



SIEBENQUELL

The Smile of God



On August 26, 1978 Albino Luciani was elected pope. He took the name of John Paul I. 33 day later he was dead. In that very brief time two apparently unrelated things happened. First, the smile of this man conquered the hearts of the world. And secondly, his picture appeared on the wall of our dining room.

Years after his death, his portrait still adorned our wall. My mother refused to take it down. She held a deep place of affection for him in her heart until the day of her death. When I was older, I decided to read his books and fell under the enchantment of his marvellous work »Illustrissimi« a series of fictional letters which he wrote to various historical and fictional characters.

One day I sat down with my mother and told her how much I loved this book. My enthusiasm ran away with me and I spoke far too long about all the things that impressed me about his book, his vivid imagination and his provocative thoughts. When I was done, my mother simple said, »I loved his smile. It is why I never took his portrait down.«

Her answer remains with me. I was moved by this man's erudition and creativity. She was moved by his smile. Later he would be known as the smiling pope. In Italy he is still often referred to as »Il sorriso di Dio«, the smile of God. His smile spoke to my mother of warmth and kindness. It spoke to her of his understanding of what it means to be human, of empathy and decency. She was drawn by his tenderness and his gentleness.

My mother was not an astute theologian and her tastes in life and faith were simple. She was unassuming and easy to underestimate. People often did not appreciate her depth of kindness or the tenderness of her soul. She was much like Albino Luciani in that way, easy to underestimate, often dismissed as a simple, provincial pastor caught up in a job too big for him. He has long been banished into the shadows of the charismatic John Paul II and the towering theological intellect of Benedict XVI. Being the smile of God does not carry great weight with people obsessed with power, prestige and personality.

I recently had an encounter with a highly educated person. Extremely qualified and with extensive training, his gifts are admirable. Yet, there was nothing of kindness, decency or tenderness about him. He is domineering, abusive, haughty and derisive toward any and all who disagree with him or dare to contradict his opinion. Dismissive of all that he does not care about or understand (including storytelling and storytellers), I can only imagine what he would say about »the smile of God«.

It is encounters with people like this that have deepened my appreciation for Papa Luciani. I miss his portrait on our dining room wall and would trade my copy of his marvelous book in order to have it back. And encounters with people like this deepen my gratitude for my mother, a person they would likely have ridiculed and belittled. Faced with the scowl of haughtiness and self-aggrandizement, I prefer the smile of God, in my mother, my friends, my colleagues and my confreres.

Papa Luciani, prega per noi.

Erik Riechers SAC

August 27th, 2020