

John Paul I - Biografia ex documentis

Preface by Cardinal Beniamino Stella ***Postulator of the Cause of Canonisation of John Paul I***

This *Biography* is the result of a decade of meticulous research, supervised by doctor Stefania Falasca, vice postulator of the Cause of canonisation of Albino Luciani - John Paul I. It traces in a scientific manner his entire biographical history.

It refers to the IV volume of the *Positio super vita, virtutibus et fama sanctitatis* of this Pope from Belluno, a volume of over a thousand pages, which contains the *biographia ex documentis* and the general bibliography. The *Positio* is a voluminous dossier, divided in five volumes, of a total of over three thousand six hundred pages, that encompasses the overall scientific research of documents and of processing carried out according to an historical critical work method. It therefore represents the *corpus* of documentary and testimonial evidence established to prove the heroicity, the virtue and the reputation of holiness of the candidate to be raised to the honour of the altars. On the 17 October 2016 the *Positio* was presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. This meant that the exhaustive scientific and editorial work had been completed and the conclusive act of judgement on the part of the judicial bodies of the Congregation initiated. Bodies which according to the procedure are called to express their vote within two sessions of examinations: the first by the Congress of theological advisors and the second by the ordinary Congress made up of cardinals and bishops. The Congress of theologians expressed an unanimous positive vote on 1 June 2017 and the ordinary Session of cardinals and bishops followed suit on the 7 November of that same year. On the 8 November 2017 the Cause concluded with a decree promulgated by Pope Francis in which he recognised the heroic virtues of John Paul I [«...] who was therefore elevated to the devotion and imitation of his brothers and sisters»¹.

In 2008, Giorgio Cracco, an historian from Veneto, remarked during a conference, that he felt that to dedicate himself to a figure such as Albino Luciani, might provide him with an extraordinary opportunity. It appears, he stressed, that until the present: «nobody has really wished to speak about him ('really' intended in purely rigorous scientific terms, that's to say exclusively on the basis of written texts and documents)»², highlighting how little or almost no attention had been paid at an historiographical level to John Paul I, a disregard which might have been directed towards a figure considered anything but epoch-making.

In fact it has to be said that during the eighties and nineties of the last century historiography had paid little attention to the figure, work and personality of Albino Luciani. And while this trend was inverted at the beginning of the XXI century, in particular during the past ten years, there still exist few significant contributions at an historiographical level.

I therefore believe it is important to stress here how much the Cause of canonisation of John Paul I, which gave access to documentary sources - the only ones that can provide in-depth analysis and knowledge of Luciani in scientific terms - has contributed in this respect. How it finally allowed full opportunity to do this.

The *Biografia ex documentis* that is now to be reprinted by the 'Libreria Editrice Vaticana' is a homogeneous work divided in twelve chapters, each of which is accompanied by the publication of

¹ Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, *The Causes of the saints. Handbook for the Studium*, Vatican City 2014, 342.

² *Albino Luciani from Veneto to the world. Acts from a conference of studies on the XXX anniversary of the death of John Paul I* (Canale d'Agordo, Vicenza, Venezia, 24-26 September 2008), by G.VIAN, Viella, 2010, 7.

pertinent documents. The first eight, relating to the years Luciani spent in Belluno and Vittorio Veneto were drawn up by Don Davide Fiocco from Canale d'Agordo, doctor in theology and professor of patrology. The two following chapters, relating to the years of his ministry in Venice, were compiled by Professor Mauro Velati, doctor in research of religious history. The last two chapters which relate to his pontificate and death were drafted by Stefania Falasca who earned a doctorate in 'Italianistica' which focused on the writings of Luciani and of Davide Fiocco.

The biographical account is divided into four parts.

The first part is dedicated to the years Luciani spent in Belluno, to his family, his birth, and early years (1912 - 1923), to the years of preparation for the priesthood while he was at the seminary (1923 - 1935), to his first apostolic ministry in Agordino (July 1935 - September 1937), to the years of service as vice rector at the Seminary in Belluno (1937 -1947) and finally the years spent dealing with various assignments of responsibility in the diocese (1947 - 1958).

The second part, in three chapters, focuses on the years of his episcopate at Vittorio Veneto (1959 - 1969). What emerges here are the characteristics of his pastoral orientation, how he related to social and religious issues and in a special way his active participation in the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

The years of his episcopate in Venice (1970 - 1978) are dealt with in the third part. This is divided in two chapters with a special focus on his pastoral visits, the question of the ACLI, (the Christian association of Italian workers) and the issues tied to the referendum on divorce.

The fourth part which focuses on the pontificate and death of John Paul I has only two chapters. The last chapter, centred around his death, is a serene and balanced account compiled on the basis of documentation and testimonies that have been critically evaluated with the intent of shedding light on the historical truth. The investigation which aimed to retrace the final hours of the Pontiff on the basis of acquired documentation and of available oral testimonies was carried out according to the critical historical criteria adopted, by means of documentary evidence and the confrontation of precise and punctual testimonial proof. Certainly a process which sheds full light on the epilogue of the life of Pope Luciani. And one which proves how important and indispensable the in-depth confrontation of sources is, in order to fully reestablish with precision the circumstances and the causes of a death. This section has recently been highlighted in Stefania Falasca's book *Papa Luciani, Chronicle of a death*, Milan 2017, which has now been reprinted by the 'Libreria Editrice Vaticana' for the series dedicated to John Paul I.

This biography concludes with an entire list of the relevant archival sources consulted and with a great wealth of bibliographical notes, organised according to official acts and documents, edited written work, studies regarding his person and his activities. Considerable effort has also been placed in the cataloguing of all the writings and publications signed or attributed to Albino Luciani. This list is published here for the first time.

The reader should therefore consider the specificity of this type of biography in which three types of research merge.

First of all an *archival investigation 'omnino plena'* which includes the consultation of roughly seventy archives in thirty different localities and cities, separately listed in the final bibliography. The archives consulted were mainly those relating to the venues where Albino Luciani lived and worked but also archives of institutions and private foundations with which he had been in contact.

Part of the archival investigation took place during the diocesan phase of the Cause entrusted to the historical diocesan Commission made up of two archivists: Monsignor Ausilio da Rif and doctor Loris Serafini. Another part was undertaken during the Roman phase. In fact before it got underway, on the 9 November 2007 while examining the acts presented by the diocese to be approved, the ordinary Congress of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints noted that the documentation received

contained various shortcomings, in a special way when related to both the Historical Archive of the Patriarchate of Venice and the Archive of the Episcopal Conference of Triveneto. So in an effort to obtain the missing documentation, the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints requested further investigation. On the 25 March 2008, the Bishop of Belluno-Feltre, Giuseppe Andrich, set up the tribunal for supplementary diocesan Inquiry, entrusting it to doctor Stefania Falasca. And it was only on the 13 June 2008, after this ulterior archival documentation had been submitted and the formal validity of the acts of the diocesan Inquiry recognised by Decree, that the Roman phase of the process of canonisation could begin. The first step in this phase entailed doing the necessary research to gather the complete acquisition of the papers pertaining to the Servant of God, the historical scientific study, the examination of all the documentary and testimonial sources with relative critical evaluation and finally the drawing up and elaboration of the *Positio*. On the 27 June, Father Cristoforo Bove was appointed relator of the Cause, while the drawing up of the *Positio* was entrusted to doctor Stefania Falasca who as from 2012 was assisted by professor Don Davide Fiocco. At the death of Father Bove, the Cause was assigned to Father Vincenzo Criscuolo, relator General of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, who picked up on the work already undertaken, requesting further appropriate details and necessary acquisitions concerning both the part dedicated to documentation and to that of testimonies.

Secondly the biography also takes into account *the testimonial sources* acquired in the course of over two hundred procedural sessions - which took place in Belluno, Vittorio Veneto, Venice and Rome - during which a hundred and sixty seven witnesses were heard. Added to these were those of the Roman phase of the process. The delay in the opening of the Cause had further compromised the acquisition of precious eye-witness accounts and had somewhat resulted in the dispersion of documentary material for which accurate research was required. Between 2008 and 2015 submitted to the acts were out-of-court depositions of twenty one witnesses, with particular reference to the pontificate and death of John Paul I. Among these witnesses were Renato Buzzonetti, the doctor who certified the pope's death and Sister Margherita Marin, the only surviving member of the team of nuns of 'Maria Bambina' in the papal apartment, to first discover his death. Absolutely remarkable is the testimony of Benedict XVI which took place on the 26 June 2015. It is considered *unicum* in as much it represents the first time one pope gives a *de visu* testimony on another pope, the only such case in the history of causes of canonisation.

Given some of those who gave evidence are still living and because they have testified for a canonical trial - and not in view of depositions for publication - the authors decided to quote the testimonies only with reference to the procedural acts, the volume II of the *Positio*. The identity of these witnesses remains subject to bonds of confidentiality therefore in the majority of cases their names are omitted.

Thirdly this biography refers to the most qualified existing *bibliography*, particularly in those passages where research required contextualisation and more in-depth study of the historical and social background pertaining to various episodes in the life and work of John Paul I.

While entrusting this study to those mindful of the memory of Pope Luciani, I cannot conceal my own veneration for this man of God to whom I was close to in the late fifties in as much as he was my diocesan bishop. I was at secondary school at the time and my acquaintance with Luciani was that of a young student who met his bishop during celebrations in the seminary and at the cathedral. I recall his ability to communicate and effectively convey the doctrine to seminarians, always using examples drawn from every day life but with the know how of a cultured person well grounded in classical and academic studies.

I left the diocese to go to Rome in 1960 and for the next six years I only met him occasionally. However when I returned to Vittorio Veneto he always received me at the bishop's castle with paternal affection and simplicity. His human touch, his cordiality and warmth made you feel good, something that came across in our face to face conversations.

I later attended the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy in Rome, in fact it was he who asked me to

undertake diplomatic studies. I remember as if it were yesterday when and how he asked me to do so. It was during the final session of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council: he called me to the Pontifical Minor Seminary in Rome where he was staying at the time, to tell me that he was relaying a request for me to enter the Academy and that he'd anyhow already accepted for me. So according to the *modus procedendi* of the times, he addressed me without so much as a preamble saying: «You agree don't you?». I then met him again during the summer holidays going round to greet him and fill him in on my life as a priest and on my studies.

The next time we met was in the early seventies when I went to visit him in Venice. Unfortunately I was not able to meet him as Pope in August - September 1978, as at the time I was *charge d'affaires* at the nunciature in Malta. At any rate, Luciani has always been for me 'my bishop' and I wish to remember him as such.

By leafing through this biography what clearly comes to life is the figure of a man assiduous and deeply prayerful, with a capacity to listen attentively to others, give human and spiritual support to fellow priests and to the people of God and in a special way to the poor, the humble and the sick. Certainly he was a scholarly master of faith and engaging communicator of the 'Word of God' and as Benedict XVI defined him, an «unparalleled catechist». These are the features pertaining to him I consider exemplary. My mother often quoted Monsignor Luciani as to how priests should not have bank accounts or cheque books. I believe she heard him say so during one of the periodical meetings with parents in the seminary. He took part in the meetings of the priests of his diocese in Vittorio Veneto so he could place his finger on the pulse of their diocesan life and ministry. He was also personally familiar with his priests, visited them in their rectories when they were sick or elderly and otherwise received them at the bishop's castle during entire mornings showing a capacity to be patient and persuasive. He wanted his priests to have both training and formation.

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council had greatly raised the bar of expectancy and demands of the Christian people. This meant that areas requesting attention and pastoral care had greatly increased. Furthermore in the aftermath of this momentous historical event he also travelled a little abroad, including to Africa and America above all to pay a visit to the priests from his Vittorio Veneto diocese living out their service as missionaries in Burundi and Brazil. But also closer to home to the emigrants across the Alps. The Pope had in fact appealed to Bishops that they might send the priests of their diocese to Africa and Latin America and Luciani took up this mission of service. He was a patient man, a pastor who took the time to convince his interlocutor, gentle but firm in taking important decisions even when these cost him inner suffering. Above all when it came to solving two major crisis situations in the diocese of Vittorio Veneto, an economic one provoked by financial bankruptcy, due to bad administration on the part of the diocesan bursar's office and that of the painful conflict with the Montaner community. But it was mostly only when he reached Venice that the post-conciliar malaise hit him. His episcopal duties had by then already expanded and increased both in terms of personal representation with the investiture as Cardinal Patriarch of Venice and of institutional responsibilities as vice - president of the Italian Bishop's Conference. However he always wanted to remain a priest and bishop faithful to his roots, amidst his people and priests. I occasionally remarked to Pope Francis how Monsignor Luciani - perhaps in the same way as himself when he was Bishop of Buenos Aires - when he was in Rome the 'sanpietrini' (the hand made rough grey stones of St Peter's square) burnt his feet... In fact as soon as he'd accomplished his institutional duties at the Curia or at the CEI (Italian Bishop's Conference) he hurried back home to serve his people as the good pastor that he was.

I believe in the sanctity of John Paul I's Christian life, that of a man who lived in humble daily dedication to the Church and the neighbour in need, inspired by the theological virtues, practised with inner fervour. A life in which the cross and sacrifice, and sometimes humiliation contributed to bringing the disciple of Jesus closer to Our Lord.

My hope is that this publication might restore his memory to those who cherish him today and that it might serve as a reference and point of departure to open up new opportunities of study relevant to his work.

These pages are an attempt to restore the full picture of a human, religious and cultural journey, allowing the treasures of scholarly dignity, that of a priest, Bishop, Patriarch and Successor of Peter to emerge. As well as those of his biblical, patristic, dogmatic, moral, historical humanistic culture, of the apostle of the Council that he embodied *naturaliter et simpliciter*, united in *nova et vetera* successful and ingenious synthesis. In the course of his brief pontificate the priorities of this Pontiff who guided the Church by pointing it in the direction indicated by the Council emerged. Among these are: the return to Gospel sources and renewed missionary service, collegiality, service in ecclesial poverty, dialogue with the contemporary world, research for unity with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, inter-religious dialogue, the quest for peace.

Pope John Paul I was and remains a point of reference in the history of the universal Church, whose importance - as John Paul II observed - is inversely proportional to the length of his brief pontificate: «Magis ostentus quam datus».