

Section 2 – Luciani's places

A Shepherd from the Dolomites: Silence and Wisdom

To understand John Paul I, one cannot ignore the places where he was born and raised as a child and a young man. Albino Luciani's hometown, Canale d'Agordo, in the Biois Valley, is surrounded by the Dolomites, mountains that some have called "the most beautiful in the world." They constitute a unique and marvellous landscape that undoubtedly influenced him as he grew up, shaping his character and influencing his worldview.

In a land marked by poverty and a simple life where time is marked by nature and the image of God is reflected in the grandeur of the mountains, Luciani learned from an early age verticality, the ability to raise his eyes to the sky in gratitude for the beauty of nature, the intensity of family bonds, and simple yet effective relationships. From the mountains, he learned silence, the ability to listen, and above all, his connection with the Creator.

From boyhood he was shaped in a living cultural reality that has its centre in the Pieve di Canale d'Agordo and where faith is a factor of social connectivity, which takes care of all the needs of human life: religious, cultural, economic and social.

Thanks to the work of "enlightened" parish priests who were attentive to the education of young people, Luciani discovered a love of study and acquired a wide knowledge from an early age, which led him to expand his culture well beyond his ecclesiastical education. The result of this care is evident in a humanity attentive to and at the service of his fellow men, all united by a common vocation to God's mercy.

Luciani served as a pastor and priest in the Agordino and Belluno areas, then as bishop of Vittorio Veneto and later as Patriarch of Venice, always remaining tied to his native land, and the people of Veneto retained a deep affection for him. He was the remarkable fruit of a simple, poor land, which over time experienced emigration, but which always preserved a profound faith, rooted in life, capable of responding to the hidden needs of the human heart.

The museum dedicated to Albino Luciani, next to the parish church of Canale d'Agordo, and his birthplace, a few steps from the town square, which can now be visited, keep alive the memory of this illustrious man from Agordo.

«Long live Agordino, a poor land, but full of good people; not because I am from Agordino, but because they are truly honest people. - John Paul I»

The beginning of a journey

Canale d'Agordo is a typical mountain village nestled in the Biois valley, about 15 km from Agordo (Belluno).

Albino Luciani was born on October 17, 1912 in a humble home, in Via Rividella 8, a few steps from the parish church.

His father, Giovanni Battista, was almost always abroad for work, like many men in the village. In Germany, he was a skilled blast furnace worker, where he encountered the socialist movement and joined the German trade unions.

His mother, Bortola Tancon, whom Luciani often remembered as his first catechist, was always a guiding light. She was a woman of great faith, simple, yet of great character.

His siblings recalled: **«When Albino entered the seminary, she said these words to him: “Look, I’m happy you’re going, but you don’t have to be afraid of me; remember, you’re free. If you can’t find yourself, don’t just sit there thinking, go home right away. A good boy is better than a bad priest”. But in the evening, when she had us say the prayer for vocations, she always made us add: “And especially for your brother” ».** (My Brother Albino – Memories and Recollections of Pope Luciani’s Sister, S. Falasca; 30 giorni, 2004)

The parish priest of Canale, Don Filippo Carli, pointed Luciani towards the seminary.

Albino wrote to his father, a migrant worker in France, asking for permission to enter the seminary. His father responded with a letter, which Albino always kept with him, in which he wrote: **«I hope that when you are a priest you will be on the side of the poor, because Christ was on their side».** (My Brother Albino – Memories and Recollections of Pope Luciani’s Sister, S. Falasca 30 giorni, 2004)

On his eleventh birthday, October 17, 1923, Luciani boarded the bus to Feltre to begin high school at the minor seminary.

This was the years after the First World War (1915-1918). His brother Berto always remembered: **«It wasn’t a bus, but a small war-surplus truck. Albino was smiling, he was happy».** (My Brother Albino – Memories and Recollections of Pope Luciani’s Sister, S. Falasca; 30 giorni, 2004)

«I hope that when you are a priest you will be on the side of the poor, because Christ was on their side»

The years of training

Entering the minor seminary of Feltre in 1923 for his middle school studies was the beginning of the journey that would lead Albino to the Gregorian Seminary of Belluno in 1928 for his high school and theological studies.

His sister Nina said: **«Our mother, it's true, was an example; she passed on to us all the essentials of religion. But if Albino became the priest he was, he owes it, in large part, to Don Filippo».** (My Brother Albino – Memories and Recollections of Pope Luciani's Sister, S. Falasca; 30 giorni, 2004)

The young seminarians returned to their hometowns during the holidays and Don Filippo Carli always followed them with a watchful and discreet eye, entrusting each of them with tasks.

Albino was responsible for reorganizing the library. Classical and theological works, ancient and rare texts, over a thousand works were diligently organized by the young Luciani in the rectory's library. It was during this time that the wide cultural knowledge Luciani possessed, without ever flaunting it, began to take shape.

From boyhood he showed a propensity for reading and a great desire for knowledge.

Even in summer, when Albino and his brothers set off late at night to reach the mountain pastures to mow the grass, the young seminarian always carried some books with him and in his moments of rest he sat on the rocks to read.

His sister remembered: **«Don Filippo said to Albino: “You will become a priest... when you speak from the pulpit, think of the old lady who lives at the end of the village... Look, she must understand you too! ...”. Albino learned simplicity in speaking from him».** (My Brother Albino – Memories and Recollections of Pope Luciani's Sister, S. Falasca; 30 giorni, 2004)

«And also in writing» his brother adds. **«The parish priest often had the young clerics write short articles for Il Celentone, our parish bulletin, and taught them to have a direct, essential style, made up of images and examples».** (My Brother Albino – Memories and Recollections of Pope Luciani's Sister, S. Falasca; 30 giorni, 2004)

Albino continued to write for *The People's Friend*, the weekly magazine of the Diocese of Belluno.

Sister Nina testified: **«he always said: “Even with the pen you can do a lot of good”. Francis de Sales, the patron saint of journalists, was one of his favourite saints».** (My Brother Albino – Memories and Recollections of Pope Luciani's Sister, S. Falasca; 30 giorni, 2004)

He was ordained a priest on 7 July 1935 in the Church of San Pietro in Belluno, by Bishop Giosuè Cattarossi.

On July 8th he celebrated his first mass in the church of Canale d'Agordo, and was later appointed assistant to Monsignor Luigi Cappello, archdeacon of Agordo, where he remained until 1937.

«Even with the pen you can do a lot of good»

The Belluno years (1937 – 1958)

In 1937, called by Monsignor Angelo Santin, rector of the Gregorian Seminary of Belluno, Luciani moved from Agordo to the main provincial city to take up the position of vice-rector of the Seminary.

The Belluno years were very important. Luciani held various positions there over the years; however, teaching at the seminary and his work as director of the Catechetical Office remain a fundamental part of his development and of his legacy as a priest in these lands.

During the war, Don Albino began his studies for a doctorate at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, with an exemption from attending courses.

Despite the war, his activities in the diocese did not stop; in these years, in addition to the activities of the Seminary and his studies at the Gregorian University, Don Albino began his collaboration with "The People's Friend", the weekly newspaper of the Diocese of Belluno, which continued until 1956.

In 1947 he graduated with honours in Rome, defending his thesis: "The origin of the human soul according to Antonio Rosmini".

The many commitments and hardships of the war years caused Don Albino to return to Belluno from Rome ill. He needed to be admitted to a sanatorium for suspected tuberculosis, but it was actually pneumonia. This experience of pain brought him close to suffering people, and visiting the sick would be a constant part of his daily activities.

From then on, Don Albino's commitments and responsibilities multiplied, putting to good use the passions he had developed during his years of study: his great love for beauty and art, one of the subjects he taught in the Seminary, in particular for sacred art; his keen interest in cinema, which led him to promote the first city film club in 1956, being sensitive to this new art form, an expression of the culture of the time, still in its early stages.

In 1949, ***Catechesis in Small Sections*** was published, dedicated to the tender memory of his mother, his "first catechism teacher" who had died the previous year. In January 1952, his father Giovanni also passed away.

Catechesis was not just a passion: Luciani revealed a true natural gift in transmitting concepts in an accessible and immediate way thanks to effective examples, taking care of the training of both catechists and primary school teachers.

For example, in 1956 he took part in a conference of theology teachers from the Venetian seminaries in Borca di Cadore, with the presence of Cardinal Angelo Roncalli, Msgr. Bortignon and Msgr. Muccin.

Meanwhile, he was appointed vicar general of the Diocese of Belluno, carrying out the administrative and spiritual governance of the diocese.

Muccin and Bortignon, bishops of Padua and Belluno, put Luciani forward for the episcopate.

«Faith, hope, and charity are the center of all Christian life. I chose these three stars for myself, and I will also choose them for my future people»

The episcopate in Vittorio Veneto (1958 – 1970)

On July 15, 1957, in Calalzo di Cadore, Don Albino was received by Patriarch Roncalli, who would succeed Pius XII as Pope John XXIII. He was appointed bishop of Vittorio Veneto on December 9, 1958.

In appointing him bishop, Pope John dismissed the various doubts expressed to him regarding Luciani's poor health, which until then had prevented him from becoming a bishop due to fears of his premature death, and responded good-naturedly: "...it will mean that he will die a bishop."

Luciani entered the diocese on January 11, 1959 at the age of forty-six; the motto he chose was *"Humilitas"*, (Humility) following the example of St. Charles Borromeo.

The bells of Canale d'Agordo ring out in celebration on January 6, 1959, when Don Albino returns to celebrate Mass dressed in the episcopal insignia:

«Who would have ever thought that in this church, in Canale, where I was born, where I played as a boy, where, during the holidays, you saw me working with the scythe and the rake; [...] I am the little boy I once was, I am the one who comes from the fields, I am the pure and poor dust. If anything good ever comes out of all this, let it be clear from now on: it is only the fruit of the goodness, the grace, the mercy of the Lord».
(*Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 13)

And in his first letter to his new diocese he uses the metaphor of dust again:

«As soon as your bishop was appointed, I thought that the Lord was implementing an old system of his with me too: 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». (*Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 11)

During his episcopate in Vittorio Veneto, Luciani assiduously participated in the work of the Second Vatican Council in Rome, called by Pope John XXIII on 25 January 1959.

The period in Vittorio Veneto lasted about ten years and proved challenging and full of difficulties; however, the memory of Luciani's deep love for his diocese endures. This love made him intolerant of life in the Castle of San Martino, residence of the bishops of Vittorio Veneto, because it was perched high up and far from the people, and led him to go down to the Seminary several times a week to receive the faithful in the rector's room.

«You cannot do good to souls if you don't first love them. [...] My dear priests, my faithful, I would be a truly unfortunate bishop if I didn't love you. Instead, I can assure you that I love you, that I desire only to enter your service and make my meagre strength, the little I have and what I am, available to everyone».
(*Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 11)

Luciani devoted himself to his duties consistently, scheduling his day between study, work, and prayer; he usually slept very little, rising early in the morning. The first official secretary, Don Piergiorgio da Canal, was also his driver, because Luciani didn't have a driver's license.

«I am the dust»

Patriarch of Venice (1971 – 1978)

Although the Venetian period of the bishop of Vittoria began on February 8, 1970, the day of his entrance into the Diocese, on November 17, 1969 he was designated Patriarch of Venice.

Venice, its palaces, its churches, life on the water, and its problems were not unknown to the new Patriarch. Indeed, as Bishop of Vittorio Veneto, as Luciani himself recalled in his greeting letter to the citizens, he came into contact with these realities **«through the commuters, who daily go down from that diocese to Mestre and Marghera»**. (Complete Works, vol. 5, p.13)

Furthermore, an image remained in his mind that was “almost like a dream” drawn from the stories of his mother, who had lived in Venice for 11 years and who had met his father there, and from this reading, first as a boy in the mountains, then as a student and finally as a teacher.

The spirit with which he was preparing to put himself at the service of the city and its people is expressed very clearly in this greeting:

«My frame of mind is this: I pray to God that I may love the city and its religious concerns; that He may help me to make available to all the little that I have and that I am, working with you, Mr. Mayor, with all the other authorities, with the priests and my fellow citizens for the common good». (Complete Works, vol. 5, p. 13)

The first commitments for Patriarch Luciani were aimed at getting to know the various components of the Venetian Church, the Seminary at Madonna della Salute, the associations and the parishes.

His sensitivity to situations of need led him, in the days following his inauguration, to visit the prisons: the women's prison on the Giudecca, the men's prison at Santa Maria Maggiore, then the hospital of Santi Giovanni e Paolo and the Stella Maris clinic on the Lido, where Msgr. Olivotti, his auxiliary bishop, was being treated.

These moments became fixed appointments in his pastoral service alongside the celebration of Christmas Mass, as documented by his diaries.

Thus, with simplicity and as a pastor close to the poor and the people, Albino Luciani's activity as Patriarch of Venice began and developed.

Over the course of his eight years as patriarch, Patriarch Luciani was called upon to address many challenges and trials. He addressed numerous demands from the local church and social issues (work, the referendum on divorce, etc.), but also the publication of ***Illustrissimi***, his appointment as cardinal, and Paul VI's visit to Venice.

On 10 August 1978 he left Venice for Rome to participate in the conclave that would elect the new pontiff after the death of Paul VI, and he never returned.

«In Venice the waterways are lined with gondolas and they tie the gondolas to poles just like we up here tie animals to trees»