

JOHN PAUL I

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

Albino Luciani, was elected to the Apostolic See on the 26 August 1978 taking the name of JohnPaul I. He was born on the 17 October 1912 at Forno di Canale, today Canale d'Agordo (Belluno), to Giovanni Luciani and Bortola Tancon. The eldest of four children he was baptised on the day of his birth. Having received from his mother the first teachings in the Christian doctrine, on the 26 September 1919 he was confirmed by Bishop Giosue Cattarossi at the Pieve di San Giovanni Battista. Successively his parish priest Don Filippo Carli played a fundamental role in his early cultural and religious formation. It was he who in the summer of 1923 privately prepared Albino (who'd just finished his fourth year at elementary school) for the Minor Seminary at Feltre. The choice of this vocation, matured at an early age under the guidance of his mentor Don Carli, is to be set into a significant and vibrant context both at a cultural and ecclesial dimension. In fact the ancient Pieve di Canale d'Agordo in the Biois Valley with its extensive library, was located, until the First World War at a geographical crossroads and consequently open to enriching cultural exchanges. So lent itself down the centuries as a place of reference for the surrounding population. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the local clergy had contributed in a diligent, enlightened and creative way to the promotion of literacy, unusual at that time in Italy. Added to this it encouraged forms of corporatism that marked a first at a national level as exemplified by Don Antonio della Lucia, a pioneer of social corporatism at Canale d'Agordo. In fact despite the troubled times the towns of the valley developed a significant cultural and ecclesial vitality promoted and sustained mainly by its parish priests. A reality certainly highlighted by the fact that at the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council - a unique case worldwide - this little mountain parish counted well three of its sons among the Council Fathers.

On the 17 October 1923 Albino Luciani began his studies at the Minor Seminary of Feltre. Five years on, in 1928, he entered the Gregorian Seminary of Belluno to study philosophy and theology. On the 10 February 1935, having completed his theological formation in which he had distinguished himself for moral qualities, intellectual capacity and high academic achievement, he was ordained a deacon. On the 7 July of that same year he was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Cattarossi in the church of 'San Pietro Apostolo', Belluno, having previously received the dispensation *super defectum aetatis* since he had not yet reached the canonical age to become a priest. On the 8 July 1935, the day after celebrating his first mass in his hometown, he was appointed cooperator vicar of Canale d'Agordo, then coadjutor to Monsignor Luigi Cappello at Agordo. However his service at the parish did not last long.

In October 1937 when he had just turned twenty five he was called to Belluno to take up the position of vice rector at the Gregorian Seminary as well as that of professor of secondary school and of theology. From 1937 to 1945 he taught religion, history, philosophy and history of art at secondary school. He was also professor of dogmatic theology and canon law until 1958. During his time in the diocese of Belluno when needed he also taught patristics, liturgy, sacred art, locution, catechetics, pastoral and administration. Added to this intense didactic and educational activity he also found time to employ his journalist skills, regularly writing for the diocesan weekly «L'Amico del Popolo», sometimes tackling major issues tied to the Italian political scene. He was also at the heart of cultural formation of a number of youth groups. In a special way he promoted the mass media's interest from a critical point of view as well as oversee the 'cineforum' of his town.

In 1941, having obtained exemption from obligatory attendance by the Holy See, he enrolled at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. In July 1942 he graduated gaining a license in theology with a thesis on the 'Ordalie', earning 'magna cum laude'. In 1947 he obtained his doctorate in theology at this same university with a dissertation by the title of *The origin of the human soul according to Antonio Rosmini*. Until 1947 he turned his hand to being vice rector, seminary professor, scholar, preacher, journalist and cultural animator. But it wasn't just his studies, his didactic commitment and his responsibilities as a pedagogue in the educational field to characterise the years of the future John Paul I in Belluno. To all of these responsibilities he added assignments at a pastoral and governance level.

In November 1947 the new Bishop of Belluno and Feltre, Girolamo Bortignon named him vice chancellor of the bishopric and chose him as organiser and secretary of the diocesan Synod scheduled for the 28-30 October of that same year. A year later the Bishop entrusted him with the role of pro-vicar and the responsibility as diocesan assistant of the Catholic Action women's section. He also made him director of the catechetical department, a position which spurred Luciani to record the substance of his experience in a book by the title of *Catechism in Crumbs*. A publication intended to help with the formation of catechists. Seven editions of this book were published from 1949 to 1965 and years later several posthumous editions. The message therein shines the spotlight on the importance of catechesis. A feature which for Luciani always had pride of place in the pastoral governance of Vittorio Veneto and Venice. In fact while looking ahead to the 1977 Synod of bishops he gave a wide-ranging speech centred around this theme. In 1951 at the request of

Bortignon, by then Bishop of Padua, he took part in the third provincial council of the Veneto region. Bortignon's successor, Monsignor Gioacchino Muccin, confirmed all Luciani's assignments, promoted him on the 8 February 1954 to the role of vicar general of the diocese and in 1956 named him canon of the cathedral. Bishops Bortignon and Muccin who had chosen him as a close collaborator in the governance of the diocese were to sustain him as he trod the path towards becoming a bishop.

On the 15 December 1958, during John XXIII's first Consistory, it was announced that he would be ordained Bishop of Vittorio Veneto. On the following 27 December he received his episcopal ordination in St Peter's Basilica and on the 11 January 1959 took possession of this diocese in the Veneto region. The years spent there (1959-1969) represent a fundamental milestone in the formation of Albino Luciani.

As bishop he chose the episcopal motto *Humilitas*, borrowed from St Charles Borromeo, and had it placed on his coat of arms together with three stars, symbolic of faith, hope and charity.

Symbols indicative of the direction the exercise of his papal ministry would take. Equally intense was the mission he undertook at a spiritual, charitable and cultural level. And having a particular inclination for dialogue and being a good listener he gave priority right away to pastoral visits and to direct contact with the faithful, manifesting great sensitivity towards social problems. In his episcopal service, he chose St. Francis Sales as a model, encouraging an active participation of lay people in the life of the Church. He was also attentive to clerical life, promoted greater collaboration among priests and was dedicated to the pastoral care of vocations and to the formation of young people.

In the course of his episcopate Bishop Luciani participated in all four sessions of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962-1965). While he never spoke at the working sessions of the Council, he deposited a written paper in favour of episcopal collegiality and outside Council doors presented the Italian bishops with Chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* (on the figure of Mary in the Church) expressing a positive assessment. In the years that followed he encouraged the application of Council teachings highlighting how they should favour change in the structures of the Church, but above all a reform in the inner attitude of Catholics. He never tired of promoting the teachings and orientation of the Council in his diocese both in speech and in writing. The Council experience also had an important effect on pastoral care sparked by the encounters had with bishops from the developing world. A trend that encouraged an interest for collaboration between Churches. So much so that as the diocese became involved in missionary ministry, Bishop Luciani sent some of his priests to Brazil and Burundi and in 1966 went on a pastoral visit to Burundi himself. Meanwhile within the Episcopal Conference of Triveneto he stepped up his involvement in the delicate work entrusted to him: the writing of theological sections of documents and the preparation of collegial documents. In 1967 the Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Urbani, entrusted him, as representative of the episcopates of the regions of 'Veneto' and 'Lombardy', with the drawing up of a report for Paul VI on birth control.

On the 15 December 1969 Bishop Luciani began a new chapter in life when Paul VI named him Patriarch of Venice and on the 8 February 1970 he took possession of his diocese. During those years on many an occasion Paul VI expressed considerable respect and consideration towards him. In fact in 1971 'Papa Montini' appointed him member of the Synod of bishops, convoked to discuss issues pertaining to the ministry of the priesthood and of justice in the world. In a brief speech at this Synod, Luciani suggested that Catholics adopt: «a mindset that might fly high in terms of solidarity imbued by the spirit of *Populorum Progressio*». And also that wealthier dioceses embrace self-taxation: «not to be regarded as alms-giving but as something that was owing...as part compensation for the injustices that our consumer society is constantly inflicting on the developing world, and to make reparation for the social sins that should not be glossed over» (*Opera omnia*, V, p. 281).

On the 16 September 1972 while on a pastoral visit to Venice Paul VI placed his stole around Patriarch Luciani's shoulders almost as if to anticipate his elevation to the cardinalate. In fact a few months later on the 5 March 1973 he received the red hat. In Venice, Luciani succeeded Patriarch Giovanni Urbani at a time of growing social and ecclesial tensions. While at this patriarchal see he adopted the work schedule and sedate life style he had been accustomed to in Vittorio Veneto. As Patriarch he did not fail to give his support to the workers of Marghera, who often manifested unrest. In the face of the severe climate of crisis between the entrepreneurs and trade unions of 'Porto Marghera' he personally attempted to act as negotiator between the two parties in an effort to avoid or anyhow procrastinate the resorting to a policy of redundancy. He met with factory workers, accomplishing his pastoral duty and attempting to better understand the issues affecting them; sometimes even acting in personal solidarity. He was keen to give priority to the pastoral care of work so as to highlight the importance civil industrialisation had taken in society and as Church support workers in their autonomous search for solutions to their various problems.

During those years he travelled abroad on various occasions: to Switzerland (June 1971 to meet with the emigrants of Mariastein), to Germany (May 1975 to take part in 'The day of the Italian worker abroad', celebrated at Magonza) and to Santa Maria of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil (November 1975) where he was awarded a degree *Honoris Causa*.

Also of consequence was his written work, characterised by the conscious choice of a direct and colloquial style. He frequently published articles regarding actuality and ecclesial issues in various newspapers such as «Il Gazzettino», «L'Osservatore Romano» and «Messaggero di Sant'Antonio». He also promoted the publication of a new weekly diocesan newspaper, «Gente Veneta», which within financial parameters of the patriarchate aimed at developing a modern criteria of publication. He showed a similar interest in cinema and in a project regarding the setting up of a private television station that might be Catholic inspired and entirely run, in his mind, by lay people. In 1976 his literary work *Illustrissimi*, an original collection of forty imaginary letters to major authors or characters of the past focusing on themes of actuality, went to print. It was to be the only publication he had reprinted in the course of his pontificate.

Luciani's role in the permanent Council of the Italian Bishop's Conference was stepped up in 1972 when his fellow bishops elected him vice president of this body, a position he held until June 1975. In 1974 he took part in the Synod of bishops convoked by Paul VI to focus in a special way on the issue of evangelisation in the modern world. In 1977 he was elected once again as one of the representatives of this bishop's body for the fourth Synod. A Synod which focused this time on the issue of catechesis and during which he embraced the opportunity to deliver a major speech, given his familiarity in this particular field of interest.

In the difficult years that followed fraught with post conciliar disputes and drifts the bishop from Belluno felt he should firmly intervene to correct doctrinal errors being spread by some theologians and professors in seminaries. He took a clear stand on various aspects of diocesan life including the work agenda of the presbyterial council, liturgical practice, formation of clerics and the experience of newly ordained priests in pastoral work. In 1974 when the issue of the referendum regarding divorce came up he took a firm stand against the position the diocesan Catholic Action had adopted on the matter. Manifesting once again his strict adherence to the episcopal communion and fidelity to the Pope. His interventions at a national level were viewed as marked by a courageous sense of responsibility and in keeping with Church tradition. Within the local Church he distinguished himself once again for this sense of responsibility as well as prudence and within the universal Church for a *sensus Ecclesiae*, which did not escape his future electors.

The days after the death of Paul VI, on the 6 August 1978, Patriarch Luciani left for Rome. On the 25 August he went into Conclave. The Conclave to elect the successor of Paul VI was to be the first since the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The first in which cardinals over eighty years of age were excluded. And the first in which the new norms promulgated by Paul VI in 1975 were applied. Among these was the rule that during the 'sede vacante' the curial government should automatically resign to enable the newly elected pope to then choose his own collaborators. It was also the first Conclave to take place under the media spotlight.

On the 26 August 1978 Albino Luciani was elected to the See of Peter during a Conclave that lasted a mere twenty six hours. There was an almost unanimous consent, one which had the flavour of an «acclamation», «a regal three thirds» as Belgian Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens put it. His election was significant of the will to continue the implementation of conciliar teachings. The cardinals had opted for virtue inherent to pastoral ministry. They felt it unnecessary to make particular evaluations or compromises when it came to his name. For the first time in two thousand years in the history of the Catholic Church the newly elected pope chose a double-barrelled name: John Paul. He explained how it was a choice in deference to his predecessors to the See of Peter, John and Paul, bearing in mind the intention to highlight the continuity with these two pillars of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. On the 27 August he delivered his first *Urbi et Orbi* radio message as well as recite his first Angelus in St Peter's Square. When he addressed the faithful he broke with tradition by dropping the plural *maiestatis*, or 'royal we' and declared he wished to take St Gregory the Great as model both in his capacity as guide and as pastor. In his *Urbi et Orbi* message he also disclosed the six 'volumus', a six point outline of his pontificate relating to his thoughts on the way the Church should proceed. A programme of the pontificate he further elaborated during his first discourses placing an emphasis on the necessity to implement the teachings of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

Luciani's pontificate may have been brief but he had time enough to shine the spotlight on the priorities he intended to implement as pontiff, among these the teachings of the Council: the return to Gospel sources and renewed missionary zeal, episcopal collegiality, service in ecclesial poverty, dialogue with the contemporary world, promotion of Christian unity, inter-religious dialogue, the search for peace. Each one of these priorities marked the words and gestures of his thirty four day pontificate, the fruit of hard work over the years rooted in a magisterium characterised by a radical theological choice expressed in a simple, conversational and accessible language. A language inspired by the *sermo humilis*, the humble speech consolidated by St Augustine which encompasses the world and its people and is comprehensible and in dialogue with everyone so the message of salvation might reach every single person. A

magisterium and a style exemplified in his four general audiences during which he reiterated the relevance and beauty of Christian life founded on the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. But also during his first audience on the 6 September when he spoke instead on the virtue of humility. For the record his final audience on the 27 September focused on charity.

Late in the evening of 28 September after a mere thirty four day pontificate, while at work in his apartment, John Paul I suddenly died of an acute heart attack of the myocardium. On the 4 October, liturgical feast of Saint Francis, he was buried in the Vatican grottoes.

[By Stefania Falasca]