

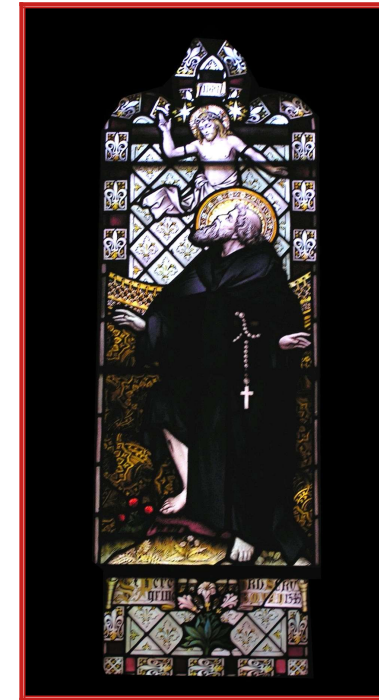
weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). It is a new birth.

This healing - a truly holistic recovery - finds its fullest expression at the moment of his death, through two specific details that Peregrine’s biographer takes care to recount.

The first is the “exquisite fragrance” that emanates from his body. While this is a recurring motif in hagiographic accounts, in the case of our saint it takes on a unique significance, for it is the scent of a life lived to the full - an “extraordinary fragrance” that stands in stark contrast to the stench of decay and disease. The second aspect characterising Peregrine’s death - and manifesting his miraculous recovery - is the spontaneous influx of country folk who flocked to the Servite priory as soon as news of his passing spread:

“From every direction, through all the city gates, the inhabitants of the countryside crowded in, drawn by the fame of that servant of God; so much so that, on that night, it was impossible to close the city gates because of the surging multitude.” (no. 9)

Peregrine not only returned to being a man of connection, but after his recovery, he forged bonds - especially with those living on the city's margins - becoming an instrument of communion between the centre of society and the marginalised of his time. In the most genuine tradition of the mendicant orders.



Stefano M. VILIANI, OSM

PEREGRINE OF FORLÌ CANONISATION AND CULT

cover image St Peregrine stained glass 1890s
Servite Priory Begbroke Oxford



Conference presented at UNIFASI ASSEMBLY 4 June 2026 FORLÌ

of one who believes he is self-sufficient - and goes to the very heart of community and encounter: the Chapter Room. He does not remain in the solitude of his cell, nor does he go to the church; instead, summoning the last of his strength, he makes his way to the Chapter Room - a place of sharing and momentous decisions, the most intimate yet communal space in the friars' home. A place of encounter. Going to that specific place is the first step toward restoring and weaving anew his relationships. There, he is able to entrust himself completely to the Lord, offering a beautiful, spontaneous prayer:

“O Redeemer of mankind, to blot out our sins
You chose to bow beneath the torment of the Cross
and a most bitter death.
While You walked the earth among men,
You healed many afflicted by various ailments:
You cleansed the leper and gave sight to the blind man
when he cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” [Mt 8:2].
Deign likewise, O Lord my God, to deliver this leg of mine
from an otherwise incurable affliction;
for if You do not, it will have to be amputated!” (no. 7).

It is then - at that moment and in that place - that instead of striving to ascend toward God, he surrenders himself to the Lord's boundless love and welcomes the Christ who is descending toward him. The biographical account employing this image of a twofold movement - ascending and descending - is remarkable: “in his sleep, he saw the crucified Jesus descend from the cross and free him from all weakness in his leg” (no. 7). It is God bending down over Man's wounds! “He fell asleep,” the account specifies - doing precisely what he had avoided for thirty long years, when “at night he would not lie down, but spent almost the entire time reading hymns and psalms.” Now, Peregrine finally surrenders to rest: “Come to me, all you who are

PEREGRINE OF FORLÌ: CANONISATION AND CULT

Three hundred years have passed since the canonisation of the Servite friar Peregrine Laziosi, which took place on 27 December 1726. The ceremony was presided over by the reigning Pope, Benedict XIII, in St. Peter's Basilica; on that occasion, two other religious figures were canonised alongside him: John of the Cross (1548–1591) - the renowned Spanish mystic who, together with Teresa of Avila, inspired the Carmelite reform - and Francis Solano (1549–1610), another Spanish religious, a Friar Minor and missionary to the Americas. Both were figures who lived in the sixteenth century and were canonised little more than a century after their deaths - unlike the Servite friar from Forlì, who was canonised some four centuries after his earthly life (according to traditional chronology, he was born in 1265 and died in 1345). It is easy to understand, then, why the Prior General at the time, Fra Pietro Pieri, upon sharing the wonderful news with the friars, began his letter with these words: "His Divine Majesty has finally deigned to grant our shared prayers!"¹

To understand the reason for the considerable time that elapsed between Peregrine's death and his canonisation, one must first place the event within the context of the Servite calendar of

1 L. DE CANDIDO, *"I Servi di Maria in Italia nel secolo XVIII"*, in *I Servi di Maria nel Settecento*. Da fra G.F. Poggi (1702) alle soppressioni napoleoniche (1810), Quaderni di Monte Senario, 7, Monte Senario, Bivigliano (FI) 1986, p.53.

All this allows us to introduce the third and final aspect highlighted by his canonisation: "Peregrine the miracle-worker." This is not a strictly orthodox title, considering that, for the Church, miracles performed through a saint's intercession serve to confirm their blessed state. It is always God who works miracles; the saints are merely intercessors. Yet Peregrine - perhaps due to the severity of the illness suffered by those under his patronage - is often invoked as a kind of healer. And a compassionate healer at that, for he was the first to endure this terrible affliction. In reality, however, Peregrine's story is that of a man who was healed, not of a healer. When revisiting the account of his life, this aspect of healing stands out strikingly - though we perhaps focus too much on physical healing rather than on what might be termed the "integral" healing of the man of God. Indeed, once he became a friar, Peregrine was obsessed with sin: "each day he examined his own actions, weeping over offenses and shortcomings he believed he had committed [...]; the holy man held himself guilty of many things." He spent the best years of his life striving to ascend to God through gruelling ascetic practices, yet he never felt at peace. This immense effort lasted a full thirty years, and one consequence was physical illness. Yet perhaps an even graver consequence was his isolation - his exclusion from community and social life: entirely focused on God, he lost sight of his fellow man, of his brother. The biographical account conveys this isolation through a literary device, attributing it to the terrible stench given off by the gangrene: "for this reason, he had already been abandoned by his fellow friars - indeed, he had become nauseating even to himself" (no. 5).

The turning point comes when Peregrine realises he is nearing the point of no return. He leaves his cell - stepping out of the solitude

saints. Setting aside the saints from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we find that Philip Benizi was canonised in 1671 - just over fifty years before Peregrine - while Juliana Falconieri was raised to the altars in 1737, a mere decade after Peregrine. A distinct and unique case is that of the Seven Holy Founders, canonised in 1888. Thus, in the span of a few decades straddling the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Servites gained three new saints - indeed, their first three - comprising two men and one woman who had lived during the Order's first century. Before this, there had been none - or at least, no saint officially recognised by the universal Church.

The impetus leading to this happy outcome originated in the late sixteenth century, driven by certain Priors General who were keen to spread the cult of the Order's blessed members, as well as by resolutions adopted at various General Chapters. Subsequently, a combination of factors - a convergence of favorable circumstances - facilitated this process in the post-Council of Trent era. Not least among these was the relocation of the Prior General's headquarters from Florence to Rome during the seventeenth century, which fostered a network of relationships with figures within the Roman Curia itself. Moreover, the Order's aspiration to see the sanctity of its illustrious sons recognised aligned perfectly with the Church's own efforts to promote new devotions that resonated with the popular sentiment of the time (such as the devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows, which saw its greatest expansion during these centuries). This Counter-Reformation context also provided significant scope for the spread of the cult of saints—an initiative pursued by the Catholic Church with unprecedented intensity.

Also noteworthy is the Order's numerical growth in terms of friars and establishments, accompanied by widespread efforts to

he would lean briefly against a stone or, when in the choir, against a bench. He did not lie down at night but spent the time almost entirely reading hymns and psalms" (no. 4)

A few observations can be made here. The ascetic practice of never lying down - often associated with voluntary sleep deprivation or resting strictly in a seated or upright position - is found in various spiritual traditions; its primary aim is to achieve a state of continuous wakefulness, to remain ever-vigilant, and to master bodily needs. This ascetic practice cuts across major religions, appearing most notably in Eastern religious thought, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zen. Within the Christian tradition, too, various Desert Fathers limited their sleep to the bare minimum, sometimes sleeping while leaning against a staff or on a stone seat. In the case of stylitism, ascetics even lived standing atop a pillar, praying ceaselessly day and night. Medievalist historian André Vauchez, author of *Sainthood in the Middle Ages*, notes that the ability to endure such extreme ascetic practices commanded great respect, as it drew the admiration of contemporaries who interpreted it as a virtue specific to the saint - a kind of "superpower".¹³

13 A few observations can be made here. The ascetic practice of never lying down - often associated with voluntary sleep deprivation or resting strictly in a seated or upright position - is found in various spiritual traditions; its primary aim is to achieve a state of continuous wakefulness, to remain ever-vigilant, and to master bodily needs. This ascetic practice cuts across major religions, appearing most notably in Eastern religious thought, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zen. Within the Christian tradition, too, various Desert Fathers limited their sleep to the bare minimum, sometimes sleeping while leaning against a staff or on a stone seat. In the case of stylitism, ascetics even lived standing atop a pillar, praying ceaselessly day and night. Medievalist historian André Vauchez, author of *Sainthood in the Middle Ages*, notes that the ability to endure such extreme ascetic practices commanded great respect, as it drew the admiration of contemporaries who interpreted it as a virtue specific to the saint - a kind of "superpower".

friar - a matter that, in the past, seems to have been of crucial importance for the successful outcome of the cause (sic!).¹² Finally, this ancient source is completely silent about the youthful years of Peregrine - and thus also regarding his past as a Ghibelline and a hot-headed youth, a detail found only in very late traditions. Yet, this very aspect was strongly highlighted at the time of his canonisation and, in a sense, even exploited during the subsequent disputes of the Risorgimento, when Peregrine effectively became a sort of counterpoint to Sarpi for the Servite Order.

Regarding “Peregrine the ascetic”, we can revisit what the *Vita* by Borghese says:

“He afflicted his body in an extraordinary manner with vigils, fasts, and mortifications; and - what is scarcely credible - for thirty years he was never seen to sit down: he remained standing while eating and knelt while praying; if occasionally overcome by weariness or sleep,

12 Cf. L. DE CANDIDO, “*I Servi di Maria in Italia nel secolo XVIII*,” p. 55: “There is a curious piece of evidence dating from the eighteenth century. In a dispute with the Bollandists - specifically with Papebroch, who did not acknowledge Peregrine of Forlì as a priest - the friars commissioned Tassinari, the confessor of the mystic Veronica Giuliani, to ask the Holy Virgin directly about the matter during a vision. The nun complied; regarding the specific question posed - namely, whether or not the saint from Forlì was a priest - she reported hearing the following declaration from her heavenly interlocutor while in a state of ecstasy: ‘Tell my servant [the Capuchin nun’s confessor] that Blessed Peregrine was a priest, but out of humility he did not celebrate Mass.’ She also claimed to have seen Philip Benizi and Peregrine Laziosi together, both wearing priestly vestments, though only the former was celebrating” (*Monumenta OSM*, XVII, pp. 143–145); a footnote notes that a contemporary witness and early biographer of Peregrine wrote that the friar from Forlì celebrated Mass every day after going to confession.” (*Monumenta OSM*, XVII, pp. 143–145); a footnote notes that a contemporary witness and early biographer of Peregrine wrote that the friar from Forlì celebrated Mass every day after going to confession.

promote devotion across its various provinces; by 1750, there were over 2,700 friars distributed throughout Italy, Tyrol, Bohemia, Provence, and Spain.²

Regarding the veneration of Saint Peregrine, the *Campione Universale* of San Marcello records the celebrations organised by the friars in Rome - dating back some thirty years prior to his canonisation - and the success they enjoyed:

“Feasts of our Blessed. This year, our Blessed Joachim and Peregrine were also honoured with celebrations on their respective feast days; the church was splendidly decorated, their holy images were displayed at the magnificently adorned high altar, and the events featured music, a panegyric, and an extraordinary turnout of the faithful. [...] To inspire the people’s devotion to the aforementioned Blessed, summaries of their lives and images were distributed [...]. It should be noted that the celebrations for these two Blessed figures actually began [...] the previous year, 1693, though they went unrecorded at the time. It is impossible to overstate the prestige gained not only for our church but also for our Order. For the church, this marked the beginning of greater renown and increased attendance, driven by the variety of feasts celebrated there and the newly introduced devotional practices that had not previously existed.”³

We might wonder, however, whether the sanctity of Peregrine resonated in any way prior to this period, or if he was essentially unknown to the faithful. While circumstances certainly changed over the centuries, we should not assume that our friar was not venerated before his canonisation - and not merely on a local level. We know that for much of the Middle Ages - the era in

2 Cfr. V. BENASSI, O.J. DIAS, F.M. FAUSTINI, *I Servi di Maria. Breve storia dell’Ordine, Le Missioni dei Servi di Maria*, Roma 1984, p. 156.

3 Priory Archive of San Marcello – Rome, *Campione universale* of San Marcello, fol. 171.

which Peregrine lived - the distinction between saints and the blessed was not as clear-cut as it is today; or rather, the terms underwent a kind of semantic shift over time. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the situation differed from what we know today; indeed, in the case of Saint Philip Benizi, documents dating to the years immediately following his death refer to him interchangeably as “Blessed” or “Saint”.⁴

Furthermore, while only a small percentage of the vast number of “unofficial” saints and blessed figures received a formal pronouncement from the Bishop of Rome over the centuries, the Servites do not appear to have shown much interest in undertaking the arduous processes of canonisation.

Thus, Peregrine’s canonisation was only achieved in the modern era, following a long process comprising necessary and decisive steps that were by then well-established by the universal Church. Although the Servites obtained initial recognition of his sanctity in 1609 - with permission to include his memorial in their liturgical calendar - more than a century would pass before the final goal was reached. During this hundred-year period of petitions and prayers, Prior General Francesco Maria Poggi, elected to lead the Order in 1690, played a decisive role in vigorously reviving the cause. The *Campione di San Marcello* also records the following:

4 A significant milestone in the distinction between saints and the blessed was reached in the second half of the fourteenth century under Urban V (1362–1370): the bull *Molesta significatio* (1368) distinguished between saints - those officially canonised- and the blessed - those accorded veneration authorised by the local bishop or a religious order; it was not until 1634 that beatification came to be sanctioned by the Holy See through a clearly defined legal act (cf. A. Vauchez, *La Santità nel Medioevo*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1989, p. 56).

So much for the event and the ceremonies themselves. However, we might ask what image of the new saint was intended to be conveyed on the occasion of his canonisation - a question that also allows us to reflect on the veneration he has received ever since. Three aspects of Peregrine’s figure were certainly highlighted: the convert, the ascetic, and the miracle-worker (specifically, the healer rather than the one who was healed).

Regarding “Peregrine the Convert,” it is necessary to touch upon an issue debated by hagiographers and historians of the Order. As is well known, the primary source for the biographical details of Peregrine’s life is a *Vita*¹¹ written in 1483 by Niccolò Borghese. Although this is a late source - given that Peregrine almost certainly died in 1345 - it is nonetheless reliable, as it appears to be a translation into Humanist Latin of an earlier source in Medieval Latin: a biography written shortly after the saint’s death. However, the *Legenda of Blessed Peregrine* - a text that has unfortunately been lost - raises a number of much-debated historiographical questions. First, it does not provide an exact chronology; that is, it fails to state the years of the saint’s birth and death, forcing us to rely on later traditions instead. Furthermore, it does not specify whether he was a priest or a lay

11 See N. BORGHESE, “*Legenda del beato Peregrine da Forlì nella trascrizione di Nicolò Borghese (1483)*” (trans. by P. Branchesi with an introduction by A. Serra), in *Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria*, I (1245–1348), Servitum, Sotto il Monte (BG) 1998, pp. 374 ff.; A. SERRA, “*Nicolò Borghese (1432–1500) e i suoi scritti agiografici servitani*”, in *Studi Storici dell’Ordine dei Servi di Maria*, Vol. XIV (1964), Rome 1965, p. 109 ff.; IDEM, *S. Peregrine Laziosi. Profilo storico-spirituale* (excerpt from the proceedings of the study days “La piazza e il chiostro”: San Peregrine Laziosi, Forlì e la Romagna nel tardo Medioevo, Forlì, 3–4 May 1996), Department of Culture of the Municipality of Forlì, Forlì 1996, pp. 5–6.

Now, with the canonisation of Peregrine, the aim was to present an example of a sober and humble friar.

Returning to the accounts of those days, the records reveal that eight-day thanksgiving observances and celebrations were organised throughout the Order - in Italian cities such as Florence, Naples, and naturally Forlì, as well as abroad, in places like Vienna. The celebrations in Rome were undoubtedly the most lavish; they began as early as November 1726 with a magnificent procession organised to transport the banner bearing the saint's image - created specifically for the occasion - from St. Peter's to the Church of San Marcello al Corso. These records convey the festive atmosphere and the level of public participation, while also providing detailed information on the procession's organization and its participants - ranging from the general public to the multitude of religious figures and members of various confraternities. It continues:

“At the end of the procession came the standard, surrounded by twenty of the Pope's grooms and the Swiss Guard, accompanied by a great number of lanterns and crystal chandeliers. Upon the standard's arrival at the Piazza di San Marcello - which was ringed by soldiers, its façade softly illuminated and adorned - it was received at the entrance by the Most Eminent Cardinal Pipia, who was vested in his mitre. [The octave concluded with the solemn blessing] amidst the thunderous volley of a hundred small mortars. [...] The church, previously embellished with gold and stucco work, was magnificently decked out in damasks and velvets, with large chandeliers distributed throughout the nave. The standard was placed beneath an elaborate canopy at the high altar, while the cornice was illuminated with *cornucopiæ*, paintings, and the like. It was considered the finest of the octaves celebrated that year.”¹⁰

10 L. DE CANDIDO, «I Servi di Maria in Italia nel secolo XVIII», p. 54; who quotes *Monumenta OSM*, XVII, pp. 12-15

“The first thought that occurred to our Prior General immediately upon his election—in order to restore lustre to our holy Order - was to promote the solemn canonisation of our blessed members, and particularly those for whom funds had been set aside by lay benefactors, since our own poverty prevents us from undertaking exorbitant expenses. Having therefore turned his attention to Blessed Peregrine, and having - through repeated and most urgent letters - stirred the city of Forlì (the Blessed's birthplace) to show zeal for this holy and glorious undertaking, he finally succeeded in his aim; for the city authorities, having resolved in their General Council to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the cause, instructed their agent at the Curia to do whatever was necessary - following the guidance of our Most Reverend Father - and, most importantly, they remitted the aforementioned cash sum to cover the necessary expenses...”⁵

Thus, thanks in part to the decisive contribution of the city of Forlì, further crucial milestones were rapidly reached: on 26 August 1702, the Congregation of Rites confirmed the cultus paid to Peregrine *ab immemorabili* (from time immemorial), subsequently recognizing him as “Blessed” on 2 September (even though the Order had already been using this title for four centuries). On 23 August 1720, the same Congregation authorised the examination of miracles; three of these were finally approved by Benedict XIII on 5 February 1725, as having authentically occurred through Laziosi's intercession. The following year, the canonisation could thus be solemnly proclaimed: the date was 27 December 1726.⁶

Among the three approved miracles, perhaps the most striking is the one involving a ten-year-old boy from Città di Castello in Umbria, crippled by an accident that had occurred when he was

5 *Campione universale* di San Marcello, f. 167v.

6 Cfr. *Fonti Storico Spirituali dei Servi di Maria*, IV (unedited), by dates; L. DE CANDIDO, «I Servi di Maria in Italia nel secolo XVIII», pp. 52-53.

only four; ever since then, he had been forced to move about on crutches (commonly known as *schiacces*), dragging his legs behind him. Alessandro - for that was his name - had lost his mother, yet he was fortunate enough to still have a father and family who could support him; otherwise, he would have shared the fate of others in his condition who were forced to beg. Having been unable for years to run and play with children his own age, he spent his time moving between his home and his father's workshop. Along the way, he would always stop at the Franciscan church to rest and pray to be delivered from his terrible affliction. One day, however, he took a different route; he entered the Church of the Servites and, standing before the image of our saint, offered this prayer:

“Brother Peregrine, since Saint Anthony has not granted me this grace, please grant it to me yourself - and give it some serious thought, because I do not want to walk on crutches anymore!”⁷

The heartfelt, sincere prayer and trusting plea of this child - denied a normal childhood - must have stirred more than one heart in Heaven. The fact is that Alessandro felt strength returning to his legs; he tossed his crutches aside before the altar and immediately ran back to his father's workshop, shouting wildly: he was healed! It was his father who reminded him of his duty to return to the church and thank Saint Peregrine; the boy hadn't even thought of it, so overjoyed was he at the prospect of running with his friends again. The accounts movingly capture the irrepressible joy of the boy as he ran and skipped all over Città di Castello. One also senses the genuine humanity in the witnesses' stories: his stepmother - his father had remarried - noted with great satisfaction that one positive outcome of the healing was

7 General Archives of the Servants of Mary, Historical Section (AGOSM), *Postulatio*, Cause of Saint Peregrine.

that Alessandro no longer wore out his socks by dragging his feet along the ground.

Returning to the canonisation itself, certain cardinals who were very close to the Order certainly played a decisive role in the successful outcome of the process. Among the many, we might mention Cardinal Lorenzo Corsini (1642–1750) - a Florentine and Protector of the Order (who would go on to become Pope Clement XII) - but above all Cardinal Fabrizio Paolucci (1651–1726), from Forlì, who as early as 1725 sought to build a chapel dedicated to Blessed Peregrine within the Roman church of San Marcello al Corso. An interesting detail: it may well have been a coincidence, but the chapel commissioned by Paolucci replaced an earlier one dedicated to Saint Anthony of Padua.⁸

But as mentioned, there was a confluence of favourable circumstances, a whole network of relationships that contributed to the cause. In particular, we recall that Pope Benedict XIII held in high regard Fra Sostegno Cavalli, Prior General between 1720 and 1725, the man who made every effort to secure a happy outcome in the years immediately preceding the canonisation. When his term as Prior General ended, Cavalli was consecrated Bishop of Gubbio personally by the Pope. Reading the biographies of the two, the Pope and the Prior General, it is interesting to note that a frugal and Spartan life was a common characteristic of both. Benedict XIII is remembered for having refused to live in the luxurious papal apartments of the Apostolic Palace at the time of his election, choosing to live in a small room in an outbuilding right next to the main building.⁹

8 Cfr. *Campione universale di San Marcello*, f. 202.

9 Cfr. J. GELMI, I papi. Da Pietro a Giovanni Paolo II, Rizzoli, Milano 1986, p. 199.