



A Priest of Bergamo

IN OCTOBER 1904 THE NEW DON ANGELO RONCALLI WAS back in Rome. Rather than being assigned to a parish, he had been sent to take a three-year course in canon law.

Then the gentle bishop of Bergamo died. Early in 1905 a well-known and popular sociology professor at Rome's Collegio Leoniano—a priest Don Angelo considered one of “the most outstanding”—was selected to replace him. In a letter Angelo was profuse in praise of Giacomo Maria Radini Tedeschi’s “piety, his vast and profound learning,...his innumerable and worthy...relationships and connections,...affable manner...and above all his apostolic zeal.”¹

Wonder of wonders, suddenly young Don Roncalli was told to close his barely opened canon law textbooks. Because he was from Bergamo, yet was one of the few available young priests with the breadth of a Roman education, he, twenty-three-year-old Angelo Roncalli, had been chosen by

the distinguished new bishop as his secretary. Don Roncalli even participated in Radini Tedeschi's consecration ceremony in the Sistine Chapel, honored to hold the Gospels over the man's head.

WIDER, EVER WIDER

If Roman education had broadened Angelo Roncalli, his assignments under this vigorous new bishop would widen his views and understanding immensely more. As secretary, he lived in Radini Tedeschi's household, seeing up close an outstanding bishop's spiritual practices, duties and innovations. Radini Tedeschi was a great organizer and, as his secretary would later write in a biography of the formidable man, someone who wanted to carry the Church forward, maintaining its "glorious traditions" but "in harmony with the new conditions and needs of the time."²

This meant many things. Physical properties of the Church, such as ramshackle rectories, were replaced. Others were brought up to date. For instance, heating was added to the seminary, where for several centuries half-frozen boys, including Angelo, had huddled, clothes on, under the bedcovers in icy dormitories.

Catholic Action, with its varied apostolates carried out by laity for laity, in union with the area bishop, was already established in Bergamo in Roncalli's childhood. Under Radini Tedeschi it was promoted even more vigorously on behalf of labor, peasant farmers—and women. And there was much more tradition-respecting innovation, all involving, it seems, tasks for the secretary. This arduous schedule meant it was not that often, to his regret, that he could find free time

to visit his family. He might chide himself in his 1907 retreat notes that he had not learned to make the best use of time, but in fact he was working incessantly.³ And the pleasant manner he brought to all these tasks won him many admirers and friends, among these Radini Tedeschi, who became another, and many think the greatest, of his spiritual fathers. For the rest of his life, Don Angelo would reflect the importance of this relationship by referring, even as pope, to Giacomo Maria Radini Tedeschi simply as “my bishop.”

With a bishop of this kind, there was lots of travel. Locally Roncalli accompanied Radini Tedeschi on pastoral visitations of every one of the 352 churches in the diocese. That took from December 1905 until 1909. Nationally there were many trips to Rome and to Italian cities new to Don Angelo, all the way south to Naples.

In April 1905 “the bishop’s shadow,” as his secretary was called, followed Radini Tedeschi out of Italy to Lourdes—Angelo’s first of many spiritually enriching visits—with stops at other important French shrines. His 1906 retreat was replaced by a moving diocesan pilgrimage with the bishop to the Holy Land; in 1908 he was at Lourdes again; 1911 brought time in Switzerland and various new French cities; in 1912 he discovered Austria, Poland and Hungary. Only in 1913 did the bishop’s health troubles stop this culturally and spiritually widening exposure to new lands, new languages, new people.

NEW TASKS, NEW PEOPLE

After passing half his life as a student, Roncalli was asked to add teaching to his secretarial duties. Wanting to do some inconspicuous reform, the new bishop handed his secretary

the additional delicate assignment to be “spokesperson for the seminarians on one hand, and on the other, for the members of the disciplinary commission.”⁴ This meant learning to work on committees (over the next few years at the seminary and elsewhere there would be lots of them) and learning to bring disputants together.

Professor Roncalli first taught Church history, then apologetics and patrology. With no teaching experience, he was too intimidated or too busy the first year to do more than read the textbook to the class. His teaching was consequently considered, understating it, “rather monotonous.” Then he got into his stride, and his classes became the seminary’s “most popular.”⁵

Don Roncalli’s job as secretary, he noted in his journal, “demands the greatest tact and prudence”⁶ interacting with many people. Because his bishop was involved beyond the diocese, young Roncalli also made these broadening contacts, including, as early as December 1905, an edifying and exciting relationship with Cardinal Andrea Ferrari of Milan. Angelo had been only thirteen when, as part of a pilgrimage to a Eucharistic Congress in Milan, Ferrari’s observable extraordinary devotion to the Eucharist and his ardent commentary on John 15:9’s admonition to love had left the boy with the awed impression he had seen a saint. Of Ferrari, Don Angelo eventually wrote in his diary, “He envelops me with so much kindness that it is almost embarrassing.”⁷

Beginning in 1908, Achille Ratti, of Milan’s Ambrosian Library, lent help to the younger priest’s research on Roncalli’s favorite saint, Milan’s Cardinal Archbishop Saint Charles Borromeo. Achille Ratti would become Pope Pius XI in 1922.

Don Angelo also made friends with peers, the up-and-coming men who were secretaries to people like Ferrari. And in 1910 he befriended a younger man, a new teacher of biblical science at the seminary. Don Gustavo Testa, ordained in Bergamo that year by Radini Tedeschi, was returning from study in Rome. The two forged lifelong ties before Testa was summoned to Rome in 1920 for diplomatic training. From far-flung places or less often in close proximity, the knot of their friendship would never loosen—as evidenced by the fact that in 1959, Don Roncalli, as pope, would make Gustavo Testa a cardinal.

BEGINNING TO SHINE

His PH.D. in theology, Roncalli began teaching with only a general knowledge of Church history, a topic he discovered fascinating. And knowing the history of the Church in more depth, especially adding deeper study of the Church fathers for the patrology class, proved another important broadening experience.

At the bishop's request, in 1907 Don Angelo gave a deeply researched, very successful historical lecture on a late cardinal of local interest, which the local paper praised as "timely, concise, brilliant."⁸ The proud bishop had his spiritual son's lecture published in a scholarly Milan review. As for Roncalli, he found spiritual benefits from contact with "vast horizons illuminated by... truth and sanctity."⁹

It was the start of various historical research projects and publications, including in 1909 the one on Saint Charles Borromeo, which, limited to his spare time, would take nearly a lifetime. Soon, whenever there was to be some special

commemoration of Bergamo's ecclesiastical past, Don Roncalli was called to produce publications or lectures for the occasion. All these projects resulted in the extremely important ability—looking at past reforms, for instance—“to make appropriate comparisons with the present times.”¹⁰

As early as the 1906 Holy Land pilgrimage, Don Roncalli revealed another talent, writing articles with vivid descriptions of people and places for Bergamo's press. That same year Radini Tedeschi started a monthly diocesan bulletin for priests. With his approval, in 1909 Don Roncalli changed the format of *La Vita Diocesana* to one providing ongoing education of the diocesan clergy. With the help of one other person, each month Don Angelo personally wrote the thirty-six pages, including meaty items like his series profiling the diocese's past bishops. As he would remark in old age, his was becoming a life passed “pen in hand.”¹¹

After the hugely successful lecture in 1907, Don Roncalli was in demand as a speaker around the diocese. Preparing these talks took time from one who had none. During his 1908 retreat he noted, “The numerous tasks assigned to me leave my head and heart in a ferment of excitement and prevent my attending seriously and whole-heartedly to anything.” And on the 1909 retreat he confessed, “All the things I have to do... confuse my brain.”¹²

Thus he once arrived to give a talk and couldn't recall a word. Understandably, said the young orator, giving talks sometimes led to real feelings of fear. But he must have done well, for the invitations kept coming.

In the summer of 1907, in order that Roncalli not be recalled to military service, the bishop made him interim pas-

tor of a small church, Santa Maria d'Oleno, whose pastor had just died. The holiness of his pastor back in Sotto il Monte had caused Roncalli wholesome reflections as a seminarian. This July-to-November pastorate replowed that same furrow: He saw the goodness of humble people only too willing to cooperate with a priest who extended them a little pastoral kindness and goodwill. Again he realized the spiritual potential of being a simple pastor for simple folk.

He may have felt the occasional prick of shards of pride, with its ambition to do great things, but his retreat notes of 1909 show that he had gotten a stranglehold on letting that part of his personality direct any of his acts. To practice humility and deliberately further squash his ego, he joined a newly revived diocesan religious order, begun with only four men by Radini Tedeschi, the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart. He noted: "Being a member of the new Congregation...will place me under a stricter obligation not to be self-seeking in any way, but always to follow the will of God as expressed in the will of my Bishop."¹³

A FRIEND OF WOMEN

Laymen in the Bergamo diocese, including Roncalli's father and great-uncle, had been notably and commendably active in initiatives of Catholic Action and other politico-social undertakings, while their women stayed voiceless at home. But women's lives were changing. As a former sociology professor, Radini Tedeschi understood this and greatly favored social initiatives for women. So it was perhaps natural to the bishop that Don Roncalli be active in this arena too.