

PAUL VI

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Paul VI

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Preface

On Sunday, June 30, 1963, just nine days after his election as pope, Giovanni Battista Montini composed his Last Will and Testament. Earlier that day he had been crowned pope on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, the 262nd successor to St. Peter as Bishop of Rome and the last pope to wear the triple tiara. The arduous ceremony, which had lasted some three hours, brought to a conclusion the process of election that had begun with the death of Pope John XXIII on June 3.

As he wrote in neat copperplate handwriting, Pope Paul recalled the key figures of his life. In his mind's eye he could see his parents, his brothers, and a multitude of friends who had accompanied him throughout his life.

I feel obliged to thank and to bless those who were the means of conveying to me the gifts of life received from thee O Lord: those who brought me into life (Oh! blessed be my most worthy parents!), those who educated me, loved me, did good to me, helped me, surrounded me with good examples, with care, affection, trust, goodness, kindness, friendship, fidelity and deference. I look with gratitude on the natural and spiritual relationships which have given origin, assistance, support, significance to my humble existence: how many gifts, how many beautiful and noble

things, how much hope have I received in this world! Now that my day is drawing to a close, and all of this stupendous and dramatic temporal and earthly scene is ending and dissolving, how can I further thank thee, O Lord, after the gift of natural life, also for the higher gift of faith and grace, in which alone at the end my surviving existence finds refuge?¹

CHAPTER ONE

The Birth and Youth of John Baptist Montini

The small rural town of Concesio lies some eight kilometers north of Brescia in the Trompia valley. Concesio had its origins in the early medieval period, and a Christian population existed already in the sixth century. The town expanded rapidly in the sixteenth century when many Brescian nobles bought land and built houses in the hamlet. While not taking up permanent residence, the country villas offered members of the noble families a pleasant escape from Brescia during the suffocating summers.

It was in such a villa, one that had formerly belonged to the noble family of Lodron, that Giovanni Battista Montini was born on September 26, 1897. His father, Giorgio Montini (1860–1943), was some fourteen years older than his mother, Giuditta Alghisi (1874–1943). His father's family had acquired the large summer house and adjacent land in 1863. In the latter stages of her pregnancy Giuditta Alghisi traveled to their country farmhouse on the Via Vantini at Concesio to prepare for the birth of her second child. Her

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first son, Ludovico, had been born a little over a year earlier on May 8, 1896, at the main family house in Brescia. Given the intense summer heat in the city, Giuditta came to spend the last months of her pregnancy in the countryside.

Giuditta was twenty-three when she gave birth to her second son. She had met her future husband on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica five years earlier when Giuditta was just eighteen. The two were independently on pilgrimage to Rome. Although she always recalled that their meeting was "love at first sight," she had to wait until she was twenty-one before marriage could be considered with the permission of her father.

The couple married on August 1, 1895, in the church of San Nazzaro in Brescia, and the reception took place in the bride's family home. Giorgio had graduated from the faculty of jurisprudence at the University of Padua, but he chose to pursue a career in journalism. Although only twenty-one years old, he was appointed editor by a Brescia-based attorney, Giuseppe Tovini, of the newly founded *Il Cittadino di Brescia*.

Giorgio's profession was somewhat avant-garde. However, the daily Catholic newspaper quickly established itself in a country that was struggling to cope with rapid change on the political front. When the Papal States were confiscated by the newly established Italian government in 1871, Pope Pius IX (1846–78) withdrew to the enclave of the Vatican. A myopic decision by the Holy See to dissuade Catholics from voting in elections resulted in some three decades when the political scene developed with few references to the Christian faith. In particular, it allowed the expansion of Freemasonry in Italian politics, schools, and universities. Despite the limitations, the church continued to provide hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and other social services for the general population, which remained resolutely Catholic.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Italian peninsula underwent enormous changes. For centuries the country had been divided into duchies, city-states, kingdoms, and republics. Two-thirds of the population subsisted on the land while the remaining third lived in cities and major towns. By the fin de siècle the population was close to 30 million, although some 200,000 emigrated each year to other parts of Europe or the New World.

The average age of Italian citizens was forty-two, although infant mortality was high with 20 percent of infants dying before their first birthday. Space was often limited, as extended members of the family often lived in small houses made of brick or stone. Malnutrition was widespread as were associated diseases. Running water was confined to the houses of the middle class and wealthy, while the poor shared water from wells.

Although the country had been officially united into the Kingdom of Italy in 1871, the process of unification was slow, and many citizens remained loyal to their previous rulers. Dialect was slow to change and efforts to standardize the Italian language proved difficult. The polite and familiar grammatical forms of address reflected a class society based on money, political influence, and privilege. The church, with its two-thousand-year-old traditions, reinforced the maintenance of the status quo. The poor sat on one side of the church, while the well off occupied the central pews. It was into this society that the Montini children were born.

Four days after his birth, on September 30, the infant was baptized Giovanni Battista—John the Baptist—in the local parish church at Concesio. He was the fifteenth child to have been born in the parish that year.

Giuditta's pregnancy had been difficult. On the advice of her mother-in-law, Francesca Buffali, Giuditta sent the

newborn to a wet nurse who lived some six kilometers away at Bovezzo. Twenty-three-year-old Corinda Peretti, who had three children of her own, kept the young Giovanni Battista in her home for several months. When the young boy finally returned to the family, he was brought to the main residence at Via Dante in Brescia.

Life remained tranquil for the young child. The third and last child in the family, Francesco, was born on September 22, 1900. Summer vacations were taken each year in both Concesio and Verolavecchia, the latter an isolated village to the south of Brescia where Giuditta had family. During the winter months Ludovico, Giovanni Battista, and Francesco remained at home with their mother and entertained their numerous cousins. At the age of six Giovanni Battista followed his elder brother to the local Jesuit-run Collegio Cesare Arici. It was an obvious choice, for in 1899 the family had moved to Via Trieste 37, just a block away from the school.

The young Giovanni Battista settled into school and his teachers and contemporaries later recalled Giovanni Battista as a quiet and reserved youth, pious and committed to learning. The years of formal schooling were often interrupted by periods of ill health, although this rarely disrupted his education. On June 6, 1907, the young Giovanni Battista made his First Communion at the chapel of the Sisters of the Holy Child in Brescia.

The brothers did well at the Jesuit school, their education amplified by the stories their parents read to them at bedtime. In 1907 the family made a pilgrimage to Rome, where they spent a few days visiting St. Peter's and the principal churches and shrines of the city. They returned to Brescia, where, some weeks later, both Ludovico and Giovanni Battista received their First Communion and the sacrament of confirmation.

Shortly afterward the family moved house for the last time, taking up residence at Via Grazie 7, just across the street from the church of Santa Maria della Grazie. Here the boys became altar servers and also frequented the nearby church of the Oratorians, Santa Maria della Pace. It was at this church that the young Giovanni Battista met one of the most influential people in his life. Father Giulio Bevilacqua joined the oratory shortly after his ordination in June 1908 and was assigned to the oratory of Santa Maria della Pace. The quiet and taciturn Montini was fascinated by this somewhat rumbustious young priest. Another young cleric, Paolo Caresana, also joined the oratory in 1912 and became the spiritual director and confessor to the young Giovanni Battista. The Oratorians had a particular apostolate to young people and invited youths to accompany them on their cycling trips into the countryside. The young Giovanni Battista developed a passion for cycling and regularly joined the weekly excursions. Such popular activities engaged young people but also fostered vocations to the priesthood and religious life. In keeping with the times, these engagements were designed for young men rather than women.

At the age of sixteen Giovanni Battista left the Jesuit school to conclude his formal education at home. Although he was officially enrolled in the Liceo Arnaldo da Brescia, he rarely attended classes. A bout of ill health prevented him from continuing with his companions, and the decision was made to provide a private tutor. During the summer Giovanni Battista had suffered an unspecified malady, the culmination of two years of health concerns for his parents. While cycling one day, the teenage Montini collapsed, alerting his doctor to possible cardiac problems. The trauma affected the young man, who could not understand his precarious bouts of ill health and fatigue.

World War I began on July 28, 1914, and Pope Pius X (1903–14) died almost a month later on August 20. As he neared the end of his education, Giovanni Battista contemplated what path he would choose for his future professional career. His earliest intention was to become a writer or a journalist like his father. To this end he considered studying Italian literature at university. He also examined a possible vocation to the Benedictine way of life. From this he was dissuaded by a Benedictine monk, Dom Denys Buenner, who believed that Montini was not sufficiently robust to withstand the privations of monastic life. He also spoke to his favorite priest at the Jesuit school, Fr. Persico, about his hopes to be a priest. At the age of nineteen Giovanni Battista graduated from the *liceo* with the highest marks possible.

Around this time Giovanni Battista met a newly ordained priest who had recently been appointed assistant pastor at Concesio. Don Francesco Galloni, just twenty-four, arrived in the small town full of plans to stir up the quiet parish. The urbane young priest was extremely popular and visited the family often. The Montinis had gone up a notch on the social ladder the previous year when Giorgio was appointed *assessore*, an unelected position for local political oversight, to the township of Brescia.

If coverage of the war occupied Giorgio's time and energy in 1914, it redoubled when Italy entered the war in May of the following year. Initially Italy had been allied to both Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This Triple Alliance had been intended as a purely defensive measure in the event that one of its members was attacked. But as the other two had started war without Italy's approval, the latter had avoided confrontation. By early summer 1915, however, Italy opted to side with Germany against the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Suddenly the war was on everybody's lips. The nearby Austrians, once friendly neighbors, were now belligerents. The war spread into northern Italy, dividing families and communities. The Oratorian house at La Pace in Brescia was taken by the Italian authorities and turned into a field hospital. In 1915 Ludovico Montini joined the army and was sent to a military Aviation Corps while Giovanni Battista concluded his final state exams.

After a brief summer vacation at Viareggio, Giovanni Battista returned home, where his family anxiously awaited news about Ludovico's fate. As the war gathered momentum, Giovanni Battista presumed that it would be only a matter of time before he was conscripted for military service. In early September Giorgio took Giovanni Battista to Rome on a business trip. During the visit, the teenager confided to his father his hopes to enter the seminary if he were not drafted for military service. Given Giovanni Battista's precarious health, however, it was uncertain that he would be enlisted.

Plans for the seminary were also affected by the war. The traditional opening date for Italian seminaries was in the second half of October. Most had suspended their intake of young students because of the war, however, and some seminaries had been commandeered during the hostilities by the Italian government. The bishops did not want to be accused of harboring young men fleeing conscription. Accordingly, Bishop Giacinto Gaggia of Brescia granted the seminarians permission to attend philosophy and theology classes while residing at home.

As he had suspected—and to his mother's relief—Giovanni Battista was rejected by the army on health grounds. News of the capture of Don Giulio Bevilacqua, who had been serving as an army chaplain, perturbed him, as did reports of other companions who were imprisoned by the enemy. The

war had entered Italian soil, and the hostilities rapidly worsened. A constant concern was for the safety of Rome, which the Italians feared would eventually fall to the invaders.

Pope Benedict XV (1914–22) regularly condemned the war as a doomed enterprise for which he was loudly condemned by all the belligerents. In October 1917 Giovanni Battista accompanied his father once more to Rome. Giorgio had begun to take a prominent role in Italian politics and was appointed president of the *Unione Popolare*, a predecessor of Catholic Action, which was founded in 1927. This was a position given personally by Pope Pius XI and indicated the pontiff's esteem for Giorgio Montini. Yet within the year he had to resign as he found it impossible to divide his time between Brescia and Rome.

The Great War finally concluded with an armistice on November 11, 1918. At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month the guns fell silent. The war, which had lasted four years and four months, had claimed some eighteen million lives. The arrival of the United States had convinced Germany and her allies that they could not win the war. A treaty, prepared largely by Britain and France, was signed by all parties at Versailles on June 28, 1919.

Since his election, Pope Benedict XV had pragmatically encouraged lay Catholics to play a greater role in Italian society. The period since 1870 had been characterized by hostility between the Italian government and the Vatican authorities. Benedict wished to normalize church–state relations, and he understood that negotiation was necessary. But first he wanted to strengthen the role of Catholics in the political life of the country; otherwise, he feared, the country could be ruled by either fascists or communists. Given that the majority of Italians were Catholic, it made sense to encourage their participation in public and political life.

Papal support for the emergence of Catholics into Italian political life was further enhanced when Benedict XV gave permission to a remarkable Sicilian priest, Luigi Sturzo, to found a political party, the Partito Popolare Italiano (Italian People's Party). Giorgio Montini was among those who successfully stood for public office at the elections in November 1919. In that same month Giovanni Battista made his last preparations for ordination to the priesthood. He received the soutane, the ankle-length coat worn by seminarians and clerics. On February 28, 1920, he was ordained subdeacon and three months later, on May 29, Giovanni Battista was ordained a priest, along with thirteen companions in the cathedral of Brescia.