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THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

Saint Andrew Avellino: A half-hearted priesthood is not enough

A handsome young man does not usually find it easy to escape the ladies who have taken a liking to him. Such was the case with Lancelot Avellino, born in 1521 in Castronuovo, Italy, the eldest son of Giovanni Avellino and Margherita Apelli. On more than one occasion, he found himself in a situation similar to that of Joseph in the house of Potiphar the Egyptian, but the memory of his beloved mother—a woman of extraordinary virtue—kept him from falling into temptation. Nevertheless, the interest of women pursued him at many stages of his life, and he always had to guard his chastity with great vigilance.

Lancelot—that was his given name—aspired to the priesthood. As a subdeacon, he taught catechism to children, guiding them toward a pious life. But the advances of the female sex did not cease, so he fled to Naples. Even there, he had to move several times to escape the amorous pursuits of ladies of high society. He controlled his passions through hard work and a very orderly lifestyle. In addition to theology, Lancelot studied law and soon earned a doctorate with honors.

Although he was able to resist the temptations of the opposite sex, he could not help but be drawn to the offerings of the world. He did not yet fully understand what the priesthood demanded. When he was ordained, enjoying a respectable and comfortable life with a good stipend was not at the bottom of his list of priorities.

Fortunately, he had a holy confessor, Father Foscareno of the Theatine Order, who led him to reflect more deeply. Still, Lancelot needed a decisive experience. Out of vanity and ambition—even as a priest—he liked to act as a lawyer in his friends' lawsuits. One day, contrary to the law and his own convictions, he presented false evidence just to win a case. This incident deeply affected him and robbed him of peace. This is how the key experience he had at that time is recounted:

Lancelot Avellino could not stop thinking about the matter and could not find peace. Finally, as midnight approached, he decided to go to bed. Before undressing, he opened the Holy Scriptures, as usual, to read a short passage. He did this every day, and on that day of deceit, his gaze fell on the verse that says, *“A lying mouth kills the soul.”*

Lancelot read these words once, twice, three times—and then collapsed as if struck down. He remained on his knees all night and, as soon as dawn broke, went to the nearest church to confess. It was then that the holy confessor spoke seriously to his conscience, urging him to abandon half measures, to leave jurisprudence behind, and to devote himself exclusively to the priesthood.

Lancelot changed his life and, from then on, was a priest after God's own heart: a fervent preacher, confessor, apostle of charity, prayerful and penitent. He was respected throughout Naples for his pious conduct.

Because of his good reputation, the archbishop entrusted him with the arduous and thankless task of reforming the Benedictine monastery of Sant'Arcangelo in Baiano. The monastery was in a state of profound spiritual decline and needed to be guided back to compliance with the rule. However, the nuns opposed his attempts at reform. Avellino was the victim of several attacks by worldly people who came and went from the convent and now feared losing their freedoms. He survived the attacks but was seriously wounded and barely managed to take refuge in the Theatine convent.

As soon as he recovered from his stab wounds, he knelt and asked to join the strict order. Thus, at the age of thirty-six, he began his novitiate and took the religious name Andrew. The martyr of the cross would be his special patron.

In the convent, Andrew became an exemplary religious who conscientiously followed the strict rule and grew in wisdom and knowledge. He held the position of novice master for ten years. Additionally, Avellino became a confessor and spiritual director sought after by people from all walks of life. He had a gift for comforting and encouraging sinners. *“Confess, and God will help you”* was his motto.

Until the end of his life, he provided spiritual direction through writing, composing thousands of letters. He was entrusted with many tasks. He was appointed rector of a seminary and of a shelter for repentant prostitutes. It is worth mentioning that, in all these positions, Andrew carried out very fruitful work, combining fervent prayer with an ascetic life. As a fervent defender of the purity of the clergy, tireless in confession and in visiting the sick, he exerted great influence in his time—to the point that men such as St. Charles Borromeo and other fervent bishops came to him for advice and sought

his help in ecclesiastical matters of great importance. Thanks to his work, the Theatine Order spread to many dioceses.

God had guided him not only to transform a half-hearted priesthood into a wholehearted one, but also to take on the challenge of a strict religious life. In this way, his life became fruitful for many.

Even his death was a great demonstration of God's love. On November 10, 1608, shortly after the celebration of Holy Mass began, he managed to utter only the words *Introibo ad altare Dei* (I will go unto the altar of God). Then, he suffered a stroke. He was taken to his room, where he died peacefully after a few hours of suffering, during which he kept his gaze fixed on an image of the Virgin Mary with the Child.

Saint Andrew Avellino, pray for priests and religious, that by God's grace they may know how to respond to the high dignity of their vocation!

Meditation on the Gospel of the Day: <https://en.elijamission.net/sin-and-forgiveness-2/>