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From Richard Owen in Rome

THE Pope has endorsed the cult of a 17th-century "flying monk", declaring St Joseph of Copertino to be "a model for our times". In a message marking the 400th anniversary of the birth of St Joseph, the Pope said that the Franciscan friar, who was said to amaze congregations by levitating and flying through the air, was spiritually close to our times. He is the patron saint of aviators and students.

The son of a carpenter, St Joseph was born in 1603, allegedly in a stable, at Copertino near Lecce, and was ordained in 1628 despite being so illiterate and simple-minded, according to contemporaries, that he walked around with his mouth open all the time, earning him the nickname "the Gaper".

His reputation for flying brought Vatican disapproval and he was forbidden to say Mass. But he found refuge in monasteries and churches in Naples, Assisi, Pesaro and Fossombrone and became famous for his "flights".

Witnesses record that after falling into an ecstatic trance, St Joseph would utter a loud cry and soar into the air, sometimes flying down the nave and sometimes flying out of the church and across the hills for several miles.

He was put on trial by the Inquisition, but when he flew over the heads of his inquisitors, the judges referred the case directly to the Pope, Urban VIII. The Pope dropped the case after apparently witnessing an "ecstatic flight". Numerous important people, including Frederick, Duke of Brunswick, and Prince Casimir of Poland testified to having seen the flights.

After his death in 1663 at Osimo, near Lecce, he became the object of a popular cult. He was beatified in 1753 and canonised in 1767.

Father Giulio Berrettoni, curator of St Joseph's sanctuary at Osimo, called him one of the great enigmas of all time. He said the lesson for the modern world was "that we, too, must fly towards Heaven".

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