

THE 1599 LETTER BY GIORDANO BRUNO'S ACCUSER, CELESTINO OF VERONA: ALL IS NOT AS IT SEEMS

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The heretic Capuchin Celestino of Verona, one of the harshest opponents of Giordano Bruno, wrote in 1599 to the Roman Inquisition and (anonymously) to the Venetian Inquisitor to inform himself. In a few months, he was burnt alive on the heels of an unusually short Inquisitorial trial. This traditional account, held by the most prominent scholars of Giordano Bruno too, states that the Venetian Inquisitor received an anonymous letter. Once the Pope came to know of this manuscript, he asked to run a handwriting analysis, suspecting Celestino himself. Here we show, based on a careful reading of the extant minutes of the proceedings of the Holy Office, that an alternative version can be provided which fully disagrees with the standard account.

The Capuchin friar Celestino of Verona was one of the main whistle-blowers of Giordano Bruno's Venetian and Roman trials between 1592 and 1600. Tortured and sentenced by the Inquisition in 1587, the heretic Celestino met Bruno in the Venetian prison where both were locked up between 1592 and 1593. Celestino's charges were among the most threatening dangers Giordano had to face during his prolonged captivity.

Background. Confined at San Severino Marche, Celestino wrote in May 1599 to the Holy Office of the Roman Inquisition to seek an audience. Summoned by the Inquisitors, he moved to Rome between June and July 1599. His request is reported in the official archives of the Holy Office. The minutes of the sitting of the Congregation run as follows (Firpo, 1949):

Feria

V, 3 iunii 1599. Fratris Celestini de Verona, ordinis Cappuccinorum, lectis litteris datis in civitate Sancti Severini, ad hoc S. Officium scriptis, die sexta maii, decretum quod veniat ad S. Officium et deponat quae sibi occurrunt".

The letter. Still, on 8 July 1599, a surprising minute is reported in the same archive. Here you are the extant report of the proceedings we are interested in (Firpo, 1949):

⁴"Feria V, 8 iulii 1599. Fratris Celestini, filii quondam Lactantii Arigoni de Verona, subdiaconi ordinis fratrum minorum congregationis Cappuccinorum, lecta copia litterarum ab ipso, ut creditur, scriptarum 20 iunii proxime praeteriti Inquisitori Venetiarum, Sanctissimus mandavit fieri diligentiam pro reperiendo autore dictarum litterarum per comparationem scripturae, et apud superiores Cappuccinorum, nec non ex scripturis eiusdem fratris Celestini in processu".

In brief, the report says that the Pope (and the Brotherhood) read the copy of a letter sent the 20th of June to the Venetian Inquisitor. This letter was believed to be written by Celestino. To uncover the author of such manuscript, the Pope asked for a comparison with previous Celestino's writings. The result of the comparison is unknown: what we know so far is that Celestino was taken to the same roman prison where Giordano Bruno was caged and he was burnt alive in *Campo dei Fiori* in September, five months before Bruno himself suffered the same fate in the same place. What is certain is that a very speedy trial was made and concluded against Celestino, following procedures that were unusual for the otherwise careful and meticulous Roman Inquisition.

The canonical account. How to explain the letter received by the Venetian Inquisitor? The most influent scholars, such as Marchetti (1979), Maifreda (2018), etc., unanimously held that the letter was anonymous. Once he came to know of this episode, the Pope Clemens VIII, suspecting that Celestino himself was behind the unsigned manuscript, asked for his Capuchin brothers who held the friar's previous writings. Summarizing, the standard version argues in favour of self-denunciation: Celestino wrote to the Roman Inquisition and (anonymously) to the Venetian Inquisitor to inform himself.

A diverse interpretation. However, looking carefully at the extant report, an alternative version is worth to be put forward.

The minute does not contend that the letter was anonymous. Furthermore, it is not stated that the Pope read the original manuscript, rather he went through a copy. The phrase: "*ab ipso ut creditur scriptarum*" ("the letter believed to be written by Celestino") might mean exactly the opposite of what has been traditionally conveyed by influential scholars. Indeed, an unorthodox account of the minute states as follows: the Pope (and the Brotherhood) read a copy of the letter signed by Celestino, sent on 20 June to the Venetian Inquisitor. Though, the Pope and the Brotherhood noticed something suspicious concerning the manuscript, something against the ascription to Celestino. That's why the letter "was believed to be written by Celestino": it was signed by him, but it seemed like the manuscript was not in Celestino's wheelhouse. This logical interpretation implies that the Pope had reason to believe that the letter sent to the Venetian Inquisitor was not by Celestino despite his signature. The Pope guessed that somebody was trying to pass himself off as Celestino da Verona.

This novel interpretation paves the way to a fully novel understanding of Celestino's trial. Our role ends here: once we have raised the issues, it is not our task to speculate on alternative explanations for such a rather intricate affair.

REFERENCES

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