

The participation of civil and military authorities in religious processions as bearers of simulacra: the Note from the Diocesan Liturgical Office of 23 July 2024 of the Archdiocese of Amalfi -Cava de' Tirreni

FABIO BALSAMO

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With the Note by the Diocesan Liturgical Office of 23 July 2024, the Archdiocese of Amalfi - Cava de' Tirreni intervened regarding the possibility for civil and military authorities to actively participate in religious processions as bearers of *simulacra*. The Note established that the bearers of the statues must be identified "mainly among the faithful who assiduously live the life of the parish or confraternity" and that "it is necessary to prevent civil or military authorities, priests or religious from carrying the statues even for a short distance statues of the Saints"¹.

The measure constitutes the response to what occurred in Minori on the occasion of the procession of the patron saint Santa Trofimenia whose statue was carried from the churchyard of the Basilica in Cantilena Square to the apse by the mayors of the main towns of the Amalfi Coast. Although the first citizens highlighted that their presence aimed to "strengthen the participation of local communities in the religious rite"² and to "celebrate the richness of local traditions, which represent a common heritage"³, someone has recognized in the episode a violation of the principle of secularism of the State and of the principle of the distinction of orders, as well as a clear exploitation of a ritual space that should have remained exquisitely spiritual and sacral⁴.

The intervention of the Liturgical Office of the Diocese of Amalfi - Cava de' Tirreni aims, in fact, to prevent any possible exploitation, even in a political key, of the manifestations of popular piety and is part of an action undertaken already over a decade by the Bishops of Campania, starting from the issuing of the 2013 Document "*Evangelizzare la pietà popolare. Norme per le feste religiose*"⁵. On that occasion the Campania Episcopal Conference had decided to adopt specific measures aimed at preventing episodes

¹ Cf. UFFICIO LITURGICO DELL'ARCIDIOCESI DI AMALFI – CAVA DE' TIRRENI, *Nota dell'Ufficio Liturgico circa le processioni*, 23 July 2024, available at <https://www.diocesiamalficava.it/2024/07/23/note-dell-ufficio-liturgico-diocesano-circa-le-processioni/>.

² Cf. ANDREA BIGNARDI, *Santa Trofimenia, il sindaco di Minori Reale: "Stupito dalla nota della Diocesi"*, in *Amalfinotizie.it*, 25 July 2024.

³ Cf. *Politica e Religione a Minori: La Festa di Santa Trofimenia Diventa Campo di Battaglia*, in *Positanonews.it*, 20 July 2024, available at <https://www.positanonews.it/2024/07/politica-e-religione-a-minori-la-festa-di-santa-trofimenia-diventa-campo-di-battaglia/3727788/>.

⁴ Cf. FRANCESCO CRISCUOLO, *Un intollerabile colpo di teatro alla festa patronale di Minori*, in *Il Quotidiano della Costiera*, 19 July 2024, which underlines that « the unbridled tendency to profit from the maximum exposure dividend, the disguised narcissism, the recourse to sensational gestures are completely incompatible both with the filial homage and sincere devotion of the various ecclesial communities to the patron saints, as transmitted to us by our fathers, and with the exercise of administrative power, marked by results rather than by the theatricality of behaviour, implemented by leveraging a natural festive concursus populi ».

⁵ It should not be overlooked, however, that already in 1973 the Bishops of Campania had issued specific directives regarding religious holidays.

of criminal infiltration in the manifestations of popular piety and, in particular, in processions, sometimes marked by the hateful practice of “*inchini*”⁶.

The Document of the Episcopal Conference of Campania, in order to preserve the authenticity of these public expressions of community faith, has dictated specific rules for the conduct of processional processions, without however regulating the criteria of choosing the bearers of the statues. To fill this gap, some Bishops of Campania intervened with some additional rules, as in the case of the Archdiocese of Salerno-Campagna-Acerno, where, with the diocesan decree dated 4 October 2023, has been provided that the bearers of the statues must be chosen among the “people who live parish life”⁷.

Even more incisive, in this context, was the 2015 intervention of the Calabrian Episcopal Conference in the Document “For a New Evangelization of popular piety. Pastoral orientations for the Churches of Calabria”. And, in this regard, it cannot fail to be noted that the Note from the Archdiocese of Amalfi - Cava de' Tirreni textually reproduce what was foreseen in the Document prepared by the Calabrian Bishops in the part in which it prescribed that the bearers of the statues were “mainly faithful who live with assiduously the life of the Parish and the Confraternity”⁸.

This finding represents a further confirmation of how the commitment made by the Dioceses of Southern Italy is increasingly synergistic with the objective of safeguarding the manifestations of popular piety from any attempt at exploitation which risks undermining their public character of testimony of the community’s faith, which, through the processional procession, with “well-defined roles, offers its friendship to God through the Saints”⁹.

⁶ The term “*inchino*” refers to the stopping of the statues near the homes of local bosses during the processional processions. Already with the Pastoral-Collective Letter of the Calabrian Episcopate “*Per la Santa Quaresima*” of 1916, although no express mention was made of the homes of the bosses, the practice of bowing was described in this way: «In fact, how can we still call religious certain processions which last for half a days and in which, as if the saint were a puppet, he is made to wander through all the alleys and lanes of the town, making him stop here in front of the house of prosecutor A or offeror B; further away on a table in front of a house or a tavern, where the porters come to refresh themselves? But such a proceeding, as well as being profane and ridiculous, is completely contrary to the spirit of the Church, which does not intend that the statues during processions stop at the request of private individuals, but rather follow their itinerary recto, as short and specific as possible”.

⁷ The diocesan decree can be consulted at the following address: <https://www.diocesisalerno.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Decreto-feste.pdf>. Point 6 of the Decree, with regard to the bearers of the statues, also provided that: a) For their adequate training and spiritual assistance, they form a group or parish association; b) They are prepared with catechetical and prayer meetings to live the procession seriously and with faith; c) They undertake to behave appropriately, avoiding chatter, smoking, use of mobile phones, posing for photos and anything else that could disturb meditation and prayer. d) Avoid dancing and twirling with the statues, during and at the end of the procession.

⁸ Cf. CALABRIAN BISHOPS CONFERENCE, *Per una Nuova Evangelizzazione della pietà popolare. Orientamenti pastorali per le Chiese di Calabria*, 2015, available at <https://www.conferenzaepiscopalecalabra.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CEC-Per-una-nuova-evangelizzazione-della-Pieta-popolare.pdf>.

⁹ Cf. UFFICIO LITURGICO DELL'ARCIDIOCESI DI AMALFI – CAVA DE' TIRRENI, *Nota dell'Ufficio Liturgico circa le processioni*, cit.