

INTERVIEW/CAREGGIO

## «Let me tell you about Saint John Paul II, the mystic and prophet»

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“For everything that he did, Saint John Paul II deserves to be recognized as one of the co-patrons of Europe.” The person speaking is Monsignor Alberto Maria Careggio, the bishop-emeritus of Ventimiglia-San Remo and a personal friend of the great Pope who

was a native of Wadowice.

**Today, one hundred years to the day after May 18, 1920**, the birthdate of Karol Wojtyla († April 2, 2005), the impact of the entire life of the Polish saint is more evident than ever, and in particular the 26 ½ years of his pontificate in which he untiringly pointed out to Europe and the entire world, the urgency of returning to Christ. John Paul II is a saint who should not even have been born, at least not according to the advice of the doctors who strongly advised his mother, Emilia, to abort him. But Emilia, whose cause of beatification has been opened along with her husband Karol, Sr., decided to continue the pregnancy, risking her life.

**This last story was shared by the Pope of *Evangelium Vitae*** with Monsignor Careggio himself. He is the one who, beginning in 1989 when he was still a simple priest (John Paul II appointed him as a bishop six years later), took care of organizing Wojtyla's summer vacations in Valle d'Aosta. In this way he had the opportunity to experience, day after day, the full humanity of John Paul II and his profound contemplative side. *The Daily Compass* interviewed him for the occasion of the centenary of John Paul II's birth.

**Bishop Careggio, beginning in 1989 you were the organizer of the John Paul II's summer vacations in Valle d'Aosta. What memories can you share? Were you actually with him during those days?**

From morning till night. The use of the word "vacation" is not really accurate, but for him "going on vacation" meant simply changing his location but continuing to be what he was: a contemplative and a mystic. These traits of Saint John Paul II have not been highlighted enough. He loves the mountains because he saw in the mountains the symbolic representation of the spiritual journey to the heights. Whenever he went out, always holding his Rosary, he would spend the first half hour in absolute silence because he needed to pray. I still hold in my memory the looks he would give me when we arrived at the peak or at our goal. They were looks that were so penetrating that it was not easy to hold them; he entered into your heart. Whenever he saw anything beautiful, he always wanted to share it with Father Stanislaus [Dziwisch, Wojtyla's long-time secretary] and with me, and he always used to thank me for preparing the excursions for him. In those moments of enjoyment he was in the contemplation of God. There were many such moments.

**Tell us about one...**

When John Paul II broke his leg [in 1994], he still came to Valle d'Aosta that year for his vacation. He was limping, and he took his first steps on the trail holding onto Father Stanislaus and me. On the first day we only took twenty steps. On the following days he

improved, he went forward, and he continually said to me, "Eh, Father Alberto, you have a lame Pope!" On the last day when he was about to leave, he repeated this phrase to me. And I responded to him, "It's true, Your Holiness, but he makes the Church walk!" He was amazed. And then, to soften his amazement, he said jokingly, "But also in Valle d'Aosta?"

**You shared a great confidence together.**

Yes, but he was very attentive to everyone. On one occasion we took a hike on a magnificent glacier. The Holy Father already had problems walking, and between the worry and commotion that day, I had not yet spoken a single word to him. At a certain point he looked at me and said, "What's wrong with you today? You have not yet said a single word to me." Look at the great attention of the man of God! Here is a pope who acted like he was a simple priest...it's something that I cannot forget.

**How long did these vacations usually last?**

Ten days, not more. He was always worried about the faithful who had gone to Rome to see the Pope while he was away on vacation. He said: "Just think about how many pilgrims are coming so far to greet the Holy Father, and here I am on vacation." Although he was truly a mystic, his concern was always to be with the people. But there is another important story I would like to tell you.

**Tell us.**

In September 1994, John Paul II was supposed to go to Sarajevo, but he could not because of very serious rumors of war and fear of incidents that could have been potentially dangerous for the Pope and his entourage. Reluctantly, he gave up on the plan. Because of all these worries, that year he spent his vacation in Valle d'Aosta evidently in anguish. A similar occurrence also happened in 1991. During that vacation there was a terribly gloomy, stormy, rainy day. As you may well imagine, I wanted to stay home that day, but he wanted to go out at all costs. And so I accompanied him along with Father Stanislaus and a few others who went with him. We ended up getting completely soaked. Then we arrived at a mountain pasture where there was a large wooden cross. Wojtyla stood there in the rain, without saying a word, right in the middle of the trail. Completely drenched and waterlogged as he was, he knelt down and embraced the cross in such a way that I don't know how to describe it. He remained there for 5-10 minutes, all alone, while everyone waited at a distance out of respect. When he got up from that cross, the face of the Pope was transfigured; it was no longer the same. He had suffered his own little Passion.

**And then?**

Then we continued along the path, keeping watch on the Holy Father, who remained silent. And when we reached our goal we dried out our shoes and socks by the fire. Meanwhile the weather totally changed. In the afternoon, under a scorching sun, he wanted to return on the path that went by that cross. He said almost nothing that day, but he must have been undergoing his own Good Friday. This was the mystic Pope.

**And so was the war in the former Yugoslavia his great sorrow?**

Yes, and he suffered because he wanted there to be peace. The lack of peace and the situation in Europe were his crosses. How much he suffered seeing Europe refuse to recognize its Christian roots! He did not understand these “second fathers” of Europe, fathers who refused to recognize Europe’s Christian roots and made it into something that moved away from its history and today proves fragile. In fact he prophetically predicted the consequences Europe would face if it became atheist.

**With regard to values, you have something extraordinary in common with John Paul II: the heroism of your mothers. Both of them refused to have an abortion even though they were in very difficult situations.**

It’s true. Just as for Karol, so also the doctors told my mother that she absolutely should have an abortion. They told her that otherwise we would both die. “God gave him to me and I will not touch him,” was my mother’s response. I think that the entire family went to the country to my grandparents’ home to prepare for our funerals, because my mother wanted to be buried in the same region as her parents and it was thought certain that we both would die. And so, I was born in my grandmother’s kitchen! Today I am nearly 83 and my mother died at almost 91.

**And did John Paul II know your mother?**

When the Pope was in the presence of my mother, and of mothers in general, he had a particular veneration. At times he even helped my mother with those jobs that require special care. When my mother died, John Paul II wanted me to come and spend a few days with him in the Vatican. A few years later, at the end of my visit to Castel Gandolfo, he greeted me by saying three times, “La mamma, la mamma, la mamma!” Therefore, if we think about what a devoted son Karol Wojtyla was – he grew up without the warmth of a mother from the time he was nine years old – we can better understand why he wrote such beautiful words about women and mothers. Oftentimes in these things there is a subsoil that expresses personal experience in truth. And then...

**What?**

There is another particular story, that I referred to in my testimony for the process of beatification. For my mother’s 90th birthday, the Pope invited us to Castel Gandolfo for

Mass and lunch together. My mom didn't feel like going, and even though I tried to convince her to go she was quite firm: "I don't feel like it." So I called the doctor, who told me to take her immediately to the hospital. She was immediately admitted. The next day she was in agony and gasping on the point of death. And so, even though it was already evening, I decided to let Castel Gandolfo know.

### **And what was the response?**

The sister who answered the phone, who knew my mom well, told me she was so sorry to hear this and that she would immediately inform the Holy Father. Then I returned to my mom, who lay there dying, and I whispered the first part of the Hail Mary. My mother immediately stopped gasping and responded, "Holy Mary, Mother of God...." Then she said to me, "I am about to die, pay attention." She turned away and fell asleep. The next day they called me from Castel Gandolfo to find out how my mom was, and they told me that the night before the Holy Father had gone immediately to pray for my mom. Now, we cannot say *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, but it seems obvious to me what happened. She had the death rattle and she was expected to die that night, but instead she woke up peacefully the next morning and a few days later she was sent home (in fact she died about six months later after she broke her leg). I related this story to the process of beatification, even though this fact, like other cases of someone cured *ante mortem*, did not specifically advance his cause. But in any case, saints are saints! And John Paul II is a great saint!