

BRIEF WITNESS OF FAITH OF FRIAR ANTONIO MARIA SPEEDY

(BAPTISMAL NAME MATTHEW FARRUGIA)

“Once (Paul) had reached safety (he) learned that the island was called Malta. The natives showed (him) extraordinary hospitality” (Acts 28 1-2). The countless blessings in my life begin with the gift of faith; first handed down to me from my Maltese parents, and then lived most importantly, and indeed most authentically, through a group of Mediterranean friars who would turn my life from being ‘up-side-down’ to the ‘right-way-up’.

At nine, my sister and I were taken on our first voyage from *down-under* Australia to Malta to visit family. There for three months, we were immersed into an ancient Catholic culture foreign yet familiar. There, I had my first Holy Communion in the little fishing village of Birzebuggia.

In returning to the comparatively religiously-bland and secular Australia, I struggled to integrate the experience with my Australian friends. I felt alone and misunderstood in an interior battle of identity. After graduating from high school, my faith slipped away into the darkness of a life without God. Following a childhood dream to be a famous artist, I entered college and became an ambitious and ostentatious illustrator. Later I enjoyed a high-paying job in the Australian film industry as a scenic painter, where to the world all seemed to be going well. In reality, my soul began to slowly slip into an existential darkness and fear. Tragedy soon ruptured my swollen ego when I was diagnosed with Carpal Tunnel Syndrome in my right wrist, which toppled my lofty castles built on sand (cf. Matt 7:26-27). I later came to learn of the words: *“If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither” (Psalm 137:5).* Drawing as a career could no longer be my future.

At 22 years of age I returned to Malta, where my childhood memories of faith were reignited. My family’s unconditional love, though, began to make me feel shamefully uncomfortable. I hastily decided to follow my dream of traveling Europe in search of freedom. New countries, new architecture, new food, new art - yet the whole time, a lingering feeling of emptiness relentlessly clung to my heart. Inspired from above, a fellow traveler said: *“Go back to Malta for New Years, you have a family there who miss you”.* Thinking of my Nanna Mary who prayed her daily Rosary to Our Lady of Fatima for my conversion, I turned my course back down south through the Italian peninsula for a surprise Christmas visit to Malta.

Arriving in the southern Sicilian city of Catania and aspiring to spend one night out on the streets experiencing poverty, I walked around seeking a place to rest my head. Conflicted with the doubts and fears of the past, I looked to the sky and earnestly prayed (without realizing to Whom) to understand the purpose of my existence. (Through logical reasoning, I resolutely refused that there could be ‘nothing’ after life, or no absolute moral standard; God had to exist, and my life had to have meaning, though I was lost for what that meaning actually was.)

Moments later, as I continued along the street, there in the distance I saw the first three members of the “Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary”. When I asked who they were, they told me that they were a poor Catholic community traveling to northern Italy. The English-speaking Italian sister suggested I speak with their ‘founder’ Corrado (now known as Friar Volantino). She briefly translated my story to him, and he took me by the shoulders and asked: “*Do you want to become a Saint?*” I laughed, but he insisted: “*No... it’s for real!*”.

Not only the confidence and clarity with which they spoke to me about the Catholic belief in the Resurrection of the body, but the very way they lived and trusted in God’s providence, filled my intellect with light. We spent the night in the train station where they later invited me back to Sicily after Christmas. The following day we went our separate ways.

Deciding to return to Sicily after Christmas in Malta, I accepted their invitation to take a retreat in prayer and silence at their hermitage, all in order to better understand God’s will. I ended up spending six weeks there – six weeks that would change my life forever. I discovered that their charism, while being semi-contemplative (maintaining male and female cloistered life in distinctly separated convents), is also to send souls to the Catholic Sacraments by evangelizing along the streets of the world... Drawing from both the first Carmelites and the first Franciscans, they combined total poverty and simplicity with competent evangelization.

I had found what my heart had always yearned for; the only problem was that I had to make some very big changes in my life. With my tourist visa quickly expiring, I reluctantly returned to what I had known as home.

My heart and mind received numerous confirmations that God willed me to return to Italy, but weak in faith, I struggled to believe how it could at all be possible. This the dilemma: I’d met three young adults living in the Sicilian countryside without a cent of income. I had no understanding of their language. They (at that time) had no written document whatsoever from any bishop approving of their lifestyle. They had no phone or internet to facilitate communication either with them in my discernment or with any friend or family member once I was there. I had no visa nor could they help me apply for a religious visa, for they had not yet been approved by the Church. Together with all of this, I had to renounce my many plans in life, my family, and my friends. The Lord, through His divine fire of Love, ‘cooked’ my soul to maturity through three long years in Australia, the last of which was spent in seminary discerning Diocesan Priesthood.

Providentially, my Australian-Maltese dual citizenship application was approved and by the time I returned to Italy in January of 2003 the community had grown to six members who were now wearing habits. With a clear conscience of now perusing what the Holy Spirit had revealed to me in my first visit with them as God’s will for me, I began to reclaim the profound peace and joy that I had so tragically lost from their absence. Several years following my return to them, after

my novitiate vows, I re-entered seminary to finally graduate in Rome's Lateran Pontifical University.

Years later, following many trials and tribulations as a new community, we were also welcomed into the American Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux by Bishop Sam Jacobs, where he ordained me a transitional deacon, and then a Catholic Priest by Bishop Shelton Fabre, on December the 6th of 2014. Our community was definitively approved in the Diocese of Noto, Sicily, at a Diocesan level (as Public Association in anticipation of becoming an Institute of Consecrated Life) with a canonical Episcopal Decree of the 30th of May 2018, and we now have some 34 members (three of whom are American) and are found in 4 different Dioceses (three in Italy, and one here in the US).

Bishop Fabre since has (as of the date that this was published) also appointed me to the Catholic Parish of the Holy Family in Dulac, Louisiana as the Administrator for over a year now; attempting to integrate our community's charism of prayer and evangelization into the small parish hidden deep in the swamps of Southern Louisiana.

"The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" (Matt 9:37-38). As I look back in gratitude to the Lord for His invitation into such an adventurous journey of divine love, my heart (together with my Poor Friar and Nun brothers and sisters) begs the Eternal Father through Jesus and Mary to continue to send sincerely truth-seeking men and women into this holy foolishness (*cf. 1 Cor 1:18*) - remembering that our fruitfulness lies in our willingness to die to ourselves in order to live for God: *"Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit."* (John 12:24)

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