

Will a Roman Barber Help Secure Sainthood for John Paul II?

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By Alexander Smoltczyk in Rome

An Italian barber who claims he experienced a miracle could become the key figure in the canonization of John Paul II. There are just a few hitches: He's a communist, and he doesn't like the church.

Gianni's razor blade slices through the thick foam on the neck of his customer. "Of course, I told Wojtyla at the time that I'm a communist. He accepted it. Naturally, no one provokes his barber, at least not when he's getting a shave. Am I right, Alberto?" A mumble of assent can be heard through the shaving cream. "Not even a future pope."

Sixty-one-year-old barber Giovanni Vecchio, who goes by Gianni, once gave Karol Wojtyla a shave. It was in 1976 or 1977, and he was working in a barbershop near the Vatican.

"He didn't know his way around. He had a strong accent. He was a guest worker, just like I used to be." The two men talked, in German and Italian, and it didn't take long for him to figure out that, he, Gianni Vecchio, had had a cardinal under his knife. "Back then, in 1978, when the white smoke rose into the sky after the conclave, I was standing in St. Peter's Square, and I heard this voice, with that accent. I know him, I said to myself."

Vecchio, a stout man with a shaved head, looks like a retired wrestler. But he holds his comb and scissors as gracefully as a knife and fork at a gala dinner. His barbershop is little more than a hole in the wall, completely lined with mirrors, on Via Niso, a street flanked by tall, low-income buildings in eastern Rome. A shave costs €5 and a haircut €15. There are special rates for neighbors, a category that seems to apply to almost anyone.

The barber recently became a "miracolato," or a witness to a miracle. This makes him a potential authority on the suitability of a future saint. Before a good Catholic can be beatified or even canonized, a protracted examination procedure is required, which is described in the apostolic constitution known as the "Divinus perfectionis magister."

"Santo subito!" -- "sainthood now!" -- the people who had gathered at night in St. Peter's Square chanted when Pope John Paul II was lying in state inside the basilica. But canonization isn't possible without meticulous examination and the testimony of witnesses. And nothing goes without a miracle, recorded and certified by the relevant Vatican officials.

That's why Gianni Vecchio is so important -- or at least one of the disks in his lower back, the one that is no longer the source of excruciating pain.

Double Entry Bookkeeping

The former pope, who was instrumental in bringing down the Soviet empire, could end up owing his halo to a former guest worker and member of the Italian Communist Party. "Here," he says, offering his proof of party membership: "identification card number 496145, Togliatti section in St. Georgen. Signed by Enrico Berlinguer" -- the legendary party leader.

Vecchio carries the document, which is adorned with the hammer and sickle, in his wallet, along with two small votive pictures, one of John Paul and the other of Mother Teresa. He calls it his personal version of double-entry bookkeeping: "Faith is one account, and politics is another. I was never religious and I'm not religious today. But this Wojtyla has taken me by the hand."

The walls are adorned with several generations of calendars, layered one on top of the other. Gianni has taken out one of them, from 1988, and pinned it on top. "It's relevant again," he says, as he taps the current date with his finger and begins searching for the pieces of evidence in the miracle that involves one the disks in his lower back. Meanwhile, the shaving cream is beginning to dry on Alberto's upper lip. But Alberto doesn't mind waiting, nor do any of Vecchio's other customers. Without his shop, many wouldn't know how to spend their days.

In this country, which often seems to have deteriorated into something one might call Berlusconi, Vecchio seems as much a relic of the past as the fading calendars on the walls of his shop. He is a holdover from the days of cardboard suitcases, when the poor from southern Italy, including Vecchio, began migrating north. Some went as far as St. Georgen in Germany's Black Forest, where they worked in the factories that were still there in 1961, the factories that produced Dual record players and Kundo and Staiger clocks. "There were 2,500

foreigners in St. Georgen, most of them from Italy," he recalls. "Almost all were communists. And that was the year the Berlin Wall was built. It wasn't easy."

Vecchio loved St. Georgen. He gave the other workers haircuts and began assembling the collection of hair dryers, shaving brushes and razor blades that line the walls of his barbershop today.

Vecchio's Miracle

After Vecchio had returned to Rome and opened a barbershop, and after meeting this Polish priest, he would see him every year on January 6, at the blessing of the manger of Rome's street cleaners, a Christmas cult site for the city's ordinary people. "He always looked at me. And now listen to this..."

A year ago, Vecchio began having severe lower back pain. He could hardly walk anymore, and even giving shaves to his customers became more and more difficult. He went to a hospital, where he was diagnosed with a herniated disk between the second and third lumbar vertebrae.

On July 31, 2009, Vecchio was admitted to the San Giovanni Hospital for surgery ("San Giovanni, like Giovanni Paolo II, does that ring a bell?!"). He saw a photo of John Paul II hanging in the lobby. "It was an early photo of him," he says, "with the eyes I remembered."

An MRI was performed to confirm the diagnosis, and Vecchio was scheduled for surgery on August 3. But then, one day, as he says: "I woke up and the pain was gone. Completely gone! Dottoressa Zaccagnini did another MRI later one and found nothing! She said that while she didn't believe in miracles, there was no explanation for what had happened."

I'm Probably the only Wojtyla Miracle from Italy

It must have been the look in the eyes of his former Polish customer.

"Gianni, you were chosen," a voice says from behind a newspaper on the other side of the barbershop, where three elderly men are now sitting, waiting their turns.

Whatever the explanation, Vecchio remains pain-free to this day. He jogs 10 to 15 kilometers through the city every few days, and he circles his chair with the vitality of days gone by. "And then there was a photo of John Paul lying on the ground in front of my shop the other day. Exactly what I had wished for!" One of the waiting customers chimes in: "Sei miracolato! Like Berlusconi, who didn't have any scars after he was attacked in Milan."

The Place Where Saints Are Made

Vecchio reported his case to the "Congregation for the Causes of Saints" on St. Peter's Square, where -- during normal business hours -- saints are made.

When the Congregation for the Causes of Saints proclaimed the heroic virtue of the Polish pope on Dec. 19, 2009, Vecchio appeared as a guest on Italy's highest-rated talk show, "Porta a Porta," to talk about his herniated disk. "I'm probably the only Wojtyla miracle from Italy," he said.

Although, when it comes to miracles, some in Italy might say that leaving the notorious San Giovanni Hospital alive qualifies as one.

The proclaiming of heroic virtue by Pope Benedict XVI, together with a miracle, is a requirement for beatification. Karol Wojtyla is clearly about to be beatified, and he is also believed to be on the path to sainthood. Even upon close inspection, the way he conducted his life was preeminently Christian, and his writings (all of which were studied with "rigor and sober-mindedness" and presented to the current pope) offer no grounds for skepticism.

The regulars at Salon "Gianni" on Via Niso, at any rate, expect that there will be a new saint to whom they can offer their prayers by this fall, a Saint Karol.

"They said that my case would contribute to his beatification," says Vecchio. Unfortunately, however, the taking of evidence in "Causa Wojtyla" had already been completed in July, and retroactive nominations are not part of the process. This means that Vecchio's miracle will not be of any use to the Vatican until the second phase.

Will It Qualify as a Miracle?

When that happens, a panel of doctors and theologians will examine Vecchio's computer scans, compare the before-and-after images, obtain expert reports and opposing expert reports, and eventually arrive at a vote. And if it turns out that ordinary science can offer an explanation for Vecchio's miraculous recovery, it will not qualify as a true miracle.

"Ciao Gianni, I'll pay you the rest next time," says Alberto, the customer in the chair. "Ciao Alberto. Your turn, Tommaso. The usual?" "The usual, Gianni."

Heroic virtue is unlikely to be in the cards for barber Gianni Vecchio from Via Niso. He is currently separated from his wife and lives with a Croatian woman. He is a barber who sometimes gives his customers shaves -- even the occasional cardinal who happens to wander into his shop.

But without places like Salon "Gianni," Italian society would not be able to offer such tenacious resistance to the faster pace and general disillusionment of modern life. It's a place where, surrounded by bottles of aftershave, photos of grandchildren, pinups and pictures of the saints, Vecchio and his customers discuss the politics of the day and appraise the latest impertinences of the ruling class.

It's only a barbershop, not a place for metaphysical debates.

But wondrous nonetheless.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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