

**Sebastian Valfre (1629-1710) spent most of his life in the Turin Oratory. There are many references to him on the web because of his connection with the Shroud of Turin, but there is not much information about him as an Oratorian. The following short biography is based on Lady Amabel Kerr's *The Life of Blessed Sebastian Valfre* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1896)**

**Liturgical Feast Day is January 30**

Sebastian was a young impoverished seminarian, studying under the Jesuits in Turin, when the Oratory was started in that city in 1649.

Although the congregation had a successful beginning – six novices, all priests, almost immediately joined the two founders – it nearly ceased to be when the superior died a year later.

The six novices left; and the work of the congregation fell to one holy priest, Father Cambiani, who, however, had aptitude neither for preaching nor for hearing confessions. His evident love of God, his devotion to Saint Philip, and a beautiful singing voice kept the little church entrusted to the Oratory full, but he knew that he would need help in order to continue. Less than a year later, Sebastian, not yet a deacon, joined Father Cambiani, receiving the habit on Saint Philip's day in 1651. Soon after, some priests joined the congregation; and although it would take another seventeen years for the community to find a suitable location, the Turin Oratory was firmly established.



A week after joining Father Cambiani, Sebastian was ordained deacon. He immediately started preaching in the church and visiting the sick and the needy. He also continued to study theology under the Jesuits; but when Father Ormea, a learned theologian, joined the Congregation, Sebastian was able to complete his studies under him. In 1652, Sebastian was ordained priest, a month before his twenty-third birthday. For the next fifty-eight years, he would serve in the community, at various times as Prefect of Little Oratory, as Novice Master, and, for twenty years, as Superior.

Blessed Sebastian was, of course, a holy priest. His many activities in quest of souls were well known throughout Turin. He was revered in the hospitals which he would often visit to anoint the sick and to console them with his presence and by preaching the word of God. He was well known in the market places where he would preach to the large numbers of idle sedan-chair carriers who were waiting for their masters to finish their business. But his most popular apostolate was the catechism lessons he would give to throngs of young children on Sundays at noon. Sebastian began this work shortly after joining the Oratory and continued it for the greater part of his life. Only a saint could persevere. The children were for the most part ignorant, rambunctious, and exceedingly filthy, which made the atmosphere in the church, heated by the noon-day sun, almost unbearable. Yet, Sebastian's patient and sweet manner soon prevailed, and these catechism classes became so popular that many adults filled the church. Sebastian's explanations were so simple and clear that they applied to all ages.

Sebastian's care for the poor, the sick, the dying, for prisoners and orphans was well known throughout Turin and appreciated in the highest places. The Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel, had a new residence built for the congregation; and Sebastian was obliged to become the

confessor to the next Duke of Savoy, Victor Amadeus. This kind of intimacy with royalty was fraught with danger. The young duke, who would often act against the advice of his confessor, was nevertheless fond of Sebastian, so much so, that he wanted to make him the Archbishop of Turin. Sebastian had to go to great lengths to avoid the dignity and the office of which he considered himself unworthy and incapable. He was also guided by Saint Philip's explicit wish. There was however one advantage to being intimate with the Dukes of Savoy. Sebastian had a great devotion to the Shroud of Turin and would visit it every Friday if at all possible. When the relic of Christ's Passion was moved to the Guarini Chapel in the Cathedral of Turin in 1694, Victor Amadeus asked Sebastian to sew on a backing cloth and to mend it in several places. This gave Sebastian many hours with the Shroud during which he gave free rein to his devotion. As Amabel Kerr puts it: 'Blessed Sebastian knelt for hours as he did his work, speechless, wand with the tears flowing down his cheeks.'

Blessed Sebastian's sanctity, under God, arose from his struggles to conform himself to Saint Philip – and that was quite a task. Whereas Philip was gentle and kind by nature, Sebastian was harsh and prone to outbursts of anger. Philip had to refrain from extended prayer in public for fear of going into ecstasy. Sebastian experienced nothing but dryness in prayer, and had to keep his mind from wandering. The thought of death and judgment so tormented him that he could not sleep at night. And Sebastian found one of the principal works of the Oratory – the hearing of confessions – so repugnant that the congregation could not prevail upon him to accept faculties until ten years after his ordination. Yet, he was able to overcome all these difficulties and always to maintain a serene and joyful expression, so that everyone considered him to be another Saint Philip.

Community life presented Sebastian with many opportunities for mortifying his short temper. When teaching theology to the novices, he had to endure a student who had no interest in the subject and showed his annoyance by constantly arguing and contradicting the professor. Sebastian patiently answered his objections and did not betray his own displeasure, although, as he confided to one of the fathers, the very sight of the man filled him with repugnance. The novice subsequently left the congregation; more serious, however, and more enduring was Sebastian's natural antipathy for one of the fathers. He admitted that there was nothing objectively wrong with the priest but that the dislike was so strong that he had to take a private vow to endure the father's company. Sebastian believed that he never once betrayed his feelings and was grateful for the opportunity to mortify his nature which he recognized to be imperfect.

Sebastian had a beautiful plaster Crucifix, over the prie-Dieu in his room, to which he was quite attached. He once asked a father to get some papers for him which were inside the flap of the prie-Dieu. In opening the flap, the priest let it slip; and it shattered the crucifix into tiny pieces. Sebastian, although he was in the room when it happened, remained calm, told the father not to trouble himself with it, and swept up the pieces himself.

After many years in the congregation, there were few things to which Sebastian remained attached. He did, however, have a great desire to go to Rome, and so he was filled with joy when the superior asked him and another priest to go there on business. Because of his popular reputation for sanctity, many people came to the docks on the River Po to see him off. The two fathers were already on board when Sebastian's travelling companion handed him a note from the superior telling him that the trip was cancelled and that Sebastian was to return to the

Oratory. Sebastian left the boat, saying cheerfully to his friend: 'Come, let us return home; the journey to Rome is at an end.' He never did get a chance to see Rome in the future.

The Congregation of the Oratory derives its name from a place of prayer; and Saint Philip used to say that anyone who did not intend to pray should leave the community. Sebastian, although he was intent on praying, found prayer extremely difficult. He found it dry, and God seemed to be very far away from him. When engaged in mental prayer, Sebastian found it hard to concentrate, although he was careful to prepare his meditations. The inability to concentrate was especially painful to him when saying his office; and he seems to have given in to scruples on occasion, reciting the office more than once. And at Mass, too, he found it difficult to concentrate, although for a brief time after Communion, his soul found some peace.

As painful as the dryness in prayer must have been, the thought of death and the subsequent judgment tormented Sebastian to a much greater degree. Although he had led an objectively holy life, he was terrified of the judgment, considering himself to be a weak creature who might at any time fall from grace. This thought kept him awake for many nights and almost caused him to despair. We have an account of Sebastian's state of mind in his own words. He used to write out his thoughts in order to understand them more clearly. Shortly before his death, Sebastian burned all his writings, but fortunately for us, a priest to whom he had shown these tortured thoughts had secretly copied some of them.

I feel within me such anguish that my very soul is wrung by it . The trouble began by a darkness of mind so great that I could find no relief. It seemed to me as if I had lost hope of salvation, and that there was no way out of the thick night. I would have given the whole world for even one gleam of interior light by which to know what to do and how to fulfil God's Will. There was no one to whom I could turn for help, for such crosses are not easily understood by those who have not themselves experienced them. Meanwhile, my spirit failed me lest I should be damned, and I lived in a constant state of terror. I knew not what to do except to wait for the mercy of God; for I am resolved to do what I can to abound in His grace. Meanwhile, all I can do is to cry out, 'May He have mercy on me.' Oh, state of agony, misery, and darkness! Oh, what a Cross! But, O my God, though Thou slay me, yet I will hope in Thee.

Sebastian remained in this state of anguish for many years. But, although he suffered interiorly, he was able to lead his penitents in the way of Christian joy associated with his spiritual father, Saint Philip. Sebastian, himself, acknowledged the value of these torments in teaching him perfect detachment from all earthly things. Others have seen them as protecting his humility from his admiring disciples who were intent on bestowing every honour upon the Saint.

Sebastian was favoured with the knowledge of the time of his own death. He prepared himself for it by giving away all his possessions, by burning all his writings, but by otherwise keeping to his busy schedule of pastoral visits. On 25 January 1710, he was detained on one such visit and had to hurry back to be in time for evening Oratory. On account of the perspiration he had developed, he caught a chill when baring his back to take the discipline and died on 30 January 1710. He suffered much during the week of illness, but on the morning of the twenty-ninth, a peaceful calm settled upon his tormented soul. It did not last, however. Towards evening, spiritual anguish once more seized him and remained with him until 8:30 the next morning, at which time he died. He was eighty years old.

Blessed Sebastian is a model of perseverance and a great source of hope. He fought against imperfections such as his temper and repugnances and prevailed. And he persevered in prayer although he did not find any consolation there, but, more often than not, spiritual torment. Yet, God used these means to purify him and present him to the outside world as a great saint full of Christian joy. His exemplary life of holiness would inspire the Church in Turin for many generations.

In 1835, a year after Sebastian was beatified, there was a solemn translation of his relics. Overshadowed at the time by royalty and ecclesiastical dignitaries, there were three future saints in the crowd. There was Saint Joseph Cottolengo, who devoted himself to the care of the destitute sick; Saint Joseph Cafasso, whose work with prisoners caught the imagination of all Turin; and Saint John Bosco, whose work with children is known to the whole world. All of these could draw their spiritual lineage both by inspiration and imitation to Blessed Sebastian Valfre.