

INTERVIEW WITH ENRICA RONCALLI, POPE JOHN'S NIECE LIVING IN SOTTO IL MONTE



Enrica Roncalli

Pope John XXIII was your uncle. Was he your father or mother's brother?

Enrica: He was my father's brother. My name is Enrica Roncalli like the pope Roncalli.

It is said that he was very fond of his family and especially his mother (very good person); that is, your grandmother. What could you tell us about your grandparents, the familiar life in Sotto il Monte and its influence on him?

Enrica: the grandparents Battista and Marianna were very good. Every morning used to go to Mass. As soon as grandfather Battista and grandmother Marianna got up they used to say their prayers, the Angelus Domini. Both of them used to go to mass at 5.00 a.m.. When Bshop Angelo came on Holiday here to Sotto il Monte his mum, my grandma used to go to the house where he was to see him and to talk to him every morning.

Which are the most beautiful and happiest memories of him you've got?

Enrica: I remember when he was bishop on holiday here in Sotto il Monte and bishop Montini (the future pope Paul VI) came here to see him and he stayed here for a quarter of an hour and I put in order the house in order to welcome him. After bishop Montini went away my uncle told me these very words: " He (Montini) could be a very good pope". My uncle loved very much the light. He didn't like darkness.

How old were you when he became the Pope? Which were your feelings about this? (Because it must be an honour to have in the family someone who becomes Christ's Vicary in the Earth...).

Enrica: I was 38 years old when he became pope. I wept a lot because I wasn't happy. I saw all the world on his shoulders, all the worries of the world on his shoulders. When he was crowned Pope that day he looked for me. Every 2 or 3 months I used to go to see him to the Vatican. Every

morning when I was there I used to hear mass with him. To his relatives he talked in dialect. When I was there I stayed with the sisters. I used to stay there every time 4 or 5 days. Now and then I had meal with him. He used to ask me news about Sotto il Monte. When he was bishop and used to come here to Sotto il Monte on Holidays a month every year he enjoyed to walk around the village. He knew French and very little Turkish. He was the first at going around with civil clothes when the government obliged all the clerics not to show off their religion although some of the priest didn't want to. I had a lot of respect for him. I used to call him His Excellency. I never called him Uncle because when he became bishop in 1925 I was 5 years old.

Did you visit him at the Vatican? Were you impressed by the surroundings? Had you visited him before, when he was in Venice, etc.?

Enrica: As I said before I used to go there to the Vatican but I wasn't impressed. Some times he showed me some places inside the Vatican. I used to stay in the private apartments. I saw him in Paris. I stayed there 3 months and then to Venice. I was there when he left for the Conclave. He took a train for Rome and I another for Bergamo with the hope to see each other again after the Conclave in Venice but as you can understand it was not possible because he was elected pope.

Which were the feelings of the inhabitants of Sotto il Monte? (I mean when knowing Angelo had become the Pope of Rome).

Enrica: There was a big feast. All the people were in the streets. There was an invasion of journalists and the people were very happy.

If you had to choose an adjective to describe your uncle, which one would you use? Why?

Enrica: Holy. He didn't become holy because he became pope he was already holy. Now and then I used to watch him praying and he seemed to me in ecstasy. He had a great respect for the liturgy.

Do you think he was understood by his colleagues when he proposed the Council?

Enrica: No at first. I remember he said he told one of his cardinals (I don't remember the name) he wanted to do Concilium and the Cardinal told him not to do it. But the day after the cardinal told him to excuse him for that answer.

Did you go to Vatican when he was beatified? What did you feel about it?

Enrica: I went for the beatification. I haven't got words to express the feelings. It was a marvellous experience. I wept for the joy.

Do you think he'll be canonised in a few years?

Enrica: I don't know

How do you feel when you hear of so many people around the world who admire and love him so much even without knowing him?

Enrica: I am very happy because one of my cousins, sister Anna who is a missionary in Ethiopia told me that also in Africa there is a strong devotion and there are His images in almost all the houses or huts.

Which message would you give to all these people?

Enrica: The message is to imitate him, imitate his goodness, his humility and his spirit of prayer that struck me so much. In his simplicity and humility he had a strong character and when he wanted to do a thing he managed to achieve it. Anyway above all there was the prayer. I remember how he used to pray.

Anything about the Council?

He always followed the council from his room also when he wasn't present at the sessions of the council.



Enrica with a picture of John XXIII

(Interview given by Enrica Roncalli to father Gianbattista Inselvini PIME with questions from Montserrat Coll Capdevila 30th April 2002)