

Description of San Giovanni procession

Undated, but after 1451, when Agostino di Portico di Romagna was already abbot of San Zeno in Siena, and before 1454, when the format of the procession was changed

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Ital. f. 3, ff. 286v–290r.

Translated from Daniela Delcorno Branca, “Un camaldolese alla festa di San Giovanni: la processione del Battista descritta da Agostino di Portico,” *Lettere italiane* 55 (2003): 1–25.

To the venerable servant in Christ Sister Battista at Santa Marta

Brother Agostino, abbot, to his most beloved sister in Christ, greetings.

Because I recall the kindnesses you so lovingly showed me, and considering too your labours in this time, taking care of so many scholars, I am happy to give you nothing extra to do, lest you should just have one labour piled on another. Rather I would like to offer rest and recreation: and because I have nothing else at present, I have decided to send you this mixed salad that I have picked for you. Even though it consists of humble things and uncooked herbs, very often it is these things that bring delight to someone with little appetite because they restore lost appetite. So I think that you, being tired from all your labours, will have no appetite to read excellent things, for your mind is not free nor fit enough for such spiritual food: and therefore I am sending you in this small cup a mixed salad that was plucked by me with great diligence at the procession of San Giovanni.

Seeing that I had resolved, since I was in Florence, to see this devotion, I went to [the Baptistery of] San Giovanni with a companion to stand there and see everything. But when I could not find anywhere to stand comfortably because of all the great crowd of every kind that was there, taking two companions of our order to be my guides, I went a long way and found no space, but all the places where the procession was to pass were taken and the roads and squares and windows and rooves and walls were all occupied and there was such nobility of clothes to be seen and adornments, and especially the women, that it made me think of heaven and its happiness and I thought that the blessed souls will [not?] be adorned much better. In the end I came to the piazza de' Signori where I found a gentleman who took me by the hand and led me into a house from which I could see everything, and there I stood waiting. First I admired the majesty of the Signoria, which sat surrounded by magnificent decorations on a raised platform; then all the people who covered all the piazza and likewise the rooves and walls. After I had been there a while, the procession started to move past. The first thing was the three [foundling] hospitals, and each one had its cross and banner: the first was San Gallo, and the second was the Scala, and the third was the Innocenti. First came the cross, then many loads of tiny children in big baskets covered all over with flowers and they all had garlands on their heads. Each of these hospitals had many loads and behind them, two by two, came all the wet nurses, and it was a devout and moving sight. Behind them followed the friars of each hospital with their rectors and priests and relics and other adornments. Then many hermits and confraternities with their humble crosses and adornments. Then the Jesuati and the Third Order of St Francis in great number with very beautiful regalia and other relics. Then the Dominicans and the Servites and Carmelites with their beautiful adornments and many friars. Then the Augustinians. Then the Humiliati who had with them a wonderful *edificio* 20 braccia [11.6 metres] high with wonderful adornments, full of living children who looked like angels with their wings, and who sang and played viols [*ghigi*] and cymbals and turned around as if they were dancing; and I was amazed that they were not afraid at being so high. At the top of this *edificio* was [the relic of] the head of San Rossore with much adornment. This *edificio* was so big and beautiful that it was carried by sixty or more men. When it arrived in front of the *palazzo* it stopped and there they sang and played. Then other different religious orders came with their regalia and decoration. Then the Camaldolese monks came with the standard of the order, with relics and robes, and they had a marvellous *edificio* that was carried by seventy or more men. And this *edificio* was very high, and there were lots of little angels who sang and played and danced, and on top there was an *Annunziata*, played by a living person, and the angel: and she was so beautiful and so well dressed that she seemed real, and

the angel too was real with wings. And when it got to in front of the *palazzo* it stopped, but ahead of this *edificio* went the prophet David on horseback with lots of prophets and pages in livery, and they had people dressed up in the latest fashions and live *spiritelli*, and as well as this, these prophets were preceded by a huge and terrible basilisk that had the body of a cock but a very long tail like a serpent. All these things preceded the *edificio*. When it got to in front of the *palazzo* it stopped; the angel and the woman were on two great branches of *vivole*. The angel knelt and said “Ave Maria” and everything that follows in the gospel; and the woman replied and made all those gestures “et quomodo fiet, etc.”. At the end she said “Ecce ancilla domini” and at once a live dove flew out and descended upon her. This was so devout that it brought tears to the eyes and made me weep. Then came monks in black and all the clergy and among other things there was a great *edificio* with the sepulchre and the armed men who guarded it. Suddenly there was a great explosion and the cover fell down and Christ came out with his banner. Two angels appeared there, as it says in the gospel, and they sat on the sepulchre, and Christ went at once to Limbo, which was on another *edificio*, with flames pouring out, and there were lots of demons and they did not want to open up. Christ opened up the gates and those demons fled; and he led forth Adam and Eve and lots of old greybeards and with lots of angels he went off to Paradise. And these things were done with such order that they were quite stupendous. And then came another *edificio* of Judgement Day, and Christ was in the air and there were lots of tombs below. As soon as the trumpet sounded, lots of people emerged, and did all the words and gestures as they are written, and it was a piteous thing, even though it made people laugh because there were some who did not want to enter into Hell and there was a big battle. Then the Righteous went to Paradise and St Peter opened up. Then came three kings on horses, richly adorned with great retinues, and the queens, all adorned in the latest fashions, and behind them came an *edificio* on which there were three dead kings and a hermit who was in a cell; and those dead kings talked to the living ones and they were converted, and it was a beautiful thing. And I derived much pleasure from all these things and if I had not seen it I would not have imagined it because they seem quite incredible. I shall tell you how great and beautiful the crowds and the *paramenti*. Great the people and their adornments. All these things can be understood in their spiritual sense. Let this be the salad.

Now we shall cover it with flowers, and these are that you should be patient and long suffering and strong and fervid in your labours. Fervid love supports all burdens, but where fervour is lacking everything is weak and cold. Heat is what produces grass and other shoots and leaves and fruits. Cold is what limits them: so the fervid spirit produces many virtues and the cold of negligence takes them away. May the heat of the spirit, o dearest Battista, enter into you and make you flourish and bear fruit, and may your fruits be the fruits of knowledge, of peace, of charity. Let there be no place within you that is hidden from the heat of the spirit, but may it be all filled with grace; and may there be in you no sterility, only fruitfulness that is dictated by all benediction. Many precious grounds of great dignity are placed before you: unless you are overcome by labour, you will be glorious in eternity. And I am afraid of this: that you will fall under your burden, and that your crowns will be taken from you. And if you open your eyes and see them, I have no doubt that your labours will seem sweet to you. Therefore open your inner eyes, and gaze upon the crowns, and you will feel no burden. All labour is light for one who truly loves, and all labour is hard for one who is neglectful. What can we do that is worthy of such a prize and yet we are cold because we do not consider. Be considerate, and the burden of your labour will be lightened. Ask God for me that he should make me strong with you and that I should be worthy to be granted fervour because coldness often seizes me and binds my hands.

No more for now. Except may God give you patience, and remember me to your companion Sister Regola and may she be all “regulated” and may you be “baptised” clean of all vice. Amen. Do not despise my bland and humble gift. It has kept me awake, and will put you to sleep. Agostino, abbot of St Zenon.

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