

“Sola fides sufficit”: the Centurione family and the discovery of the New World

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Sola fides sufficit. “Faith is enough”. This is the heraldic motto of the Centurione Scotto family. A motto formed in close collaboration with that name, Centurione, which five families in the fourteenth century chose as their “residence”. The families of the Cantelli, of the Becchignone, of the Bestagni, of the Oltremarino and of the Scotti were all Ghibellines, but could not renounce this powerful evangelical reference¹ (fig. 1).

The centurion is that Roman who meets Jesus at Capernaum begging him to save his servant, the only one in all of the Gospels to ask for help for someone who is not a relative or member of his own family, but a stranger. Christ, astonished by this, wants to follow him to the ill servant but the centurion stops him. The word is enough. With this gesture he becomes the emblem of the faith and Christ replies that, “he has never found so much faith in Israel”, that many “will arrive from east and west to remain with Abraham” and in the end leaves the Roman saying “go, and as you have believed, so will be done”.

Therefore it is not by chance that the recently discovered fresco², ordered by Luigi Centurione Scotto to be carried out by Strozzi, represents a Centurion who, on its arrival in America, welcomes Faith on a shallop with four Evangelists.

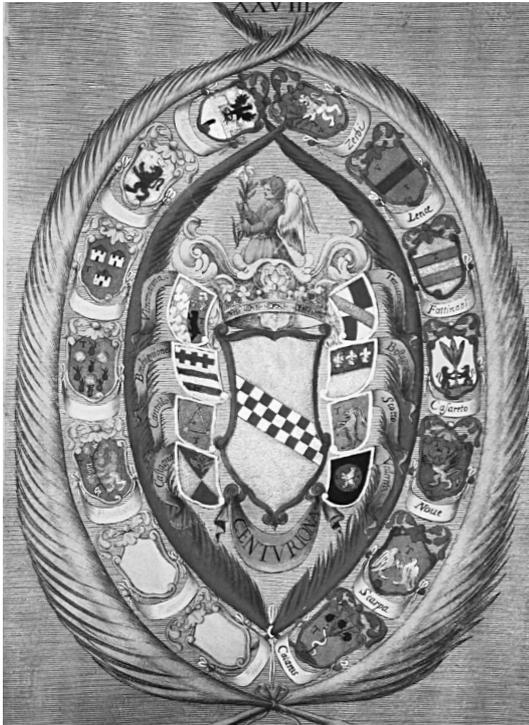
Faith who saves, which will have to save even the new people discovered, living in the world “at the back of the sun”, can only be welcomed by the Centurion, the one who represents the utmost of faith, virtue par excellence. A Centurion dressed in blue and gold (the Scotto colours), to enoble the ancient origins of the family and to clarify, for those who needed it, that the Centurione family were, in the seventeenth century, the defenders of the Faith, real

“milites Christi” serving the Pope, on land and seas

The fresco wanted by Luigi Centurione Scotto more than a hundred years after the fortunate landing by Columbus in the “Indies”, is a sort of painted poster of all that the Centurione family is at that time, a true snapshot – the Centurione family defenders and missionaries of the Faith – a self-celebration – the Centuriones of extremely ancient Roman origins – following the trend of the time when it was necessary to find in the past the justification of one’s own power. And, in short, a powerful “archaeological” operation of origins to throw on the table of acknowledgements and of the European priorities – in the sphere of those disputes between “Serenissimi” and “Chiarissimi” dukes, certainly not idle, but fundamental to clarify the new relations in the balance of power in the Renaissance, in that difficult passage to the dukedoms and principedoms of the end of the sixteenth century³. To be “more ancient” meant having a right of precedence, a title of merit, in the race for the conquest of Italian power or of a place at the Spanish Court, which were requirements for these titles. But that was not enough. It was also necessary to take sides. And many of this family did so, at the end of that sixteenth century, with the extremely Catholic Spain and with the Pope.

It must not be forgotten that this family already stood out at the end of the fifteenth century, but especially in the counter-reformation period for the introduction and creation of new religious orders which strongly favoured the ecclesiastical revival and the extension of the Genoese religious panorama. In my view, of all the innovators, an equal cannot be found with any other Renaissance *clan*. A

1. Coat of arms of the Centurione family.



few can be pointed out, starting with the turning point of Adamo Centurione of Oltremarini descent, the right arm if not the alter ego of Andrea Doria, who, right in the sixteenth century, changed political colour passing from the Ghibellines to the Guelfs. Carlo V's main banker in 1546 followed the Emperor to Germany to fight against the Protestant Princes. Stefano Centurione, married to Vincenzina Lomellini, founded together with Vittorio Strata the order of the "Santissima Annunziata", the only contemplative order of the modern age. The son Agostino, in those years when the palazzo in Strada Nuova was being frescoed, had the convent of the "Turchine dell'Incoronazione" built and made his sister Benedetta prioress. Again Agostino remained in mission for a year, in 1642, hosted by the barefooted Carmelites, in order to discuss with Urban VII the difficult relations between the Genoese church and the Pope and also the controversy caused by the crowning of the Madonna as Queen of Genoa. A crowning desperately wanted by Virginia Centurione. That same Virginia who created from its beginnings the "Opera di Nostra Signora del Rifugio in Monte Calvario", a first class structure of assistance for the recovery of the poor women and the prostitutes of the city. Giorgio, her Father,

of Becchignone descent, was Doge in 1621, the year before the ordering of the frescoes. Giovanni Maria di San Giuseppe, another son of Stefano's, spread in Poland the barefooted Carmelites of which he was part, first provincial of the order in those lands in the difficult times of 1618-1619, the beginning of the Thirty years war⁴.

Maddalena Centurione⁵ introduced the new order of the barefooted Carmelites in Italy, bringing it to Genoa from the highly Catholic Spain, at that time a source of religious innovation, a country where the Centurione family were at home. Paola Maria founded the same order in Vienna and Graz, with the San Giuseppe monastery. Alessandro di Marco, from the Oltremarino family, Archbishop of Genoa in 1591, was Governor of Rome and in 1603, Papal Nuncio in Spain. Francesco, the son of the Doge Giorgio, who in 1621 was present at his Father's coronation in the Ducal Palace, was commander of the Papal galleys during the defence of the European Christian ports from the Turks; he participated in the liberation of Malta from the siege of the Infidels, and was Captain General of the Pope's galleys. The list could go on, but this should suffice to explain how the family, armoured loyalists of the Pope for the defence of Christianity, came to be bearer and missionary for new religious trends. However, at the end of the fifteenth century Luigi, perhaps even Luigi Centurione himself of the famous Assereto document which demonstrated the Genoese roots of Columbus, had introduced the order of the "minimi" of "San Francesco da Paola" to Genoa. Even until now the only sanctuary of the order that remains in the city.

A reasoning, the religious one insisted upon by the Centurione family, which pivoted around the name and a greatly important event. In 1376 Orietta Centurione Scotto had as a guest in her house in Genoa "alla croce del caneto", Saint Catherine of Siena, on her way back from Avignon. Saint Catherine had succeeded in convincing Pope Gregory XI to bring the Papal seat back to Rome. A saint ambassadress. Nuncio like the Centurione family, more or less ambassadors. Nuncio as Columbus, Christopher bearer of Christ⁶. But let's go in order. The Saint's stay, with a following of twenty people, amongst which her confessor, the blessed Raimondo of Capua, had a deep effect on the Centurione family. Several times Saint Catherine received the Pope's visit at the home of the Centurione Scotto, while he was guest of the Fregoso family near San Tommaso. In the Centurione house she performed the miracle of curing two of her followers, Stefano da Ma-

coni and Neri dei Pagliaresi, of a serious illness. After her death in 1461, her room was transformed into a shrine. Barnaba Centurione Scotto who purchased Nicolò Lomellino's palazzo between 1600 and 1609, the palazzo of our frescoes, was very devoted to Saint Catherine and, in 1580, on the occasion of the re-building of San Siro (that had always been the Centurione church), which foresaw the introduction of five chapels for every side nave, obtained the patronage of one of these dedicating it to Saint Catherine, the protective saint of the family.

Barnaba had two sons, Luigi and Oberto⁷, but it was Luigi (or Lodisio or Aloisio), born in 1580 to Battina Giustiniani and married to Maddalena Salvago, Father of the future Carlo I who would be the first Centurione Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, to inherit his Father's endless fortune⁸.

In 1621 Luigi obtained the investiture of the Marquisate of Morasco coming to him from his Father and in 1635 that of the countship of Montaldo, thanks to the acquisition on his Mother's side. The Centurione Scotto had started to acquire the Malaspina estates in Val Trebbia in the attempt, as well as to invest the accumulated capital, to raise themselves to the dignity of imperial feudal Lords. Which is what happened in 1621 with the imperial investiture of Luigi. In 1589 Barnaba had purchased parts of the Fontanarossa and Bertassi estate, which had come to Benedetto Aliano, Giacomo and Gian Agostino Marra due to the sale by part of the members of the Malaspina descent of Alpe and Artana. In 1592 Emperor Rodolfo II confirmed the investiture of the estate purchased. After a while, Claudio Malaspina sold to Luigi all that he possessed in Bertassi, Bertone Roccavanna, Botolaria and Barchi. In 1619 the purchase of Alpe was finalised. Between 1633 and 1638 first cycle of acquisitions was completed with the feudal cessions by other members of Malaspina descent, which included Campi and Gorreto (investiture in 1639). In conclusion, in around forty years, the Centurione Scotto had realised their own personal State on the ashes of the Malaspina's ancient estates. And he, Luigi Centurione, was at the zenith of his power⁹. He was able to exalt himself but he could not celebrate his money. He needed to celebrate the Faith, which the Centurione family had carried with them for some time, since that fortunate arrival of Saint Catherine in Orietta's house. And now they were moving forwards arrogantly, in order to arrive in America: the New World discovered thanks to the Centurione family. Columbus, the bearer of Christ, was not perhaps in the service of the



2. Giulio Centurione Scotto dressed as Christopher Columbus, 1892

Centurione Scotto, in fact, in that of a Luigi, which as destiny would want is exactly the same fifteenth century name of the Luigi who was Strozzi's client¹⁰? Wasn't it perhaps Martino Centurione who financed the third voyage of the Genoese navigator¹¹? America was a fertile land where the Centuriones could have earned much more than from the former possessions of the Malaspina. Luigi knew it and was looking in that very direction, a route that touched Spain, where the Centurione were tied with a double thread with the Emperor of whom they were the bankers. Luigi was the new Columbus, the new discoverer with the astrolabe in his hand, a discoverer of new trade and revenue, but he could not celebrate the money, that within a short time, the Centurione would have printed with their own effigy and the two-headed eagle in their own mint at Campi¹². He had to celebrate the Faith and make believe that the "new Columbus" was not anything more than the overseas arm of the Pope. It is perhaps from that fresco by Strozzi therefore, that the other arrogant self-celebratory theme of the Centurione family starts (fig. 2), the one that sees them as financiers of "Colon" and discoverers of the New World. A theme that would continue for all of the nineteenth century. And in

1892, on the occasion of the Columbus celebrations, it was Prince Giulio Centurione Scotto¹³ who dressed up as Christopher Columbus. Exactly as Luigi had done more than two hundred years before.

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¹The Cantelli are already listed in Genoa in the thirteenth century, the period in which Lanfranco was alive, considered to be the founder of the family. Lanfranco had two sons, Pagano and Pasquale. The first had Simone who died without children, on the other hand the second had a large descendancy.

The Becchignone had origin from a Simone who, in 1250, is certified as son-in-law of Lucchetto Grimaldi. This side of the family had four two doge reigns: Giorgio (1621-1623), Agostino (1650-1652), Gio Battista (1658-1660), and Lorenzo (1715-1717).

The Bestagni, originated from a Giacomo in the thirteenth century survived for only seven generations, around two centuries.

The Oltremarini had their origins in the Oltremarino di Paraggi, in the thirteenth century. Their wealth was enormous. Adamo became the first banker of Carlo V and his descendants had the title of Marquis of Estepa in Spain, where they moved buying relationships with the noblest Iberian families.

The Scotto/i already cited in the notarial documents of Giovanni Scriba in 1158, where a deed of Ugo Scotto, son of Idone, is reported. In 1190 the family divided into two branches: the one of Gerardo married to the daughter of the very powerful Opizio de Castro (who died out), and that of Ogerio, considered the founder of the family. Amongst them some members reach the consular dignity in the XII century: Baldoino Scotto in 1185, Ogerio in 1194, Guglielmo in 1213.

In 1654 Emperor Ferdinando III conferred to the Centurione Scotti the rank of Princes of the Holy Roman Empire and the right to mint money. The family coat of arms was a golden goat in a light blue field.

²The palazzo is already Lomellino, in via Aurea (today via Garibaldi) 7.

³ It is enough to think of the dispute between Alfonso d'Este and Cosimo I Medici exactly about the race for the publication of family "historiae" to establish and celebrate the most ancient family in Italy.

⁴ They are difficult years. In 1618 the "defenestration of Prague" started the Thirty years war which led to the breaking up of the Germanic Empire and to the continental leadership of France. The invincible Armada was defeated in 1588 more by a storm than by the English fleet, but the people over the Channel were conquering the supremacy of the seas. For the Genoese financiers of Spain times got even harder. In 1623 the Count Duke Olivares, to supplement the State, delayed the payments to the Genoese, and then blocked them for two years for having helped the Superba in the 1625 war started by Carlo Emanuele, Duke of Savoy. Perhaps not by chance, 1625 was also the date of the interruption of work on the frescoes. For general information on the Centurione members see *Dizionario Bibliografico dei Liguri*, Consulta Genovese, Genoa 1996.

⁵ *Settimana Religiosa* no. 11 1883: "The Venerable Maddalena Centurione Spinola, widow, who from Madrid in Spain, left for Genoa where she arrived the 13th December 1589 to found a convent for nuns of the Santa Teresa order, where in the year 1591 founded the convent of Jesus and Mary of the discalced, the first to be founded in Italy".

⁶ The house is today at number 6 of Canneto and carries a stone of 1880 in memory of the saint's stay. This house positioned in Croce di Canneto belonging to the Scotto, was already noted in 1183, when Simone Buferio promised his brothers Balduino and Ogerio Scotto that, if it was given in dowry to Maria of the late Ugone Scotto, future wife of Ansaldo his son, the house positioned in "Cruce in carubio Sancti Laurenti cui coheret a tribus via publica et a quarta domus Nicole embriaci", it would be sold to them (Not. Lanfranco, Genoa State Ar-

chive). For precise information on Catherine's stay at Orietta Scotto's consult G. Ferrero, *I Centurione Scotto, Signori del Gorreto in Val Trebbia in Storia Locale*, vol. 6.

⁷Barnaba lived in the residence opposite the San Siro church. In 1599 he had become Marquis of Morsasco, which he had acquired together with the title from Vincenzo I Duke of Mantua and of Monferrato, while Battina Giustiniani, his wife, as a widow had acquired the Montaldo estate between 1622 and 1629. In 1587 Barnaba purchased the female convent of San Seplocro di Sampierdarena, building there the palazzo Centurione del Monastero, a splendid residence with frescoes by Bernardo Castello, where the archduke Alberto resided during the Queen of Spain's visit in 1599. Therefore Barnaba started a process of land and property acquisitions that Luigi enlarged further with important acquisitions in Val Trebbia and Sampierdarena, as his will of the 21st June 1653 shows drawn up by the notary Oratio Gritta (A.S.G.). Luigi also had another brother, Oberto, who died at the age of fifteen in 1605. And three sisters Isabella, Paola Maria (to whom went the profits of the revenues gained in Spain) and Giovanna.

⁸Luigi, as his Father, was devoted to Saint Catherine and, together with his son Carlo, had a church built on his land at Gorreto, the feudal capital of the Centurione, dedicating it to the Saint. Luigi had three children with his wife Maddalena Salvago: Battina, who became Sister Paola Caterina, Barnaba and Carlo, who shared the property. Amongst other properties to Barnaba also went "il palazzo di Genova posto in Strada Nuova con tutte le sue pertinenze" (the palace in Genoa, located on Strada Nuova and all its outbuildings) or rather "il palazzo di Genova posto in Strada Nuova con i suoi giardini e torre, peschiera, et aquedotto in casteletto (sic), ragioni e pertinenze, con carico, che a chi spetterà detto palazzo sia obbligato a permettere, e dare l'habitatione all'altro in cui non pervenisse[...]" (the palace in Genoa, located on Strada Nuova and all its gardens and tower, fish-pool and waterworks at Castelletto, rights and outbuildings, with the burden for the one who will receive the palace to give hospitality to the other who will not receive the property) as the notary Oratio Gritta reports in the above mentioned will (A.S.G.).

⁹G Ferrero, *as above*.

¹⁰For the regest of the Assereto document, see A. Agosto, *La sala Colombiana dell'Archivio di Stato di Genova*, 12 October 1974. In the same text there is also Columbus' will of 1506, where, amongst the creditors with whom the navigator wants to settle his debts, is Luigi Centurione, the same of the Assereto document.

¹¹Together with Pantaleone Italiano, Martino had financed Columbus' journey of 1497-1498 that led to the discovery of Trinidad and the mouth of the Orinoco. See P.E. Tavaini *I viaggi di Colombo*, Novara 1986, page 156, where it is also underlined that "vi fosse il sospetto che Colombo fosse d'accordo con i genovesi per consegnare loro il mondo che aveva scoperto" (harbouring suspicions that Columbus was in line with the Genoese to grant them the world he had just discovered).

¹²In 1654 Ferdinando III allowed the Centurione family to print money at Campi. From 1662 exist coins minted by Carlo Centurione Scotto, Luigi's son.

¹³The Centurione family maintained their power intact for all of the nineteenth century. Giulio Centurione (1865-1942), son of Vittorio and Isa Spinola, inherited the possession of "Genova, Morsasco, Castelnuovo Scrivia, Gorreto, San Giacomo di Priano, Ronco in Tortona etc", plus villa Durazzo in Santa Margherita, bought by his great grandfather. See C. Bozzo Dufour, *Villa Durazzo in Santa Margherita Ligure*, Milan 1997.