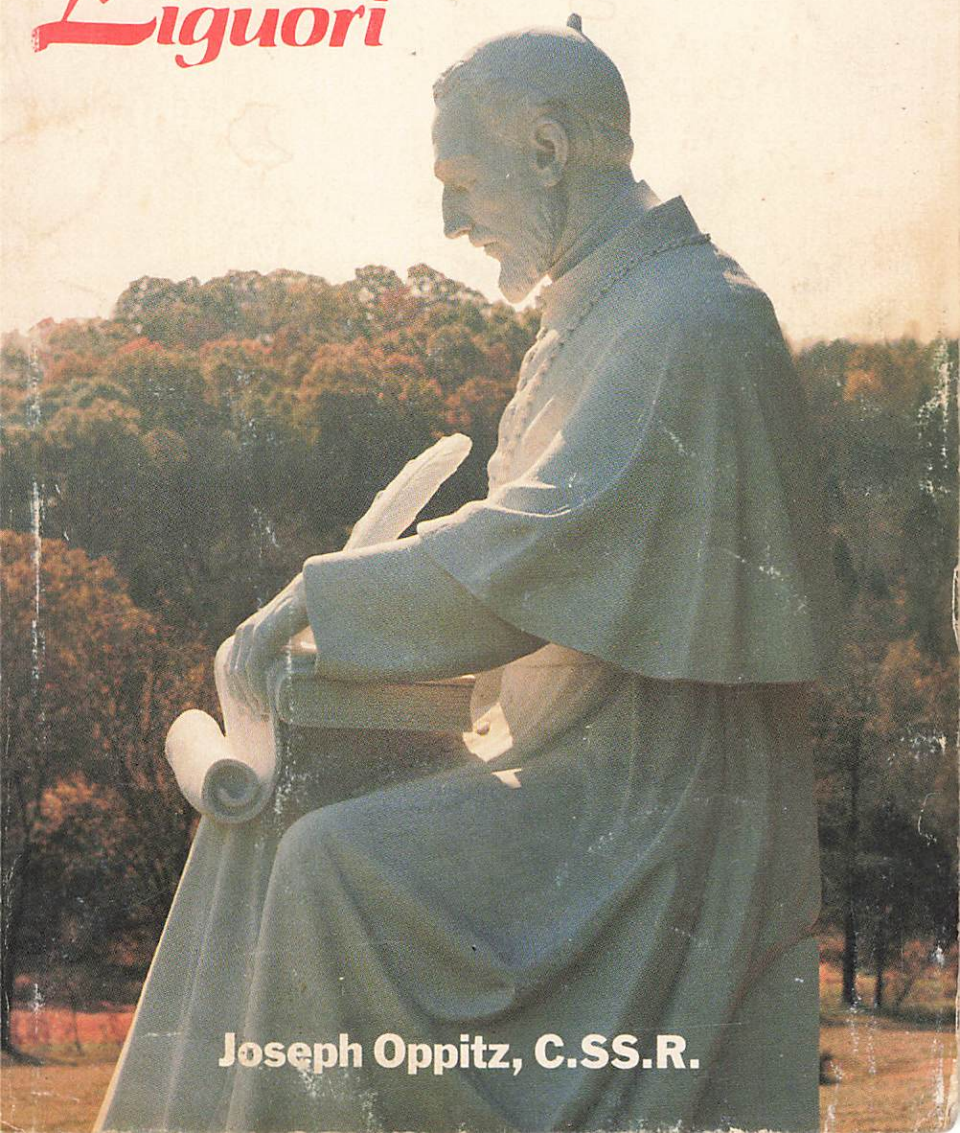


Autumn Memoirs of St. Alphonsus Liguori



Joseph Oppitz, C.S.S.R.

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Feast of St. Albert

4.

Laying the Foundation

It has been almost two weeks since my last entry. I have never felt so weak and so washed out. At times, I suspect the doctors may be slipping something into my *minestrone* to make me slow down. But, as you see, I am still here. I believe I ended the last entry with something about Falcoia and Marie Celeste.

I already mentioned that Falcoia was my auxiliary spiritual director. When I first met him, Pagano was still my Number One Man, but more and more I found myself confiding the secrets of my conscience to Falcoia. I had met him in 1729 at both the Propaganda and the Chinese College. He seemed to have spiritual sons and daughters all over town. When I met him he was already in his late sixties and was seven years older than my mother and father. His credentials as a holy man and an apostle were a mile long. He belonged to a congregation of secular priests called the Pious Workers and I must admit they used his talents well. He had been a Superior in their house in Rome, Prefect of Brothers, Novice Master, professor of theology with a laureate in both philosophy and theology, missionary of the Campagna, and last

but not least, my spiritual father. Later on he became the *direttore* of my new religious institute, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. He himself had begun a congregation of diocesan priests in the town of Taranto. As far as I know it is still in existence. He had also given a helping hand to Lucy Filippini in the organization of her group of teaching sisters, the Pious Teachers. While I was mountain climbing at Scala, I also learned that in 1720 he had reorganized a group of nuns in that town. With all that work and with his recurring attacks of kidney stones and high blood pressure, it was a miracle that he lived as long as he did. He was eighty when he died.

As an old man, his choleric nature began to be more obvious. His violent temper got him into trouble more than once. In 1734, his own nephew took him to court, and in the same year the old man suspended all the Canons of his cathedral in one fell swoop. I think I may have forgotten to mention that he had been made bishop of Castellamare di Stabia, just below Naples, around the time I first met him. That would have been around 1730. His worst year of all was 1741, when he was involved in a wild court case with the king himself over a violation of ecclesiastical immunity in his cathedral. Anyone who takes on Charles the Third and all his minions, as Falcoia did, has to have had a lot of fortitude. Poor old man, he almost got himself exiled to Terracina but, because of his advanced age, the king rescinded the order.

Now I must tell you about the surprise he pulled on me! The year was 1730. I had heard rumors along the Neapolitan clerical grapevine that Falcoia was having his hands full with a certain young nun at Scala. Her name was Marie Celeste Crostarosa. I believe the two of them met around 1722 when she was a young Carmelite at Marigliano. It seems that he had taken a great liking to her and was giving her spiritual direction by mail. After the local bishop closed the Carmelite convent because of too much interference by the local baron's wife, Falcoia invited Celeste and her

two blood sisters, members of the same convent, to come to his newly organized convent at Scala. The nuns there were living the Rule he had given them just a few years before. So, the three girls followed him to Scala. Poor Falcoia, he got more than he had bargained for.

It seems that Marie Celeste had hardly unpacked her bags when a spiritual and emotional cyclone began to tear the place apart. The eye of the cyclone was this young lady. When a wet-behind-the-ears novice begins to claim that she is receiving revelations from Jesus, and especially when she claims that Jesus is dictating a new Rule for the whole community, you can bet your last few *lire* that some of the nuns would look askance at all of this. Indeed, Falcoia himself was the unhappiest of all. I can understand his rancor. After all, he was the one who had brought her to Scala only a few years before, just after he had written his own new Rule for the nuns. An eruption of Vesuvian proportions was in the making. The heat and the rumble of the coming explosion could be heard and felt all the way back in Naples. Some were calling Celeste a madwoman, a deluded visionary, a tool of the devil, plus a few other Neapolitan labels which I shall not even repeat.

During all of this, I was happy enough to be sitting on the sidelines. The whole affair was Falcoia's hot potato! I was delighted to be out of it. Then came Falcoia's surprise. One sunny day in August I received a very friendly letter from him saying how pleased he was to hear that I would be preaching the novena of the Holy Cross at Scala. After a few unctious compliments he casually mentioned that it had just occurred to him that, since I would be right there at Scala, *perhaps* I could drop in on the nuns and give a few spiritual conferences and maybe even interview Marie Celeste Crostarosa. It would also be nice if I could send him my personal impressions of this troublemaking nun and her visions.

The opening flattery should have tipped me off. I was being saddled with a bit of dirty work. But what could I do? Even though

I had not yet taken my vow of obedience in all things to Falcoia (that happened only in 1733), he was a dear friend and a cherished counselor at the time.

Thank God the weather was nice that September as I found myself running back and forth from cathedral to convent. I gave the nuns conferences and even had personal interviews with all of them. Some, including Marie Celeste, had two and three interviews. I learned many things about Celeste in those days. For example, I was amazed to find out that when she and I were children our families had lived just a few city blocks apart. With twelve Crostarosa children and seven Liguori children, you would think that we would have run into each other as children, but such was not the case. Later, when I was a lawyer, I did know the family name as her father was a practicing lawyer during the same period. As I listened to her at Scala, I discovered that Celeste was not only a naturally gifted person but that she was also endowed with many supernatural gifts, some of the mystical order. She told me that at the age of seven she was already at a level of deep intimacy with the Lord, though her natural ebullience hid much of this from her little friends. She gave me a thorough account of her whole life up until 1730. And let me tell you — it really was thorough! Along with her gifts she also had her faults. One of them was that she just talked too much and usually she was the center of the story. Still, there was a charm about her that made me make allowances for her seeming self-centeredness.

At the end of my interviews, I was convinced that her visions and revelations were authentic. Moreover, I did seem to have a measure of success in getting the battling parties of the monastery together. When I sent my report to Falcoia, he was relieved. But the peace did not last long! Celeste had sent him a copy of the new Rule which she claimed was dictated to her by Jesus himself. Falcoia proceeded to modify what she had written and claimed that such was his right as spiritual father of the whole community.

Stronghanded as he was, he won the first bout. With my connivance, the nuns finally switched to their new red, white, and blue habits, designed by Jesus himself (that is what Celeste claimed). But the fires of the volcano were still smoldering beneath the surface. By 1731 Celeste wrote me these ominous words: "I have suffered indescribable nausea because of this man, Falcoia. He always must be the *capo di tutti*, the 'boss of bosses.' " My own opinion was that Celeste was being confused by the advice of too many men. At one and the same time she was being counseled by Falcoia, who technically was the spiritual director of all the Scala nuns. Then there was that lay theologian, Sylvester Tosquez, who was feeding her contrary advice. Her regular confessor was a Peter Romano, a priest of Scala, and occasionally her brother George, a Jesuit, also got into the act. In addition, Father Filangeri, Falcoia's Superior at the Pious Workers, also had his finger in the pie. And then there was myself. No wonder the dear thing seemed constantly in a dither as to what to do next. Had you known Celeste as I did you would know that she was not an easy person to wrap around your finger. She herself told me that she had always been a free spirit, even as a little girl. Brought up in a rollicking, happy-go-lucky family of twelve children, she seemed to have been the leader of the pack. In her *Autobiography*, which she wrote years after the Scala tragedy, she described herself as "witty, spontaneous, and intelligent." And this was true! I suppose it was these qualities that attracted so many of us clerics to her in her adult life. These same qualities were obviously involved in her clash with Falcoia. Her free spirit probably would have responded better to a kind of nondirective counseling, whereas it bridled and rebelled in the face of Falcoia's ironfisted type of spiritual direction. I could smell tragedy brewing. Yet I was caught in the middle between these two good but completely different people, both my dear friends. They seemed to be on a win-or-lose collision course.

The final blowup came in 1733 when Falcoia, then operating from his diocesan palace at Castellamare, demanded that Celeste accept his version of her Rule. He also demanded that she not see her lay friend, Tosquez, ever again. Finally, he demanded that she keep him, Falcoia, as her one and only spiritual director for the rest of her life. She was to agree to all three conditions in writing! I myself wrote several long letters to her, begging her to go along with Falcoia since he had had much more experience than Celeste or myself in religious life and in writing rules for religious groups. She would have none of it! Her Jesuit brother arrived on the scene and told her that the time had come for her to take a conscience stand. Well, Celeste made her conscience stand and, in short order, found herself and her two sisters, Ursula and Evangelista, standing out on the street in smocks borrowed from a nearby Benedictine convent. Her two sisters had been loyal to her in her struggles with Falcoia. Now they willingly joined her in her exile.

The three of them became like wandering gypsies, moving in temporarily with other religious women at places like Amalfi, Pareti, and Roccapiemonti. Celeste and Ursula finally settled down at Foggia. There they started their own religious group, using what Celeste could remember of her original Rule as their guidelines. Gentle and frail Evangelista could not cope with all the tension; she left them to join a contemplative group in Naples.

I crossed paths with Celeste only a few times after the Scala tragedy. After all these years I still remember her with great affection and love. At times I even get qualms of conscience over that whole sad affair. Perhaps if I had been willing to take a stronger stand in defense of Celeste, Falcoia might have backed down. I wonder? I myself always suspected that his bark was worse than his bite. The trouble with me at that time was that my tender conscience could not tolerate anything that even looked like disobedience or rebellion against authority. While I had told both Celeste and Falcoia that the substance of her Rule was the result of

an authentic revelation from the Lord, I had also added that the infinitesimal details which she prescribed could not have been the work of the Lord but were rather the residue of her Carmelite and Visitation experiences. Maybe it is true that I tried to straddle the fence a bit too much. Who knows after all these years? Still, it hurt me then and it hurts me now to think of how shabbily she was treated by people who called themselves religious. I must confess that after the Virgin Mary, Saint Teresa, and my own mother, Marie Celeste Crostarosa was the one woman who had the greatest influence on my life and, indeed, on that of my new Congregation. Why do I say that? Read on and you shall see!

One final point about Celeste: A few years after the Scala trouble, while I was preaching a mission not too far from Celeste's convent in Foggia, I visited her and her sister and got a quick briefing on their new work. I was happy to learn that she had finally found peace and tranquillity and that God was obviously blessing her work in Foggia. The ways of the Lord are strange indeed! One of the strangest was that God provided an excellent spiritual director for her in the last years of her life in the person of a young Brother of my own Redemptorist Congregation which she had helped to found. His name was Gerard Majella. The two of them became kindred spirits and intimate friends in Christ. He was very much like Celeste — a free spirit and one endowed with the most extraordinary charismatic gifts. It was consoling for me to see how they helped each other become saints. The strangest coincidence of all was that the two of them died only days apart in 1755. On his deathbed, Brother Gerard said to his attendant: "Today I have seen the soul of Marie Celeste entering heaven." Wouldn't it be nice if someone would say that about your soul and my soul on the day we die!

Well, it is growing late and I must leave you once more. Tomorrow I have a whole series of meetings with Father Villani, my acting Vicar, and with Majone, Leggio, and some of the

younger men who are working on the legal documents so that our Rule can be presented for the king's final approval. These young men have me thoroughly confused with all their additions and deletions. They keep telling me that there are no substantial changes. I just hope they are right. I know it will all work out for the best. Or am I just whistling in the dark? Perhaps they are doing to my Rule what Falcoia did to Celeste's. God save me from such a possibility. At any rate, one thing is certain: The others will have to do most of the work as this old skeleton is not much help to anybody anymore!