

AN UNEXPECTED POPE

Blessed Luciani: A Prophetic Glance at Today's Man

«As soon I was appointed as your bishop, I thought that the Lord was also implementing an old system of his with me: to write certain things not on bronze or marble, but even on dust, so that, if the writing remains, not disarranged or dispersed by the wind, it will be clear that the credit is entirely and solely God's. I am the dust; [...]; if any good comes from this writing, it is clear from now on that it will all be thanks to the grace and mercy of the Lord». (Complete Works, vol. 2, p. 11)

Pope John Paul I considered himself as being like the dust and as such he exercised his mission in the Church and in the world first as bishop and then as pope.

As Pope Francis rightly recalled: **«He embodied the poverty of the disciple, which is not only detaching oneself from material goods, but above all overcoming the temptation to put oneself first and seek one's own glory. On the contrary, following the example of Jesus, he was a gentle and humble shepherd».**

Thus Luciani said: **«The Lord has strongly recommended: be humble. Even if you have done great things, say: we are useless servants».** (Complete Works, vol. 9, p. 50)

In 1958, when John XXIII entrusted him with the bishopric of Vittorio Veneto, he chose the word "HUMILITAS" (HUMILITY) as his episcopal motto, which he kept in his coat of arms after being created cardinal and which also marked his very short pontificate.

The papacy of John Paul I lasted only thirty-four days and yet left an indelible mark on the Church, communicating to the contemporary world in a brilliant and simple way the relevance of the Christian message as an answer to human need.

John Paul I in his RADIO MESSAGE "URBI ET ORBI" proclaimed on 27 August 1978, the day after his election, documented the guidelines of his pontificate.

This program, which has become known as "THE 6 NEEDS", is the line that traces the path of this exhibition, providing the elements for the rediscovery of this extraordinary figure of a man who was able to open himself to the great changes in the world, but at the same time remain faithful to the heritage of faith and the doctrine of Christian discipline. (cf. Card. P. Parolin interview on the Magisterium of John Paul I, 23/05/2023)

Through the selected materials we wish to offer the possibility of an encounter with "LUCIANI THE MAN" and to forcefully bring to light his thoughts and work.

Luciani's legacy, **in particular his having lived and borne witness to the virtues**, converges quite naturally in the theme of the Jubilee 2025, "PILGRIMS OF HOPE".

The virtue of hope, which he loved to define with Dante's words, **«a certain expectation / of future glory, which produces / divine grace and previous merit»** (Paradiso XXV, 67-69): pilgrims animated by the certainty of being awaited by Heaven, which we will reach through the grace of God and through the merits we will acquire here on earth.

For this reason, with his sharp and prophetic gaze, Albino Luciani speaks to today's world as a true master from the depths of time.

CHRONOLOGICAL BIOGRAPHY

1912	October 17: Albino Luciani born at Forno di Canale.
1923	In October he enters the minor seminary of Feltre for his secondary school studies.
1928	In October he enters the Gregorian Seminary of Belluno, for high school and theological studies.
1935	July 7: he is ordained a priest in the church of San Pietro in Belluno by Bishop Giosuè Cattarossi.
1937	In July, by order of the new rector, Monsignor Angelo Santin, he is appointed vice-rector of the Gregorian Seminary of Belluno.
1947-50	He officially obtains his doctorate in theology.
1949	In December, he publishes the booklet <i>Catechetica in briciole (Catechesis in Small Sections)</i> .
1954	February 6: he is appointed vicar general of the Diocese of Belluno.
1958	December 15: Luciani is elected bishop of Vittorio Veneto.
1969	December 15: Luciani is appointed Patriarch of Venice.
1973	January 18: Paul VI creates him cardinal.
1976	In January he publishes the collection of imaginary epistles <i>Illustrissimi (Most Illustrious)</i> .
1978	August 6: Paul VI dies.
1978	August 26: John Paul I is elected Pope.
1978	September 28: he dies.
1978	September 30: Transfer of the body to the Vatican Basilica.
1978	October 4: Funeral celebration, burial beneath the Vatican.
2003	November 23: Introduction of the Cause for Canonization.
2006	November 10: Closure of the diocesan phase of the Cause.
2017	November 8: he is declared Venerable.
2022	September 4: Beatification.

Section 1 – Election as Pope

“Nuntio vobis gaudium magnum” - “I bring you good news of great joy”

The conclave meeting to elect Pope Paul VI's successor was the first since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. At the end of a very rapid conclave, the faithful gathered in St. Peter's Square heard Cardinal Protodeacon Pericle Felici announce the election to the papal throne of Cardinal Albino Luciani, Patriarch of Venice, the 263rd successor of Peter.

The name chosen by the newly elected pontiff is that of John Paul I: a sign of continuity with the two previous papacies as well as a tribute to the one who had consecrated him bishop, John XXIII, and to the one who had wanted him to become a cardinal, Paul VI.

John Paul I was the first pontiff to give himself a **composite name** in the history of the Church.

John Paul I's communication style is among the most innovative elements of his short pontificate.

«Luciani communicated in a direct, simple and clear way with all the men and women of the time, often using episodes of his own life as starting points to develop certain teachings. He demonstrated a human sensitivity capable of embracing the concerns and fragility of contemporary man and a particular attention towards human suffering and situations of hardship». (The Magisterium of John Paul I, edited by the John Paul I Vatican Foundation, p. 133, Libreria Ed. Vaticana)

No pope before him had presented himself speaking in the first person, with that: ***«Yesterday morning I went tranquilly to the Sistine Chapel to vote»***, without using the second person plural of majesty, and it was a desire to be close to others, to those brothers he had been called to “serve”, as he said immediately afterwards: it is the evangelical choice par excellence.

On the same Sunday, in the Sistine Chapel, with his radio message “*Urbi et Orbi*”, he clearly outlined the course of his pontificate.

«Called by the mysterious and paternal goodness of God to the grave responsibility of the supreme pontificate, we send you our greetings; and we immediately extend them to all the men of the world, who are listening to us at this moment, and in whom, according to the teachings of the Gospel, we wish to see only as friends, brothers. To you all, health, peace, mercy, love [...] ». (Complete Works, vol. 9, p. 17)

The expression “friends and brothers” did not fit well with the formal language of the Church of that time; it is an unusual formula.

In a later passage he recalls the apostle Peter sharing the burden of responsibility.:

«Our soul is still crushed by the thought of the tremendous ministry to which we have been chosen: like Peter, we seem to have set foot on treacherous water, and, shaken by the impetuous wind, we have cried out with him to the Lord: Lord, save me (Mt 14,30) ». (Complete Works, vol. 9, p. 17)

The final part of the message is dedicated to the enunciation of the programmatic "6 Needs, where continuity with his predecessors and the clear will to continue the implementation of the Council are expressed in six points.

«As soon as the danger began for me, the two colleagues who were next to me whispered words of courage»

An unexpected pope: the impact on the world

A truly unexpected pope: he himself didn't expect to be elected, nor did public opinion, but Luciani had made himself known and respected within the Church for his doctrinal solidity and conceptual clarity. He experienced the work of the Second Vatican Council intensely, participating with personal contributions, and pondering deeply on its programmatic guidelines and the innovations that would emerge from it. A conclave that lasted little more than a day resulted in the majority of votes converging on him.

Unexpected, for the people gathered in St. Peter's Square and in front of the screens all over the world, is the double name he gave himself, a choice never made before in history: a memorial of those who had preceded him.

The day after his election, those who listened to him saw Luciani as "**the whole man**" and heard the unexpected and, in a certain sense, disruptive language of everyday life with which he addressed them before the Angelus. They heard the pope speak like a member of their own family and express his distress in a simple way; they understood that he himself was surprised by that role: he who, shortly before entering the Conclave, had written to his sister that he was *«in no danger»*.

But now – he tells them – he is there, perhaps an unworthy successor of John XXIII and Paul VI: he is there to serve.

The way he conducts general audiences is unexpected and moving. In them, he fully applies the paradigms he so often recommends for transmitting the Word, for breaking down the most complex concepts, making them understandable, and making a dent in hearts: a language accessible to all, effective examples, spontaneity, a hint of humor, affability, and warmth, which allow one to perceive the joyful hope intrinsic to Christianity, as St. Augustine, whom Luciani so loved and quoted, said.

All these elements have to do with humility, a virtue chosen by Luciani as his guiding light and the theme of his first meeting with the faithful: being aware of being clay, of being earth and dust of the soil, making oneself small and being understood even by the smallest.

It was the exhortation that John XXIII had addressed to him when he had appointed him bishop: *«You have taught theology and other things: but be careful, keep low key, speak simply»*. (*Complete Works*, vol. 8, p. 264). Luciani always knew and wanted to do this.

In this lies his humble greatness: knowing how to make his speech lofty and learned in certain contexts and in other circumstances instead, making it agile and lively to bring the souls of the faithful closer to even the most profound mysteries, presenting their substance with rigour and at the same time with freshness: in this lies the merciful richness of a man truly at the service of the Word of God.

"An unparalleled catechist", as Benedict XVI defined him, "it took only 34 days for Pope Luciani to enter the hearts of the people." On September 10, 1978, with three unexpected and resounding words, he announced God's mercy to everyone, young and old: "God is mother." He loves us despite

everything, and like a mother's, His heart is beside us, in our frailties and our miserable smallness. (*Complete Works*, vol. 9, p. 55).

«Servants, not masters, of the truth»

The defense of the Faith: Paul VI and Luciani

«What do you want to be called?» he was asked fifteen years ago at the end of the conclave. And he said: "I will be called Paolo." Anyone who knew him would have sworn that the choice of name was that. Montini had always been passionate about the writings, the life, and the dynamism of the great apostle of the people».

Thus begins the homily at the funeral liturgy in memory of Paul VI delivered by Albino Luciani, Patriarch of Venice, on 9 August 1978 in the Basilica of St. Mark.

The bond of trust and mutual respect between the bishop of Vittorio Veneto and Paul VI grew during the latter's pontificate, who promoted Luciani to Patriarch of Venice in 1970 and elevated him to the cardinalate on 5 March 1973.

The action performed by Paul VI on the occasion of his apostolic visit to Venice in 1972 remains very memorable: with a prophetic gesture he placed his papal stole on the shoulders of Patriarch Luciani, in St. Mark's Square, in front of all the faithful gathered there.

Luciani appreciated Paul VI and wanted to continue his mission:

«The Pope warns us to avoid two equally erroneous and contradictory excesses: those who, driven by a fever for novelty and change, reject and ignore the Church's past, even though it is valid and on which tradition is founded; and those who, through a misunderstood love of the past, are deaf and hostile to the positive demands of renewal and updating defined by the Council and binding on all Christians». (R. Manzini, *Renewal and Tradition*, in *Osservatore Romano*, 3.9.1966)

The Church has always rejoiced in its two unique treasures: the faith handed down by the apostles, and the poor who are the first to benefit from its wealth, both material and spiritual.

This idea of a Church at the service of humanity and in dialogue with the world, without demolishing the tradition of Christian doctrine and discipline, is a point that unites the two popes in the implementation of the Second Vatican Council, and in particular for John Paul I it will be a fundamental aspect, present in all his gestures both as a priest and as pope.

Dialogue with the world and evangelization are tasks that Paul VI recalls in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* - Proclaiming the Gospel (1975), tasks that John Paul I makes his own in his "volumus" of the radio message "Urbi et Orbi".

«The commitment to proclaim the Gospel to the men of our time, animated by hope, but, equally, often tormented by fear and anguish, is without a doubt a service rendered not only to the Christian community, but also to all humanity. Hence the duty to strengthen the brothers, which We have received from the Lord with the office of Successor of Peter [Luke 22:32], and which is for Us a "daily obsession». (Complete Works, vol. 9, p. 19)

«This is what flows from the faith at the heart of Tradition: "the faith of the apostles to be preserved, the Christian life to be lived in an exemplary manner, the support of the poor, teaching the people and active work to cooperate in the justice and peace of the world»

The Second Vatican Council: light for the Church and for the modern world

The Second Vatican Council opened on 11 October 1962 after a long preparatory phase: it was convened on 25 January 1959 by Pope John XXIII, at the end of a week of prayer.

The Council's work took place in four sessions, of which only the first was presided over by Pope John, who died on 3 June 1963. It was Paul VI, successor to John XXIII, who presided over the other phases of the Council, from the second session to its conclusion, which took place on 8 December 1965. The Catholic bishops discussed the life of the Church and its openness to the demands of the modern and contemporary world.

The Vatican Council promulgated four Constitutions, three Declarations and nine Decrees; it was an important turning point in the life of the Church.

Albino Luciani who, in addition to participating very actively in the Council's work, became Pope, in the first of his famous "6 needs" states:

«We wish to continue to carry forward the legacy of the Second Vatican Council, whose wise norms must still be guided to fulfilment, ensuring that a push, perhaps generous but ill-advised, does not distort its content and meaning, and equally ensuring that restraining and timid forces do not slow down its magnificent impulse of renewal and life». (Complete Works, vol. 9, p. 20)

He worked to ensure that all Christian people were aware of what was about to happen in the Church.:

«When there's a football match, not all spectators understand and enjoy it in the same way. One knows the rules of the game, knows the precise roles of the goalkeeper, the wingers, the full-backs, the attacking midfielder, knows the tricks and moves: that person will appreciate the successful shots, the technique and skill of the maneuvers and sprints, and will be enthusiastically and intelligently engaged». (Complete Works, vol. 2, p. 440)

Luciani recognized how the themes developed since the Council could allow a return to the concept of an early Church closer to humankind.

«16 September 1963

Dearest faithful, as I am about to leave for Rome, where I will participate in the second phase of the Ecumenical Council, I take the liberty of asking for your interest and most fervent prayers for this great event.

It is truly a great event: the leaders of the Church gather under the presidency of the Pope, [...] they take measures to make the entire Christian family holier and more united, to contribute to the pacification of the world. [...] These are events of the Church in a solemn hour, family events, they belong to you». (Complete Works, vol. 3, p. 76)

Moreover, Paul VI himself, opening the second period of the Council on 29 September 1963, declared: **«May this Council keep fully in mind this relationship between us and Jesus Christ, between the holy and living Church and Christ. May no other light shine on this gathering than Christ, the light of the world».** (Address of the Holy Father Paul VI)

« If we want to understand and enjoy the event [...], it is necessary to be informed about the nature and tasks of both the assembly and those present »