

Chapter 3

Friar Pau of Alacant: The Plague of 1647–48 in Valencia and His Capuchin Biographical Micro–Stories

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ABSTRACT

The Capuchin friar Pau of Alacant-Jaume Fornals Colomina (Alacant 1612-1664), in view of the impact of the plague epidemic that hit many European territories in the mid-17th century and in order to highlight the martyrdom suffered by his religious brothers who had helped the sick in Valencia, wrote a letter that included several hagiographic-looking accounts, published in 1648. This chapter provides information on this forgotten author and analyzes the construction of micro-biographies that stress human values in difficult times.

We can only find brief mentions in a few erudite works about a writer called *Pablo de Alicante*, a Capuchin friar. He was the son of Antoni Fornals and Àgueda Colomina, and was baptized in Alicante on April 12th, 1612 (Pastor Navarro, 2017, IV: 215), where he received the name of Jaume Fornals Colomina –the variant *Fornales* also appears in some documents. He took the novice habit at age sixteen on May 31th, 1628 at Massamagrell, where he also professed one year later. According to father Emili de Sollana (1963: 331-332) –who offers some Capuchin erudite bibliographic references-, “he was an extraordinary preacher and when he talked about the Final Judgment he sounded like St Paul or St Vincent Ferrer”. He also adds that his only known work is the posthumous *El buen amigo en la muerte*, published in Valencia in 1670. He died on April 2th, 1664, while preaching Lent in Xèrica. In addition, he tells us that fifty year after his death, “his body was found incorrupt”. Despite this final detail and his published work, no other Valencian bibliographers mention him, although his book seems to have been well known and we have found it in several libraries –such as that belonging to the first Marquis of Dues Aigües (Català & Boigues 1992: 94). Josep Pastor Navarro, in his *Diccionario biográfico de personajes alicantinos* (2009, IV: 215), adds a reference to Pau’s baptismal records, which can be found in the *Quinque libri* held at the Basílica de Santa Maria of Alicante.

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Friar Pau of Alacant

Regarding friar Pau's preaching activity –highly praised by Jacint Alonso Maluenda in the prologue to Pau d'Alacant's other known work which we will analyze shortly-, we have found a peculiar reference to some complaints by the inhabitants of the San Gil neighborhood in Seville in 1642. They even addressed a *carta-memorial* to the Carmelite Friar Melchor de San Bartolomé (who substituted him as a preacher there), where they informed him (according to a contemporary scholar) that his predecessor was

fray Pablo de Alicante, uno más de los muchos oradores sagrados que se granjearon la enemiga del auditorio por increpar como públicos pecadores a algunos de sus oyentes. Pero los de San Gil, además de escandalizarse por los excesos de la desatada lengua del capuchino, entraron en una materia más singular, pues calificaron de groseros y deslucidos los modos con los que fray Pablo había querido llamar su atención. (Bouza, 2008: 48).

Friar Pablo de Alicante, one of the many sacred preachers who incited the audience's enmity because he called some of them public sinners. But the inhabitants of St Gil, in addition to being scandalized by the excesses of the Capuchin's mouth, complained about something more in particular, for they thought rude and vulgar the way in which the friar wanted to capture their attention. (Bouza, 2008: 48).

In all likelihood, the populist demeanor we can assume the Capuchin friar displayed (because of the above comparison with St Vincent Ferrer) was not appreciated by his Sevillian fold, for they said that he preached “como lo pudo hacer el más grosero: apercibió para este sermón muchos días antes y que todos trageren pañuelos (para enjugar las lágrimas)” (like the coarsest preacher could have done it: he warned them about this sermon many days in advance and told them to bring handkerchieves to wipe their tears with them); and they made a point of remarking that –we quote Bouza (2008: 48)-: “he had been so coarse that his advice seemed to them a caress they could do without”. In sum, it seems that they found him very “tosco y banal” (coarse and trivial). Bouza concludes that the “caresses were nothing but not very elaborated inventions, or to use the terms that apply to missionary work, poor and badly prepared devices” (Bouza 2008: 49). As we will see, his friend Maluenda does not share the same opinion.

Finally, we have also unearthed some new information: he was reprimanded by the Inquisition in 1662 for some *statements (proposiciones)* he made in the city of Alicante –that is, he had defended some opinions considered unorthodox by the church. He was judged by the Inquisition Court of Murcia and, considering his final sentence, we can conclude that they were not deemed very important (Blázquez, 1987: 86). Needless to say, this did not prevent the publication eight years later of his *El buen amigo en la muerte*, in Valencia, by Benet Macé.

Be that as it may, before that date Pau d'Alacant had published another text about which we are the first to provide any information: *Breve carta que el padre fray Pablo de Alicante, predicador capuchino, escribe de lo sucedido en la peste de Valencia*, printed by Silvestre Esparsa in Valencia in 1648. This work was addressed to the General Minister of the Capuchins, Friar Innocenci de Caltagirone –the Sicilian Innocenzo da Caltagirone-, who was residing in Spain at the time. Born Giuseppe Marcinò in Caltagirone (Sicily) in 1589, he was appointed General Minister in 1643 after having served in different positions within the Order. He traveled extensively throughout Europe visiting Capuchin convents and was in the Crown of Aragon since July of 1648. He died in 1655 and was later declared Blessed by the Pope, among other reasons for encouraging piety within the Capuchin Order and for developing new techniques in nursing and in the service to others (*Dizionario, s.v.*).

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