

Pino Loperfido

THE GIFT

*Life and wonders of Maria Domenica Lazzeri
(1815-1848)*

Pino Loperfido, *The Gift*
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*“Not by his virtue,
but by gift and grace.
Here is her beauty”.*

(H.E. Lauro Tisi, Bishop of Trento,
in the church of Capriana
on September 24, 2023)

*“I had to phone someone,
so I picked on you”*

(David Bowie, “Starman”, 1972)

*“Writing is a return – a trigger that opens chasms
of meaning, an unarmed journey towards
haunting and warrior-like shadows. Writing
is the gesture that consumes waiting, and leads to the edges
of a forgotten echo, of a life perhaps
trapped between metal sheets, still unknown”.*

(Giovanna Rosadini, “Frammenti di felicità terrena”,
LietoColle-Pordenonelegge, 2019)

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*To those who lost it all, and start anew,
for nothing ends when you truly live through.*

THE GIFT

Life and wonders of Maria Domenica Lazzeri
(1815-1848)



Venice, Friday, October 14, 2022

The city is a canvas of vivid colors and unfamiliar voices. Wandering through the narrow alleys – the famous “calli” –, deciding where to have lunch. Venice has the same effect on me as always: I feel like I’ve stepped into a giant board game. In the end, I choose a small African restaurant. The aroma of spices and a waiter guide me to the table. It’s at the exact moment I’m sitting down that phone vibrates in my pocket.

It’s Monsignor Giulio Viviani from Trento. His voice, sharp and full of his distinct accent, delivers news that rings like an alarm bell. What has happened? It’s quickly said. The consultants and theological experts of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints have expressed a favorable opinion regarding the beatification process for Maria Domenica Lazzeri.

Three years earlier, I had published “The Maintenance of the Universe” (“La manutenzione dell’universo”, in italian) my first book dedicated to this woman, who had appeared to me as an enigma to be deciphered since 1998. It was the conclusion of twenty years of research, but also the beginning of something that transcended the mere publication of a book. I had discovered that Maria Domenica, a young farmer who lived in the first half of the 19th century, was not just an object of study but a figure who had shaken my conception of faith and humanity.

From that moment onward, my life itself would be dotted with signs and coincidences, almost always difficult to interpret. A series of encounters, words, alignments, events – some beautiful, some less so, extraordinary and banal, grat-

ifying and destructive – everything seemed to be interconnected, tied by a common thread that always led back there: to Capriana.

As in every life, mine has seen both beautiful moments and dark ones, periods of total serenity and others when I could feel the heat of hell's flames. But the conclusion I've come to, in approaching the story of Maria Domenica, is that the lines of existence are in a certain sense pre-drawn, equipped with markers that it is up to our insight, will, reason, and faith to interpret.

But let's return to the novel "The Maintenance of the Universe". I remember very well the turbulent journey toward its publication. It was the beginning of 2020. The book seemed to fight against its own release. On the day I had planned to send the manuscript to the printer, the lockdown began: the world came to a halt because of a microscopic virus. The print shop shut down, along with my hopes of completing that work. No responses to emails, no calls. At that moment, the pandemic seemed ready to extinguish the world, and with it, my ambitions.

But as happens in certain stories, darkness is never total.

On March 27, 2020, while the book was stalled and humanity was overwhelmed by images of Pope Francis celebrating the Eucharist in an empty St. Peter's Square, the world was in total crisis, like the patients in intensive care. St. Peter's Square, devoid of crowds, was a place of desolation, as the Pope, under heavy rain, raised the monstrance for the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing. Dense, black, and sticky like pitch, the silence was broken only by the sounds of sirens, rescue vehicles, and law enforcement.

When, one day, we would recount that scene to our grandchildren, they surely wouldn't believe us.

What kind of fool could have been thinking, at that point, about their own novel waiting to go to bookstores? Who had the audacity to reflect on something less serious than the end of the world? The beatification of Maria Domenica Lazzeri? The documentation required for her canonization process? No, there were other things to think about at that moment... And then, for a century and a half, the Church had practically ignored this story, if not outright hindered and censored it.

But evidently, destiny had other plans.

In this backdrop of crisis and hope – when the coronavirus seemed to promise nothing good – Maria Domenica emerged from the darkness of a forgotten past, ready to reignite a light on faith and humility. That it all happened during that tumultuous period could not have been just a coincidence.

In T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", there is a passage I love to the point of madness. I am referring to the episode of the two travelers. In the notes to the text, Eliot himself specified that he was inspired by the account of an Antarctic expedition, perhaps one by the famous explorer Ernest Shackleton.

But it is inevitable not to think of the mystical encounter of the disciples of Emmaus. Lost in pain and disorientation, the two are joined by an enigmatic stranger. His presence, silent but powerful, evokes a sense of possible redemption, but also an unfathomable mystery, as if his path runs parallel to that of men, always just one step behind. Eliot writes:

“Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together,
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you”.

We walk, side by side, toward a destiny that eludes us, but sometimes, just before we wonder if we are alone, it happens: a figure joins us; we have never seen it before, but somehow, it belongs to us. We don't recognize it, yet its presence makes its way through our thoughts like a sign. We look at each other, but we don't speak, and yet, it's as if everything has already been said. Perhaps it's a memory we don't remember, a voice calling us from the past, or a shadow from the future walking side by side, without fully revealing itself. Each step separates us from our past, but brings us closer to what we have not yet seen.

These are the presences that appear in moments of fracture, when everything seems lost. A sign, a face, a story emerging from nowhere and guiding us, never truly revealing itself, but always there, beside us, like the promise of redemption that – it should be noted – almost never comes as we imagine it. It is the search for something we may never find, but that pushes us forward, one step at a time.

Are the signs that have accompanied my path since March 27, 2020, mere coincidences? Perhaps. But they could also be something else. Perhaps they are confirmation that stories of charity, poverty, and suffering, even those neglected or forgotten, can have a place in the grand design of history.

Capriana, August 3, 1861

On August 3, 1861, Capriana burns. The flames rise, then beat like a drum, crackling, exploding, devouring. The fire moves swiftly, unstoppable, and in a matter of hours, what was once the small village of Italian Tyrol is reduced to a heap of smoking ruins. Fifty-two homes, the school, the rectory, and finally the church. A random blaze, one of those that, with a certain frequency, seemed to casually break the nights in the wooden villages of the 19th century. Or perhaps not.

In Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, Mr. Wolf – portrayed by the iconic Harvey Keitel – is the “problem solver”. When Jules and Vincent find themselves in the chaos of a dead body in their car, they call him. He enters the scene calmly, elegantly, unfazed. His task is simple but crucial: restore order to the disaster. He doesn't get his hands dirty or waste time on unnecessary explanations. He's the perfect professional, resolving everything with a few words and surgical precision, bringing balance back to a highly chaotic situation.

Let me explain why, looking back to that August 3, 1861, I see Mr. Wolf's fingerprints in the fire at Capriana.

Just when people start thinking the worst is over and, all things considered, the damage isn't so extensive – after all, the church has been spared, what more could you want? – something else happens. An imitator of Mr. Wolf, cleverly disguised as the wind, suddenly begins lifting glowing embers from the remains of the houses, hurling them like incendiary arrows to the dry wooden shingles on the roof of

the small temple. The “problem solver” has found his way to finish the job. If “something” or “someone” had missed their aim, he corrects it. Et voilà.

The flames engulf the church and the rectory, climbing the walls and devouring them as if they were made of cardboard. In moments, the fury is so intense that even the stones give way. The quartz molecules in the porphyry blocks fracture. Science tells us this can only occur at temperatures of at least 3110 degrees Fahrenheit.

Nothing remains. Not even a shred of paper, a trace of parchment, a tangible memory.

The parish archive is reduced to ashes. Along with it, every document concerning Maria Domenica Lazzeri – her life, the thirteen years she spent in suffering that the villagers called a “miracle”. Nothing is left. No notes, no records. Maria Domenica’s “gift”, everything that could prove or disprove her sanctity, is erased from the face of the Earth just thirteen years after her death. That story, which had already started to fade in indifference, now risks dissolving completely.

Yet, it is fair to ask how this was possible. In thirteen years, had no one thought to duplicate those documents? Had no one considered protecting the evidence of such an extraordinary event? Did the bishop’s office not deem it important? Or maybe he did, but he still chose to ignore it, allowing the flames to do their dirty work?

The sacrifice of Maria Domenica seemed to vanish in that moment. It was as if History itself had decided to dispense with her, to relegate her to oblivion.

And yet, the accounts of what happened – those, at least, don’t burn. Even if the documents have disappeared, the words remain. And perhaps not everything written down

was stored in that archive. Many witnesses came from abroad, from other European countries.

Standing before the rubble of the Church of St. Bartholomew, the people are stunned. Most feel they haven't merely witnessed a "fire" but something more. Some weep, especially the elderly. Others murmur.

Some are thinking of Bishop Johann Nepomuk von Tschiderer, who died the year before, on December 3, 1860. During his episcopate, he had reportedly never visited Capriana. He never – apparently – met the young woman in person. He never wanted to meet her, and the reason for that refusal remains a mystery. The chronicles of the time depict him as a man of unyielding faith but quite detached. Compassion is hard to find in his letters; there are few signs of understanding for the woman who suffered in solitude.

Maybe that man was holding evidence, who knows. Perhaps he had confirmation of the extraordinary nature of the case and precisely for that reason chose to remain silent, to avoid unleashing an uncontrollable cult, a wave of popular devotion that could lead to unrest and tension. Or, on the contrary, maybe he suspected Maria Domenica was an impostor and he didn't want his diocese to be shaken by an inconvenient revelation.

In any case, in 1861, the flames seem to want to lift future generations from any conjecture. It went as it went. So be it. This is what the most suspicious among the small crowd are thinking. While others are still talking about "her", softly, as one speaks of things too great to be understood. The long sacrifice of that girl, her selfless offering without judgment or calculation at the altar of Truth, now risks seriously being in vain.

Capriana-Mattarello, December 11-30, 1876

In the cold night that envelops the Capriana cemetery, an unreal silence weighs on the village. Having risen undisturbed from the Avisio stream, only a biting wind breaks the stillness, weaving through the cypress trees and brushing against the stones, as if whispering untold secrets. The sky is somber, moonless, and December 11 brings with it a darkness that feels foreboding.

An old man wandering among the graves is wrapped in a heavy coat, his hat pulled low over his eyes to shield himself from the bitter air. His steps are slow, almost hesitant, as he approaches the site of the exhumation.

His name is Leonardo von Cloch, baron and medical officer. Ahead of him, Tomaso Zanin, along with two assistants, works tirelessly to break through the hard, frozen earth. The shovels strike like ice picks, sinking with difficulty, producing dull thuds that fade into the whistling wind. The priest, Don Vito Bertoldi, mutters prayers under his breath, his words mingling with the sounds of the night, as if even he fears disturbing the delicate balance.

Maria Domenica Lazzeri. That name echoes in von Cloch's mind, bringing back memories he had perhaps hoped to bury – or not. It had been in 1834, when, as a young and curious doctor, he first arrived at the door of the humble house in Capriana. It was scientific curiosity that had driven him there – what else could it have been? Faith, until that moment, had never offered him its comfort. The fame of that girl had spread far beyond the borders of Tyrol, and he, with the rigor of an Enlightenment thinker,

wanted to see with his own eyes and touch with his own hands.

He still remembers their first meeting. Maria Domenica was there, sitting on a bed of poverty, her face pale, illuminated by a light he couldn't explain. The palms of her hands bore two red marks, like abrasions or burns. Her fingers trembled, though not from pain. There was something sacred, an unknown energy... and yet Cloch couldn't suppress his desire to seek a rational explanation.

For years, he will study that woman, noting every detail. But his written accounts will stop in 1845.

On this December night, his hands tremble, just like Maria Domenica's had that Friday in 1834. The cold grows harsher, but it is not only the chill of the night that makes him shiver.

I am writing these words on Saturday, October 19, 2024, and after many years of being involved in this matter, only now am I asking myself: "Why?" Why carry out an exhumation in mid-December, in a mountain cemetery, a thousand meters above sea level? During that time, the temperatures always drop below freezing. The ground is frozen, for heaven's sake!

No matter how much I rack my brain, I can't think of anything other than a sudden urgency: dictated by what, exactly? What new developments – and of what severity – could have led the parish priest (and I presume, the Curia) to rush to the cemetery with shovels, pickaxes, and ropes, and do, in great haste and secretly, what they have done?

According to some biographies, the exhumation was deemed necessary due to the relocation of the cemetery, which had become too cramped. A possibility is that, after

taking care of all the other graves, perhaps during the early autumn, the tomb of Lazzeri was left for last. And so, a late evening in December was chosen, in which, while ensuring some privacy, the cold and darkness would certainly not facilitate the operations.

At a certain point, the coffin is lowered into the grave. I imagine Tomaso Zanin stopping, panting from the effort, while the assistant wipes his sweaty forehead, despite the biting cold. Leonardo von Cloch slowly approaches, his heart now beating faster in his chest. The priest, with a solemn gesture, signals to lift the first planks.

When the last board is lifted, a strange sensation of emptiness takes hold of all those present. They stand there stunned, occasionally glancing at each other, then intermittently looking down at the terrible and marvelous sight being illuminated by the torchlight.

Unable to restrain himself, Don Bertoldi murmurs a prayer that no one can distinguish. He ends it, crossing himself. Then, he pulls a small piece of paper from his pocket, on which he shakily writes something with a half-used pencil. "I dug the body and found nothing, only the coffin". Next to it, the corresponding English version (wonder why in English, one might ask, given that we're in a Tyrolean valley). A nonsensical phrase, at least on the surface. Not only due to the lexical error in the choice of words and verbs ("I dug the body?!"), but rather the ambiguity of what follows: "only the coffin". Pray tell, "in" the coffin, what did you find, Father?!

Cloch stares incredulously at the bottom of the grave. He inspects it carefully, with the attention and care he has al-

ways applied for over 50 years in his medical profession. His rational mind falters.

It is as if the bare earth itself had swallowed every sense. Proportions, perspectives, notions, customs, millennia of calculations, statements, theories, and prayers: everything, for a single moment – a flash in the night of Capriana – reveals its own inaccuracy. A lightning-fast and devastating revelation of which those present can only grasp incomprehensible fragments, and perhaps not even those.

In moments of confusion, the mind seeks out the dearest affections. Cloch's thoughts now fly home, to Mattarello, south of Trento, to his beloved Giovanna. But he is also thinking about his son Leonardo Jr., 45, and his granddaughters. In particular, he sends an invisible caress to his beloved granddaughter, the one who carries a powerful name that tonight resonates like a cymbal in the silence of a temple: Maria Caterina Domenica.

The wind resumes its whistling between the tombstones. The baron now feels overwhelmed by a profound confusion, a dizziness that shakes him. The intention to return home becomes urgent, the sweet smile of Giovanna and the embrace of the little ones await him, like a beacon of normality amidst the emotional storm that strikes him.

However, even during the return journey, at dawn on December 12, the old doctor feels that "something" has clicked inside him. An endless wait that has finally come to an end. As if what he saw that night had freed him from every obligation that still tied him to earthly life. Cloch is tired, now, exhausted by his 79 years, looking at the world.

Arriving at the villa, at the Laste in Mattarello, in his wife's embrace, he gives in to tears. Giovanna is terrified:

she had never seen him cry. Never. Not at the birth of their daughters, not at the death of his parents, not even at the death of Lazzeri, twenty-eight years earlier. Giovanna wants to ask her man what he saw in that small cemetery (“What happened, then, beloved Leonardo? C’mon, tell me!”). But she lacks the courage.

Nineteen days later, on December 30, the year is about to end, and so is the earthly existence of a curious and good man.

Meanwhile, in Capriana, someone has pressured Don Bertoldi to reveal the details of the exhumation. The curious note from the priest has only fueled further curiosity. However, in the face of insistence, Don Bertoldi responded with a “niet” so mysterious that it became fascinating. “I cannot speak”, he says. “I have the suggello” (he refers to the “seal”, meaning the oath of silence he must have taken, presumably to a superior). Then, granting a small revelation: “I will only tell you that you can well believe that you have a great advocate in heaven”.

Almost at the same moment, 50 kilometers further south, comforted by the closeness of his family, Dr. Leonardo von Cloch surrenders to the spacetime vortex, leaving this world forever. Calm. It seems that he has finally made peace with that incredible story. From that moment on, it will no longer torment him. The exhausting war that has been fought for at least six decades on the battlefield of his conscience has come to an end. Who won? No one knows. The opposing sides remain there, hundreds of thousands of exhausted, dirty, wounded men facing each other, waiting to learn the outcome of that endless conflict.

On one side, faith; on the other, secularism. On one side, the need to find a firm hold in a desert of anguish, to cling to a certainty that can stop the fall; on the other, the refusal to seek a certainty that can calm the torment, the acceptance of doubt as an inevitable part of existence. On one side, the illusion of liberation through submission to a dogma; on the other, the idea that true freedom is found in not adhering to dogmas but in embracing uncertainty and self-determination. On one side, the decision to give meaning to a life that would otherwise be unbearable, reading every suffering as a trial to face, imposed by a higher destiny; on the other, the choice to face a life with no predetermined meaning, to see suffering as a random part of existence, without seeking evidence or alternative explanations.

Moments after his last breath, in the darkness that enveloped the Adige Valley, the moon rises in all its beauty and now shines, dazzling, in the night sky.

Acquaviva delle Fonti (Bari), 1991

I was 23 years old, and one day – I’m not entirely sure how or why – I suddenly plunged headlong into a period of religious fundamentalism. A more polished way to say it could be: I turned into quite a real bigot.

After a very theatrical and somewhat pompous conversion, with the air of someone who knows more than others, I presented myself with a kind of gravity that had never been mine before, as if I had received a revelation, one of those that makes you believe you’ve been chosen for a special mission. When I spoke, I often raised my voice, as if every word carried the weight of a truth that only I knew and that had to be communicated urgently. It seemed to me that every gesture had to be measured, almost choreographed, as if someone, from the corner of the room, were watching and waiting to see if I was worthy of that role. The rigidity of my posture was that of someone who, suddenly, had discovered a greater order and, for some reason, had been chosen to represent it. My eyes, perhaps too burning with a conviction that left no room for doubt, always sought to penetrate others, as if my mission was to make them see through the same lens. I spoke, and everything I said seemed like a small sermon. And yet, deep inside, I knew the truth I proclaimed was not mine but a falsehood I had built around myself, like a tailor-made suit. But at that time, that suit seemed necessary to me, and I convinced myself it was the right thing to do.

Every morning, I would wake up at five to meditate on passages from the Bible and the daily Gospel. Then, as if nothing unusual had happened, I’d head to the office to

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