

THE LIFE OF  
POPE ST. PIUS X

1835-1914

By  
F. A. FORBES

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## Chapter 3

**CANON AND BISHOP**

In the early spring of the year 1875 the Chancellor of the diocese of Treviso was removed to Fossalunga. A Canon's stall was also vacant, while the seminary was in need of a spiritual director whose influence would be powerful for good. It was the general opinion that if these three offices could be held by one holy, wise, and purposeful man, it would be an excellent thing for all parties concerned.

"I have him!" said Monsignor Zinelli the Bishop. "Don Giuseppe Sarto is the very man we need."

No sooner said than done. The rector of Salzano was named Chancellor and Residential Canon of the Cathedral of Treviso, and appointed spiritual director of the seminary.

The Bishop had not forgotten the warnings of Don Giuseppe's friends. By this arrangement the newly appointed Canon would reside at the seminary, where the care of his health would not be left entirely in his own hands. He would, moreover, preside at the professors' table, and therefore would be unable to indulge his tendency to starve so as to feed the poor.

The news was received with mixed feelings by the people of Salzano. Joy that their beloved Father should receive such a mark of honour struggled hard with their grief at losing him. It comforted them a little, they said, to think

that his precious gifts, instead of being spent on Salzano alone, would now find full scope in a diocese that counted two hundred and ten parishes.

It was not until the autumn of the same year that Don Giuseppe bade farewell to his sorrowing parishioners, and, taking possession of his Canon's stall, sang the first vespers of Advent Sunday in the Cathedral of Treviso.

Like all the other professors of the seminary, Canon Sarto had three small rooms set apart for his use. From the windows, open to the sun and air, he could look across the neatly kept garden to where the quiet waters of the Sile, flowing by the old ivy-coloured walls, widened out into little silvery lakes amongst the thickets of poplars and plane trees that lay beyond.

The rector of the seminary was none other than Don Giuseppe's old friend, Don Pietro Jacuzzi. There were in the college 160 lay students and 54 aspirants to the priesthood. "I well remember Monsignor Sarto's first instruction," said one of the latter in after years. " 'You are expecting to find in me,' he began, 'a man of profound learning and of wide experience in spiritual matters, a master in asceticism and doctrine. You will be disappointed, for I am none of these things. I am only a poor country parish priest. But I am here by God's will—therefore you must bear with me.' I have forgotten the instruction," added the narrator, "but the preamble I shall never forget." It was a lesson in that rarest of virtues—humility.

A regular course of instructions and meditations was begun at once, and immediately won the attention of the students.

The lucid simplicity with which Monsignor Sarto exposed his points carried the minds of his hearers straight into the heart of the truth which they were considering. The boys were never tired, never puzzled, his instructions being eminently practical and within the grasp of his audience. His aim was to inculcate a real and solid piety which would endure throughout the troubles and temptations of life. It is not everybody who knows the art of appealing to the young; it was one in which Monsignor Sarto excelled. Even in his familiar talks with the boys, full of merriment and sympathy as they were, there was always something helpful and uplifting. Personal cleanliness, not as a rule the most prominent characteristic of Southern nations, was a thing on which he laid particular stress. Gentle and kind as he was to all weakness and suffering, he could be stern enough when it was necessary, and his reproofs were seldom forgotten. If any of the boys fell sick, he would nurse them with a mother's tenderness; and to those of the seminarists who were the sons of poor parents he gave material as well as moral help.

It happened that one of these young students was in great distress by reason of a family difficulty. His father, a poor working man, was in urgent need of a few pounds, and there was no means of obtaining the sum. He confided his trouble to one of his companions, who asked him why he did not go to Monsignor Sarto and tell him all about it. The advice was taken, and the lad knocked at the familiar door.

“Come in,” cried a cheery voice, and he entered. Monsignor Sarto was seated at his table reading by the light of a little lamp. “What can I do for you?” he asked kindly.

The young man, who found it difficult to put his trouble into words, stammered out the whole sad story, Monsignor Sarto listening with compassion.

“I am so sorry,” he said when the tale was ended, “but I have only a few lire, nothing like the sum you require.”

The poor student broke down completely, for his last hope was gone.

“Come, come; courage!” cried the good Canon, greatly distressed; “come to me tomorrow, and if I cannot give you all, I may be able to give you part of the money.”

Next morning the seminarist returned.

“Well?” said Monsignor Sarto.

“Well?” answered the student nervously.

“Do you really think,” continued the Canon, “that I can manufacture banknotes?” Then, seeing the distress of the boy, he added hastily: “Come come, my son, I was only joking, I have got the money,” and, opening a little drawer, he took out the required sum.

“You will soon be a priest,” he continued, “and when you can do so without inconvenience, you must give it back to me, for you see I have had to borrow it myself.”

The winters were sometimes bitterly cold at Treviso, and the house was unwarmed. The needy students would often find

warm clothing provided for them by the same charitable hand. A tradesman of Treviso can certify that he received many orders from Monsignor Sarto for warm cloaks, with strict injunction to keep the matter secret. That the Chancellor had seldom more than a few lire in his possession was not surprising.

It was a labour of love to him to prepare the little boys for their First Communion. The vice-rector begged that this task might be left to those of the staff who had more time to spare.

“You have too much to do as it is,” he urged kindly; “leave that to others.”

“It is my duty,” was the answer. “Am I not their spiritual father?”

In order to obtain the necessary time Monsignor Sarto deprived himself of the evening walk which was his only recreation after a day of hard work; and, assembling his lively little band of neophytes in the church, he would hold them spellbound with a simple instruction that made the hardest things seem easy.

His kindness and quick sympathy made him as popular with the masters as with the boys. At table he was the life and soul of the party. Laying aside the cares of his office together with the big bundle of papers that accompanied him everywhere, he set himself to make the time spent in the refectory as refreshing for the minds as it was for the bodies of his colleagues. The amusing stories told by him and the interesting discussions he set afoot were long remembered,

as was his sly teasing of certain professors which provoked much merry laughter. These were not the moments, he held, for discussing grave and serious questions; anyone who mentioned the word logic, for instance, was obliged to make amends by telling an interesting or useful story. When Monsignor Sarto's place was empty, everything fell flat.

He still kept up his old habit of working during part of the night. His neighbour in the seminary would often hear him moving in his room long after everyone else had retired to rest. "Go to bed, Monsignor," he would sometimes call out. "Lay down the cares of your office until tomorrow; he works ill who works too long."

"Quite true, quite true, Don Francesco," would come the quietly humorous answer; "put that into practice. Go to bed and sleep well." It was past midnight before Monsignor Sarto's light went out, and he was up again by four o'clock.

In the year 1879 Bishop Zinelli died, and Monsignor Sarto was elected Vicar-Capitular, with the task of administering the diocese while the see remained vacant. He announced his nomination to this important post in characteristic words.

"Called by the votes of my colleagues to Administer the diocese of Treviso, in place of him who for so many years has ruled it with such wisdom, prudence, and zeal, I must frankly confess that I have accepted this heavy burden, not only because I feel assured that they will help me in my task, but because I know the spirit of the clergy. That you will earnestly cooperate with me in upholding the most

precious prerogatives of the priesthood I have no doubt. I ask you, therefore, to remember the words of the Apostle: 'Walk carefully, that our ministry be not blamed'; let our actions be such that our enemies shall find nothing in us worthy of reproach. You are full of zeal for souls: seek to win them rather by love than by fear. The supreme wish of Our Lord for His own was that they should love one another, and this wish found its fulfilment in Apostolic times, when the Christians were one heart and one soul in Christ. A priest's life is a continual warfare against evil, which cannot fail to raise up powerful enemies. In order that they may not prevail against us, let us be united in charity amongst ourselves; thus we shall be invincible and strong as a rock."

Monsignor Sarto administered the diocese of Treviso for less than a year, but in this short time he accomplished much. Although he still retained his position as spiritual director of the seminary, he preached oftener in public, his sermons invariably rousing the enthusiasm of his hearers. In the February of 1880 he was relieved of this office on the nomination as Bishop of Monsignor Callegari, who was to find in his Chancellor a devoted and faithful friend.

The Bishop, however, was destined to remain but a short time at Treviso. In 1882 he was promoted to the diocese of Padua, Monsignor Apollonio, formerly Bishop of Adria, succeeding him at Treviso.

In September, 1884, Monsignor Apollonio, who had been making the pastoral visit of his diocese, returned home rather unexpectedly. Monsignor Sarto, who was busy as usual with the affairs of the Chancellorship, was not a

little surprised at being summoned somewhat mysteriously to the Bishop's private oratory. "Let us kneel before the Blessed Sacrament," said Monsignor Apollonio gravely, "and pray about a matter which concerns us both intimately." Still more astonished, Monsignor Sarto knelt, and the two prelates prayed for a moment in silence. Then the Bishop rose, and handing a letter to his companion, bade him read it. Thus did Monsignor Sarto learn his nomination to the Bishopric of Mantua.

Seldom has such an honour been received in such a spirit. The strong man who all his life long had welcomed hardship and suffering with a cheery smile, wept like a child. He was, he declared, utterly incapable, quite unworthy of such a trust. The Bishop, who knew better, but whose heart was touched at the sight of his friend's distress, comforted him as best he could. "It is God's will," he said; "trust in His help." Convinced, however, in his own mind that the Pope was wholly mistaken in his judgment of him, Monsignor Sarto wrote to Rome to profess his incapacity and worthlessness. Needless to say, his arguments were not accepted.

The news of the nomination spread rapidly throughout the diocese. Amongst those who knew his qualities of mind and heart, his purposeful energy, his abnegation, and his work as Vicar-Capitular, the appointment caused great rejoicing; to nobody was it a surprise. "It is what we have been expecting for a long time," said the people; "he is cut out for a Bishop."

Early in November, amidst enthusiastic demonstrations, the Bishop-elect set out for Rome. At Padua he met with a fresh ovation, Monsignor Callegari himself came to the

station to greet his old friend and to wish him well. On the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup> he was received by Pope Leo XIII, and left his presence consoled and full of courage as to the future. Consecrated Bishop on the 16<sup>th</sup>, he remained in Rome for ten days longer, returning on the 29<sup>th</sup> to Treviso, where he was to remain for some months before entering on his episcopal charge.

It was during this time that he went one day, accompanied by a friend, to visit a Venetian city. In the railway-carriage were two gentlemen, who, while conversing on local subjects, touched on the election of the new Bishop of Mantua. They wondered what kind of a man Monsignor Sarto was; not very intelligent, they feared, nor very gifted. The Bishop-elect, with a sign to his companion to keep quiet, joined in the conversation, endorsing most heartily everything that they said in his own disparagement. He then proceeded to contrast the poor picture he had painted of himself with the qualities that were necessary for an ideal Bishop, and this with such ability and discernment that his two hearers were greatly impressed.

The Bishop was the first to leave the carriage.

“Who is that delightful priest?” asked the two gentlemen of his companion, who was preparing to follow.

The latter, who could contain himself no longer, made a low bow. “Monsignor Sarto, Bishop-elect of Mantua,” he answered with elaborate irony.

The consternation of the other two may be imagined; but the Bishop heartily enjoyed the joke.

He spent Holy Week and Easter that year with his mother and sisters at Riese. It was a double festival for his family and the friends of his childhood who crowded round him to offer their good wishes. Back again at Treviso, where he had spent so many happy days, he had not the courage to face a public farewell. "Read them this letter at dinner," he said to the rector of the seminary; "tell them I keep them all in my heart, and that they must pray for me." Then, slipping unnoticed out of the house, he went to meet the carriage ordered to wait for him at a little distance, and so set out for Mantua.

At the station a large crowd had gathered to receive him, composed of priests, people, representatives of the noble families of the place, and of the divers associations of town and country. Outside the Bishop's palace, in the great square of St. Peter's, a vast multitude of townspeople were awaiting his arrival. "We want to see our Bishop," they cried tumultuously, and their desire was immediately satisfied. Stepping out into the balcony which overlooked the square, their new pastor greeted them with warm affection and gave them his episcopal blessing.

Mantua, say the Italians, has always been a fighting city, and in 1885 it was still true to its reputation. Of Etruscan origin, and the birthplace of Virgil and Sordello, throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries its episcopal see had been usually held by members of the famous family of Gonzaga.

The task which lay before the new Bishop was no easy one. There were divisions between the priests and the people; the seminary, which had been recently founded, was almost

empty of students; many parishes were without a priest; no synod had been held within the memory of man.

The spirit in which Monsignor Sarto took up his new work showed itself in his first pastoral letter to his flock.

“I shall spare myself neither care nor labour nor vigils for the salvation of souls. My hope is in Christ, who strengthens the weakest by His divine help; I can do all in Him who strengtheneth me! His power is infinite, and if I lean on Him it will be mine; His wisdom is infinite, and if I look to Him for counsel I shall not be deceived; His goodness is infinite, and if my trust is stayed on Him I shall not be abandoned. Hope unites me to my God and Him to me. Although I know I am not sufficient for the burden, my strength is in Him. For the salvation of others I must bear weariness, face dangers, suffer offences, confront storms, fight against evil. He is my Hope.”

His first care was the seminary, and in a little more than a year he was able to write to a friend: “I have a hundred and forty-seven boarders, young men with healthy appetites who can digest anything and everything.”

The scarcity of priests in the country villages was indeed disastrous. The Bishop lost no time in convoking a synod. “If people do not hear of God, of the Sacraments, and of eternal life,” he said to the priests assembled, “they will soon lose every good sentiment, both civil and social. Do not believe that any difficulty is insurmountable,” continued this intrepid soldier of Christ; “nothing is impossible to those who will and those who love.”

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