



“The Baptism”

Out of the blue one day a man and two women came into the church. One of the women was the wife of Peppone, leader of the Reds.

Don Camillo, who was up a ladder polishing St. Joseph’s halo with Brasso, looked down and asked them what they wanted. “This here needs baptizing,” replied the man. And one of the women showed him a bundle with a baby inside.

“Whose is it?” asked Don Camillo, coming down.

“Mine,” said Peppone’s wife.

“With your husband?” enquired Don Camillo.

“I should think so!” retorted Peppone’s wife angrily. “Who else would I have it with?”

“There’s no need to get angry,” observed Don Camillo as he headed for the sacristy. “I know a thing or two, and they say free love’s all the rage in your Party.”

Passing the altar, Don Camillo bowed and winked at the crucified Christ.

“Did you hear that?” he chuckled. I slipped one to the Party of the Godless!”

“That is rubbish, Don Camillo,” replied Jesus in annoyance. “If they were godless, they would not come here to have their children baptised. If Peppone’s wife had slapped your face it would have been no more than you deserved.”

“If Peppone’s wife had hit me I’d have grabbed all three of them by the neck and...”

“And?” asked Jesus sternly.

“Nothing, just a figure of speech,” said Don Camillo hurriedly as he stood up.

“Take care, Don Camillo,” Jesus warned.

Don Camillo put on his vestments and went up to the font.

“What do you want to call him?” asked Don Camillo.

“Lenin Libero Antonio,” replied Peppone’s wife.

“Then go and have him baptized in Russia,” said Don Camillo, calmly replacing the cover on the font.

Don Camillo had hands as big as shovels, and the man and the two women left without a word. The priest then tried to sneak off to the sacristy, but a voice stopped him short.

“Don Camillo, you have done a terrible thing! Go and call those people back and baptise the child!”

“Jesus,” replied Don Camillo, “baptism is no laughing matter. It is a sacrament. Baptism...”

“Don Camillo!” Jesus interrupted him. “Are you seriously trying to teach me about baptism? I am the one who invented it! Now listen. You are behaving like an arrogant bully. Just suppose that baby were to die this moment, you’d be to blame if it was denied admission to Paradise!”

“Let’s not over-dramatise the situation,” retorted Don Camillo. “Why should the baby die? He’s got ruddy cheeks like roses!”

“That has nothing to do with it,” Jesus countered. “A roof tile could fall on his head; he could have an apopleptic fit. You *must* baptise him.”

Don Camillo flung wide his arms.

“Dear Lord, think about it for a moment. None of this would matter if we knew the child was definitely destined for Hell. But even though his parents are a bad lot, he could, if baptised, end up in Heaven. Now tell me this: how can I allow people called Lenin to join you in Heaven? I’m doing this for the good name of Heaven.”

“Leave the good name of Heaven to me,” cried Jesus in irritation. “All I care about is that the child becomes an honest man. It does not matter to me if he is called Lenin or Coco the Clown. All you are entitled to do is point out to the parents that giving eccentric names to children can often cause them trouble, sometimes big trouble.”

“All right,” replied Don Camillo. “It’s always me who is wrong. We’ll try and sort it out.” Just then someone was heard entering the church. It was Peppone, alone but for the baby in his arms. He bolted the door behind him.

“I’m not leaving here,” he said, “until my son is baptized with the name I want.”

“Well?” whispered Don Camillo to Jesus with a smile. “You see now what these people are like? One can have nothing but the loftiest intentions, and look how they react.”

“Put yourself in his shoes,” replied Jesus. “Peppone’s way of life is not something for you to approve or disapprove, but to understand.”

Don Camillo shook his head.

“I’m not leaving until you baptise my son the way I want,” repeated Peppone, putting the bundle with the baby onto a pew. Then he took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and came menacingly towards Don Camillo.

“Jesus,” implored Don Camillo, “I appeal to you. If you think it right that one of your priests should assent to the threats of private individuals, then I will defer. But in that case, don’t complain when they

come back tomorrow with a calf they want baptised. You know as well as I do, precedents are dangerous...”

“Well,” said Jesus, “in that case you must try to make him understand...”

“And if he attacks me?”

“Accept it, Don Camillo. Bear it. Suffer as I did.”

So Don Camillo turned around. “All right, Peppone,” he said. “The baby will leave here baptized, but not with that damnable name.”

“Don Camillo,” muttered Peppone, “remember I’ve got a delicate stomach ever since I took that bullet in the mountains. No low blows, or I’ll give you a good going over with a pew.”

“Don’t worry, Peppone, I’ll address myself only to your upper storey,” replied Don Camillo, landing a punch by Peppone’s ear.

They were a pair of bruisers with arms of iron and their blows whistled through the air. After twenty minutes of furious, silent combat, Don Camillo heard a voice at his shoulder: “Now, Don Camillo! Get him on the jaw!”

It came from above the altar. Don Camillo aimed a blow at the jaw, and Peppone fell to the ground.

He stayed sprawled out there for ten minutes, then he got up, massaged his chin, dusted himself off, put his jacket back on, retied his red kerchief, and picked up the baby.

Don Camillo, by then in his vestments, was waiting for him, solid as granite, beside the font.

“What shall we call him?” asked Don Camillo.

“Camillo Libero Antonio,” muttered Peppone.

Don Camillo shook his head.

“No, let us call him Libero Camillo Lenin,” he said. “Yes, Lenin too. His sort cannot get up to mischief when he’s got a Camillo as his neighbour.”

“Amen,” muttered Peppone, feeling his jaw.

When it was all done and Don Camillo was passing the altar, Jesus said smiling, “Don Camillo, I have to admit it, you’re better at politics than I am.”

“And at trading punches too,” answered Don Camillo loftily, putting a nonchalant finger to a big lump on his forehead.