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Debunking four myths about John Paul I, the 'Smiling Pope'

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All Things Catholic

Oct. 17 marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of Albino Luciani, the man who would become John Paul I, the "Smiling Pope" of just 33 days, from Aug. 26 to Sept. 28, 1978. On the day of the anniversary, an official *positio*, or "position paper," was filed in the Vatican to support his sainthood cause.

In Italy, the centenary was marked by an hourlong interview on Sat2000, the network of the Italian bishops, with Fr. Diego Lorenzi, who served as Luciani's priest secretary when he was the Patriarch of Venice and also in the Vatican. Around the world, various events have been organized, including a mid-October conference in New York titled "The True Pope John Paul I: A Man of Faith for Our Time."

John Paul I's 33-day papacy was the 10th shortest of all time, and the briefest since Leo XI's in the early 17th century. Yet the ferment shows he only needed a month to leave a deep mark on the Catholic imagination.

In part, that's because he seemed exactly what most Catholics pray their leaders will be: warm, compassionate, genuinely happy to be with ordinary people, a man of obvious faith who didn't wear his piety on his sleeve or take himself too seriously. He pioneered the simplification of the papacy by dropping the royal "we," declining coronation with the papal tiara and discontinuing use of the *sedes gestatoria*, or portable throne.

In part, too, fascination with John Paul I endures because he's the great counter-factual of recent Catholic history: "What might have been had he lived?" His papacy is for Catholics what the Kennedy administration has always been for Americans, a sort of Rorschach test allowing people to project their own hopes and dreams.

One value of the events marking the centenary, therefore, is that they can help recover the "real" John Paul I, as opposed to misconceptions and hypothetical reconstructions that have flowered over the last 35 years.

In particular, the remembrances we've heard during the last month seem to debunk four persistent myths:

- The "smiling pope" was good-hearted but weak, out of his depth in the Machiavellian environment of the Vatican.
- John Paul I was a closet radical who would have taken the church in a dramatically different direction than the two popes who followed him.
- John Paul I did not die of natural causes, but rather fell victim to a complex assassination plot.
- Although a breath of fresh air after the dour final years of Pope Paul VI, John Paul I's reign was too short to have anything substantive to offer the church of the 21st century, especially with regard to its top internal priority, new evangelization.

No weakling

In his interview, Lorenzi dismissed perceptions that John Paul I was a wide-eyed naïf, a country pastor crushed by the magnitude of the papacy and the Byzantine intricacies of the Vatican.

Instead, Lorenzi said the day after his election, Luciani studied the *Annuario*, the Vatican's yearbook, to familiarize himself with the organizational chart, then set about taking things in hand. He met regularly with the Secretary of State, Lorenzi said, and also had meetings with all the cardinals who headed Vatican departments.

"He was not overwhelmed," Lorenzi insisted, saying John Paul I took up his new role with the same "perspicacity and intelligence" he displayed over a decade as the patriarch of Venice.

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At the New York conference, writer Mo Guernon argued that Luciani's humility had nothing to do with fecklessness, and that he could summon some steel when the situation called for it.

For instance, Guernon told a story of when Luciani was a bishop and one of his parishes chose a new pastor without consulting him. He responded by boldly entering the church and removing the Eucharist, refusing to return it until the situation was resolved.

In a similar vein, when some priests in Venice openly backed the liberalization of divorce in defiance of church teaching, Luciani disbanded the group and suspended the priests. As Guernon put it, that was "rather tough stuff from such a meek man."

(As a footnote, this episode lends context to a famous moment in 1972 when Paul VI visited Venice and put his stole around Luciani's shoulders. Many observers thought Paul was indicating his successor, but in context, the pope was probably showing support for the embattled patriarch.)

Lorenzi also shot down the notion that Luciani's election was a bolt from the blue, a sort of rabbit-out-of-the-hat solution to a deadlock.

For one thing, he said, Luciani knew going into the conclave of August 1978 that there was considerable talk about him. Indeed, Lorenzi said Luciani told him personally that if elected, he would decline, and that he had said the same thing to then-Fr. Prospero Grech, who's now a cardinal, noting that Paul VI's constitution allowed whoever's elected the right to refuse. In the end, however, Lorenzi said Luciani felt compelled to offer the same "yes" as when he had been named patriarch of Venice.

Lorenzi said Luciani was familiar to the other cardinals from his contributions to the 1974 Synod of Bishops on evangelization in the modern world.

"They knew him well," Lorenzi said, saying his work at the synod had been "respected and appreciated."

(That's also a reminder of the importance of synods of bishops. Since Paul VI created the synod in 1967, all three subsequent popes first made a name for themselves during one of its sessions.)

One hallmark of a John Paul I papacy may have been a desire for greater financial transparency, and Guernon suggested he had the spine to back it up.

He told the story of a scandal in which two of Luciani's priests were caught embezzling church funds. Luciani suspended the priests and wrote an open letter to the diocese explaining the situation, frankly acknowledging that "two of my priests have done wrong." While voicing compassion, he let a criminal investigation and prosecution run its course. He also sold off property owned by the diocese and also requested additional help from parishioners in order to balance the books.

No radical

Overall, the image of John Paul I that emerges is of a pastorally minded figure who tried to hold a divided church together. At the New York event, his niece, Pia Luciani, recounted a time shortly after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) when he was still the bishop of Vittorio Veneto, when he said to her the diocese actually contained people "of three councils":

- Those stuck at Vatican I, if not actually at the Council of Trent.
- Those "who gladly accept the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II, seeing it as a grace to improve the relationship between the church and the world."
- "A little group who make the council say things that in reality it does not say, planning a radical rush toward another council that still does not exist, a Vatican III."

Her uncle, she implied, was in that second camp, but didn't want to just write off either the first or the third.

Lorenzi said during his Sat2000 interview that Benedict XVI actually reminds him of Luciani, both in terms of "physical stature," he said, and in terms of their core concern with the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Just as those were the subjects of Benedict's first encyclicals, Lorenzi said, they were also the topic of John Paul I's first homily as pope.

The primary newsflash from the interview was another bit of continuity between John Paul I and the popes who followed him: a desire to heal the schism with the church's traditionalist wing.

Lorenzi said John Paul I was keenly concerned about the breach with Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who in 1976 had defied Pope Paul VI by ordaining priests despite having been asked not to do so. Lorenzi said John Paul I hoped to address the problem "as soon as possible" because the "unity of the church" concerned him "more than many other things which the press seemed interested in."

Cementing the impression of sympathy between John Paul I and Benedict XVI, freelance writer Lori Pieper, a Secular Franciscan who organized the New York conference, quoted from a homily given by Luciani in 1977, after Paul VI announced that then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger would become the archbishop of Munich and a cardinal:

A few days ago, I offered my congratulations to Cardinal Ratzinger, the new Archbishop of Munich. In a Catholic Germany that he himself deplures as suffering, in part, from an anti-Roman and anti-papal complex, he has had the courage to proclaim loudly that 'the Lord should be sought where Peter is.' ... Ratzinger appears to me to be the right kind of prophet. Not all those who write and speak today have the same courage. In order to want to go where others are going, for fear of not seeming modern, some of them accept only with cuts and restrictions the creed pronounced by Paul VI in 1968 at the closing of the Year of Faith; they criticize the papal documents; they talk constantly about ecclesial communion, but never about the pope as a necessary reference point for those who want to be in true communion with the church.

Other examples surfaced at the New York event.

British researcher Paul Spackman reported that when a bitter national debate erupted in Italy in the 1970s over divorce, Luciani's views lined up solidly with orthodox teaching. The difference, he said, is Luciani had a keener sense than some others of how to expound that teaching in the context of the times.

In 1974, Spackman said, Luciani was opposed to efforts by right-wing Christian Democrats to stage a national referendum seeking to overturn the liberalization of divorce, fearing it would divide the church and underscore its declining influence. (In the end, the referendum was soundly defeated.)

Overall, Spackman describes John Paul I as a man of "doctrinal rigor leavened by pastoral and social open-mindedness," and said he left behind a "legacy of gentle and compassionate bridge-building."

Pieper unpacked two famous sound bites from John Paul I that have fueled a good deal of speculation:

- A comment before the conclave of August 1978 congratulating the parents of the world's first test-tube baby, which has led some to believe he would have overturned the church's ban on in-vitro fertilization
- A comment during his Sept. 10, 1978, Angelus address that God is "more mother than father," prompting some to wonder if he shared the objection of many feminists to the church's "patriarchal" bias and might have reversed the ban on female priests

On IVF, Pieper wrote Luciani upheld the teaching of Pope Pius XII against mechanical intervention in the marital act. Further, she said, people always quote his congratulations to the parents of Louise Brown in that pre-conclave interview, but not the lines that followed it:

Even if the possibility of having children *in vitro* does not bring about disaster, it at least poses some enormous risks. For example: If the natural ability to conceive sometimes produces malformed children, won't the ability to conceive artificially produce even more? If so, won't the scientist faced with new problems be acting like the "sorcerer's apprentice," who unleashes powerful forces without being able to contain and dominate them? Another example: Given the hunger for money and the lack of moral scruples today, won't there be the danger that a new industry will arise, that of "baby?manufacturing," perhaps for those who cannot or will not contract a valid marriage? If this were to happen, wouldn't it be a great setback instead of progress for the family and for society?

Needless to say, that doesn't exactly sound like an IVF enthusiast.

On the celebrated "more mother than father" quote, Pieper argued that John Paul I meant to underline God's tenderness, not to dislodge traditional imagery about God as a father or to suggest that God is more female than male in an absolute sense. It's a trope, she notes, that was developed by John Paul II, including his 1980 encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*.

On women priests, Spackman quoted a 1975 talk Luciani gave to a group of sisters expressing support for the all-male priesthood:

You will ask: what about ... the priesthood itself? I can say to you: Christ bestowed the pastoral ministry on men alone, on his apostles. Did he mean this to be valid only for a short time, almost as though he made allowances for the prejudice about the inferiority of women prevalent in his time? Or did he intend it to be valid always? Let it be very clear: Christ never accepted the prejudice about the inferiority of women: they are always admirable figures in the Gospels, more so than the apostles themselves. The priesthood, however, is a service given by means of spiritual powers and not a form of superiority. Through the will of Christ, women -- in my judgment -- carry out a different, complementary, and precious service in the church, but they are not "possible priests" ... That does not do wrong to women.

Spackman hinted, however, that John Paul I might have taken a different tack on another perennially controversial question: birth control.

Spackman said Luciani privately favored a more moderate position, quoting a 1968 memo after Paul VI reiterated the traditional ban in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, in which Luciani wrote: "I must confess that I hoped in my heart, even though I didn't let it out in writing, that the very serious difficulties could be overcome and that the reply of the Teacher ... might coincide with the hopes raised in so many couples."

In February 1974, Luciani was even blunter: "If I were the 'divine master of the law,' " Spackman quotes him as saying, "I would abolish the law."

Spackman concludes: "This statement may have had incalculable implications had his papacy not been cut short."

No conspiracy

As he has done on many other occasions, in his comments on Italian TV, Lorenzi rejected conspiracy theories suggesting John Paul I was the victim of foul play. Instead, he said he believes the pope died of a heart attack, a conviction based partly on the fact that, according to Lorenzi, he had complained of chest pains at dinner the night before.

They didn't summon the doctor, Lorenzi said, because at the time, the pope said the pains were passing.

Lorenzi added that the initial Vatican statement announcing the death of the pope probably could have short-circuited much of the speculation by including those details, but said everyone involved felt under tremendous pressure to get it finished.

Pia Luciani said in New York that "the whole family, beginning with my father, his brother Edoardo, has never attributed the sudden death of my uncle to anything but natural causes."

"All the castles of the most disparate theories that have been heard or read in books and newspapers fall," she said.

She added that perhaps the Vatican's effort to fudge the circumstances of the death -- not wanting to admit that John Paul I was discovered by a nun who worked in the papal apartment, and trying to suggest he was holding *The Imitation of Christ* rather than papers from the office -- "gave rise to other problems and suspicions."

Luciani said her uncle may have suffered a thrombosis, meaning a clot that obstructs the flow of blood, since he had already experienced one such episode during a 1975 trip to Brazil that affected the retina in one eye.

Interestingly, she rejected the idea floated by Lorenzi of a heart attack, insisting that had her uncle really complained of chest pains, the nuns in his household who accompanied him to the Vatican from Venice would have called a doctor whether he wanted it or not. The actual cause of death will likely never be ascertained with certainty because no autopsy was performed, in keeping with Vatican protocol.

Bishop Enrico Dal Covolo, rector of the Lateran University in Rome and the postulator for John Paul I's sainthood cause, recently said medical records collected as part of the process also support the conclusion that the pope died of natural causes.

The new evangelization

Although John Paul I apparently didn't use the phrase new evangelization, Pieper argued that he not only "anticipated" the idea, but "preached it and lived it." If the aim is primarily to reach out to lapsed Catholics in the West, Luciani was certainly early to the party; Pieper quoted from a 1968 essay in which he argued that Italy was, by then, every bit as much "mission territory" as Africa.

In a speech to the College of Cardinals the morning after his election, John Paul I said it clearly: "We want to recall to the entire church that her first duty is still evangelization."

The important point, however, is not that John Paul I wanted to relight the church's missionary fires, because plenty of people share that desire, but rather the model he offered of how to go about it.

His approach was neither the swashbuckling bravado of John Paul II, nor the professorial precision of

Benedict XVI. Instead, John Paul I had a breezy, mild, informal style, one arguably well-suited to the inductive and personalistic temperament of the post-modern era.

Among the iconic images of his short papacy are when John Paul I called children onto the stage at the end of his audiences, making some fairly profound points in simple language. The most famous expression of this dialectical approach is the celebrated book *Illustrissimi*, in which Luciani carried on an imaginary correspondence with various saints, historical figures (such as the Empress Maria Teresa of Austria), authors (such as Mark Twain and G.K. Chesterton) and even fictional characters (such as Pinocchio). The letters were originally written for a monthly periodical when Luciani was in Venice, and proved so popular they were collected into a book.

Aside from the tremendous wit the letters reveal, they represent a philosophy of catechesis in action: meeting people where they are, acknowledging the wisdom they already possess and then gently leading them to consider the Gospel.

Pieper quoted an English priest who recently told her of John Paul I, "If there was ever a prophet of the new evangelization, it's him."

One final footnote: John Paul I is usually remembered as an extremely "pastoral" figure, someone close to ordinary people who understood their struggles and their dreams, and who knew how to make church teaching accessible and relevant.

(Here's an example. Several years ago, Lorenzi told me he was standing with the crowd in St. Peter's Square on Aug. 27, 1978, when the new pope delivered his first Angelus address. At the end, Lorenzi said, he overheard a little girl who had been sitting on her father's shoulders exclaim: "Papa, I understood everything!" Lorenzi said he gazed at the pope and smiled, offering a thumbs-up.

"That was his gift, to put complex things in a way that a little girl could understand," he said.)

Strikingly, however, Pia Luciani reminded the New York conference that despite his pastoral reputation, her uncle never actually served as a parish priest. During his career, he was a seminary professor, rector and vicar general, then a bishop, patriarch and pope.

John Paul I thus illustrates a key Catholic insight: being "pastoral" is far more about outlook and personality, not so much one's résumé. Somebody can be pastoral from behind a desk, just as they can be clericalist in a cornfield.

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