from the statuette made from the earth of the tomb of the Saint. Having taken it with “fervorosa divotione” (fervent devotion), she was immediately healed. She recovered her sight and was able to move her head, in which she no longer felt weight and heat. And not only that, to guarantee the healing, God had made her not only healthy but “più carnosa, e rubiconda” (plumper and rosy-cheeked). All of this was confirmed by the doctors Paulo (sic) Lavagnino, Antonio Antonelli, Gio Antonio Bacciocco and by the surgeon Giacomo Balestrino together with the nuns Teresa Maria di san Giuseppe, the then Prioress, Teresa Madalena (sic) di Gesù, Marianna da san Giuseppe and by Maria Vittoria herself, witnesses examined in the case held from 31 October 1701 to 20 May 1702, in which all of the theories requested by

the “Dottori” (doctors) were tested so that a healing could be said to be miraculous, authenticated then by the Archbishop with the decree of 4 May 1702 from which the *Relazione* is reported below (see **Illustration 1**)²².

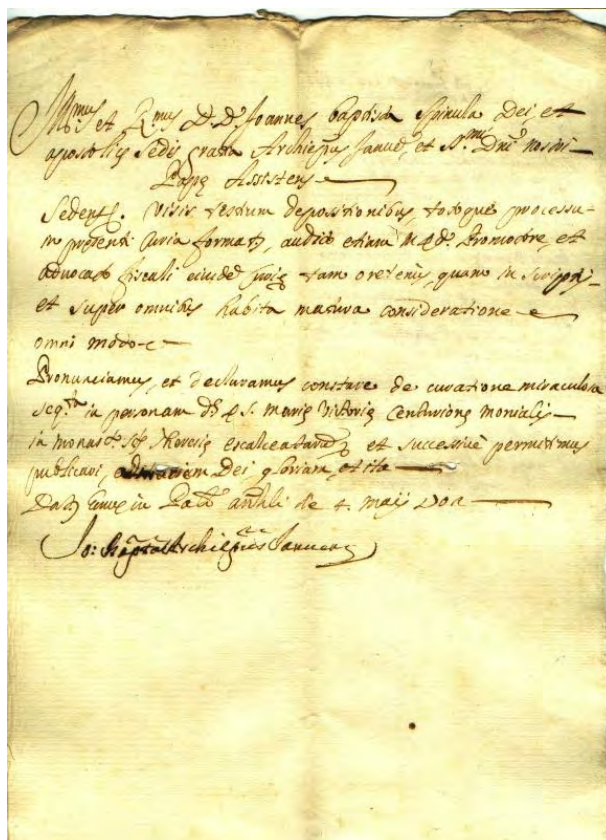


Illustration 1, ASDG 1355

Conclusions

From these facts we can obtain some information, firstly on how Maria Vittoria moves within the network of protection provided for the convent by the Centurione family, which had in the past placed there young girls of the family destined to found and spread the

²² The version is the same as that of the preserved manuscript in ASDG 1355 *Grazie e Miracoli*.

Genoese Carmelite convents abroad²³. A generation later, Maria Vittoria and the Centurione sisters entered the Carmelite convent of St Teresa. The close female family and sisterly ties are replicated in the convent where, around the sick and healed body of Vittoria, gathered the sisterhood of the other nuns, sisters in the convent, sisters by blood.

Maria Vittoria's (living) body was subjected to a number of tests by the nuns, doctors and ecclesiastical authorities. The other nuns tended to her in the monastery while the doctors' ministrations to her body are known to us from the legal proceedings. The treatment was the usual type administered at the time, with the witness accounts attesting to its ineffectiveness. The shortcomings of medicine are redressed by the miracle. The verdict delivered by the ecclesiastical authority takes into consideration the testimony of doctors, setting it against knowledge that had accumulated from the end of the Middle Ages and grown apace in the seventeenth century: knowledge of the distinction between 'true' and 'false' mysticism. Starting with Pignatelli's volume, the Vicar General Salvatore Castellino refers to a specialized bibliography on the question, which informs us of how the Genoese Curia of the time was set up to deal with the matter.

A difference can be noted between the two miracles. The first is the result of ingestion of the powder from the statue; the second arises from a vision that follows an act of devotion by Maria Vittoria to St Pasquale, suggested to her by a doctor. In the first case, the cure is effected through the body via the mouth, by absorbing food; in the second case, through the eyes, the sight, the fact of first seeing a picture and then having a vision. It is noteworthy that, in contrast to current thinking, no questions were posed at that time on the reality or the origin of the vision: divine, natural or diabolic? The monastic setting and the acceptance of the first miracle made any such enquiry superfluous. In short, the healed body of Maria Vittoria was indeed "miraculously cured".

Manuscripts

²³ Consider Paola Maria di Gesù Centurione (1586-1546), who spread the Carmelites to Austria, and Maria Maddalena Centurione (1586-1660), who founded the Carmelites of Avignon, Carpentras and Chambéry cf. P. Fontana, "Appunti su agiografia carmelitana ed Inquisizione nel Seicento. La censura della Vita di Maddalena di Gesù Centurione di Paolo del SS Sacramento", *Rivista di Vita Spirituale*, no. 1, 2010, pp. 103-109.

AMCSTG (Archivio Monastero Carmelitano Santa Teresa, Genoa), *Catalogo delle religiose professe* 5

ASDG (Archivio Storico Diocesano, Genoa), *Grazie e Miracoli 1355, Decreto dell'arcivescovo di Genova Giovanni Battista Spinola del 4 maggio 1702 che attesta la miracolosità della guarigione di suor Maria Vittoria Centurione*

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G. Pignatelli, *Consultationum canonicarum tomus primus [-decimus]. In quo praecipue controuersiae de ijs, quae ad sanctorum canonizationem, ac sacros ritus; ... pertinent ... Opus omnibus vtriusque fori iudicibus, iurisconsultis, ... & aduocatis vtile plane, ac necessarium. Cum duplici indice, altero consultatum, altero rerum notabilium in fine quarti tomi appposito*, Venice, Paulum Balleonium, 1687-1696.

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A. Ricca, *De canonizatione sanctorum commentarius, hoc est, De definitione, auctoritate, & antiquitate; deq. causis, & ordine iudiciario canonizandi Sanctos; de miraculis item ac de rebus, quae veram declarant sanctitatem, necnon de honoribus, qui Sanctis debentur; ... additis caeremonijs in ea obseruari consuetis, ac declaratis; sanctorumq. canonizatorum catalogo accedente*, Romae, Guillelmum Facciottum, impensa Ioannis Martinelli, 1601.

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N. Tommaseo, *Nuovo Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, Florence, Luigi Pezzati, 1830.

Vocabolario della lingua italiana già compilato dagli Accademici della Crusca ed ora nuovamente corretto e accresciuto dall'Abate Giuseppe Manuzzi, (A-C), Florence, David Passigli and partners, 1833-1840.