

AN UNEXPECTED TWIST

My First Lunch with John Paul II

NOVEMBER 18, 1984

It's raining in Rome and I have to retrieve my car (yesterday it was towed away), before the start of Giovanni Agnelli's conference¹ at the Foreign Press Association, which I have to moderate, as I am currently the president. I rescue the car and manage to arrive minutes before the start of the event.

In the middle of the conference, when I had recovered from the rush, Maria Teresa Lazzaro, the secretary of the Association, passes me a note: they had just phoned, inviting me to lunch with the Pope at half past one in the Vatican. I hide my surprise as best I can. I discreetly glance at the clock: more than an hour to go. Time passes and Agnelli continues talking. Shortly after, another furtive glance: I'm approaching the limit. Even though Agnelli is about to finish, every second feels like an eternity. As soon as he says the last word, I conclude the session, say goodbye quickly, take a cab, and arrive at the *Portone di Bronzo*, the most direct access to the Pope's Apartment, minutes before the scheduled time.

I go up to the Courtyard of San Damaso, where the main entrance to the Apostolic Palace is located. A baroque and picturesque elevator, with a bench upholstered in red satin and, naturally, with an elevator operator. I pass through the second floor, where the Secretary of State's quarters are located. On the second floor are the rooms where the Pope receives guests: the Consistory Hall, the Clementine Hall. . . .

The elevator stops at the third floor. Opposite the offices of the Secretariat of State is the Papal Apartment, the Pope's residence: an anteroom, a reception room, a large office for his private secretaries and one for himself, from whose window he prays the Angelus many Sundays of the year. Beyond are the

1. Giovanni Agnelli (1921–2003) was a well-known Italian businessman, president of the automobile company *FIAT*, founded by his grandfather, Giovanni Agnelli, in 1899.

bedroom and the private chapel. They lead us to the dining room, a sober and spacious room.

The Holy Father receives us cordially. Four of us had lunch with him: Crescenzo Sepe;² an Italian journalist of Polish descent, Gian Franco Svidercoschi;³ the substitute of the Vatican Secretariat of State, Eduardo Martínez Somalo;⁴ and myself.

The Pope asks me about the life and activities of the Foreign Press Association and we exchange a few words about the correspondents, including the Soviet ones. Soon he directly proposes the topic: what can be done to improve the information provided by the Holy See Press Office? At a certain point, he mentions the work of Deskur, whom he has known for many years.⁵

I tell him I have nothing prepared and will have to improvise. He doesn't seem to care. Notes are taken. Two days later, I bring a report with me, which gives a more orderly account of my ideas.

An Unexpected Call

NOVEMBER 30, 1984

I am working in my office in *Piazza Navona* when I receive a telephone call from the Vatican. The *Sostituto*,⁶ Martínez Somalo—I am told—wants to see

2. Crescenzo Sepe (Italy, 1943). At that time he worked in the Secretariat of State. Years later, he was appointed Advisor to the Secretary of State, then Secretary of the Congregation for the Clergy and Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. He was Secretary General of the Committee for the Jubilee Year 2000 and Archbishop of Naples (2006–2020). He has been a cardinal since 2001.

3. Gian Franco Svidercoschi (Italy, 1936) was deputy editor of *L'Osservatore Romano* and collaborated with John Paul II on *Gift and Mystery* (1996); he is co-author of: *Stanislaw Dziwisz, A Life with Karol. Conversations with Gian Franco Svidercoschi* (2007). Among his best known books is *Letter to a Hebrew Friend* (1993).

4. Eduardo Martínez Somalo (Spain, 1927–2021). He was Substitute for the Vatican Secretary of State until 1988, when he was appointed Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. In 1992, the Pope appointed him prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life. In 1988 he was elevated to the cardinalate and served as Camerlengo (administrator in *Sede Vacante*) from 1997 to 2007.

5. Andrzej Maria Deskur (Poland, 1924–2011) was, in 1983, president emeritus of the then Pontifical Commission for Social Communications. He had a close friendship with John Paul II, whom he had known since before he was elected Pope. Precisely the day before the conclave of October 1978, Deskur suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed for the rest of his life. He was created a cardinal in 1985.

6. Substitute of the Secretariat of State: this name is given to the official of the Holy See who heads the first section of the Secretariat of State, the Section for General Affairs.