

HIS EXCELLENCY
ANGELO COMASTRI
A LIFE DEDICATED TO DIVINE LOVE

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■ BY LUCY GORDAN AND WLODZIMIERZ REDZIOCH

Born in Sorano, near Pitigliano, in the southwestern region of Tuscany known as "La Maremma" on September 17, 1943, Archbishop Angelo Comastri was ordained a priest on March 11, 1967 at the age of 23. At age 47, he was appointed bishop of Massa Marittima-Piombino (1990-94) and then in 1996 archbishop of Loreto and pontifical delegate of the Loreto Sanctuary and president of the National Italian Sanctuaries Commission. Under his guidance, Loreto was proclaimed an international sanctuary and twinned with Nazareth. Our Lady of Loreto was proclaimed the patron saint of aviation, and the John Paul II Pastoral Youth Center was built in Loreto.

Since early 2005, at the request of Pope John Paul II, His Excellency has been president of the Fabric (or Edifice) of St. Peter's Basilica, and head vicar of Vatican City State. On November 1, 2006, he was named archpriest of the Basilica of

St. Peter. Besides his many administrative and pastoral duties, His Excellency is a book collector and prolific author.

How old were you when you felt your vocation and how did it reveal itself to you?

ARCHBISHOP ANGELO COMASTRI: My vocation was born and nurtured within my family where faith was the center of life. Ever since I was a small boy I've felt that the Lord Jesus was the true richness of existence, and so, to dedicate my life to him was not a difficult decision for me, but it wasn't hot-headed either. It developed over a long passage of time and took several steps to reach my final decision.

At the express wish of the Holy Father John Paul II, since February 5, 2005, you have been the president of the Fabric or Edifice of St. Peter; maybe not all our readers know what that job entails.

ANGELO COMASTRI: The Fabric of St. Peter was set up to

oversee the work on the construction of the "new" basilica. Today, with its famous *sampietrini* (the nickname for the Roman workers who care for the basilica), it's the institution which oversees the daily maintenance of the basilica and is also in charge of the guard service within the basilica.

Although appointed in February, I arrived in Rome on March 31. On April 1, I telephoned Monsignor Stanislaus, now the cardinal of Cracow, for an audience with the Pope to receive my direct orders. Monsignor Stanislaus informed me that the Holy Father had taken a turn for the worse and was dying, but he told me to come for a papal blessing anyway.

When I arrived at the papal apartments and Monsignor Stanislaus showed me into the Pope's bedroom, Stanislaus whispered to the Holy Father, "Loreto is here." The Holy Father opened his eyes, looked at me, and said, "No, Saint Peter." I was overcome with emotion because, as sick as he was, he realized that I was no longer in Loreto.

That evening the Pope's condition worsened and St. Peter's Square began to fill up with the faithful. I suggested that we all recite the rosary. His Holiness had become a devotee of the Madonna after his assassination attempt. He used to say: "One hand opened fire on me; another deflected the bullet."

After the Pope's death, Monsignor Stanislaus asked you to take care of the burial, right?

ANGELO COMASTRI: Yes. I was again overwhelmed by emotion. I never thought I'd have to arrange a papal burial, never that of a close friend too. I was very pleased with Monsignor Stanislaus's suggestion to build the tomb in the chapel of Blessed John XXIII under the basilica together with Pope Paul VI. This gesture was extraordinary: that the recent Popes are buried under the basilica, where St. Peter was crucified and also buried.

Did you foresee that John Paul II's tomb would become such an important pilgrim destination?

ANGELO COMASTRI: No. We had to figure out special access and exit arrangements very quickly. At first between 20,000 and 25,000 pilgrims a day came to pay their respects. Now it is about half that number, but some days there are as many as 20,000 pilgrims.

You are the official custodian of Pope John Paul II's tomb and you go there often to meditate. What do you think about there?

ANGELO COMASTRI: I go there nearly every day. It is as if I am visiting a relative, a member of my family. He appointed me bishop of Massa-Marittima-Piombino and then archbishop of Loreto and archbishop pontifical delegate of the Loreto Sanctuary. Whenever we met he would say, "Here comes Loreto; here comes the Madonna." Then he called me to Rome. So I feel I

had a special relationship with him. Whenever I have a problem, I go to pray at his tomb and ask him for his advice and help. I feel very near to him, protected, especially there.

Do other people who visit the tomb tell you why they have come?

ANGELO COMASTRI: Sometimes, but we collect the notes they leave. We already have many bags full which we will use as documentation for the cause of his sainthood. The majority are prayers of thanks and reflect his generosity and humaneness. People think of him as a protector of the family and of young people.

Are we right that you are responsible for all the activities which take place in the basilica every day?

ANGELO COMASTRI: Absolutely not. I have lots of collaborators. All together we create a awesome synergism so as to serve the great mission of the Holy Father.

Your typical day?

ANGELO COMASTRI: My day begins with a moment of prayer in the chapel of my apartment only a few yards from the basilica. Then I meet with my collaborators and oversee various activities before opening my office as a welcoming center for pilgrims. My heartfelt desire is that they will feel that St. Peter's Basilica is the beating heart of their huge Catholic family.

I know that, besides appointing you president of the Fabric of St. Peter, in his same letter to you via Cardinal Sodano, at the time secretary of state, the Holy Father added another responsibility...

ANGELO COMASTRI: I now hold three positions: archpriest of the Vatican Basilica, president of the Fabric of St. Peter, and head vicar for His Holiness in Vatican City, all three of which have one final goal: to make "the site of Peter's martyrdom" come alive and speak and to

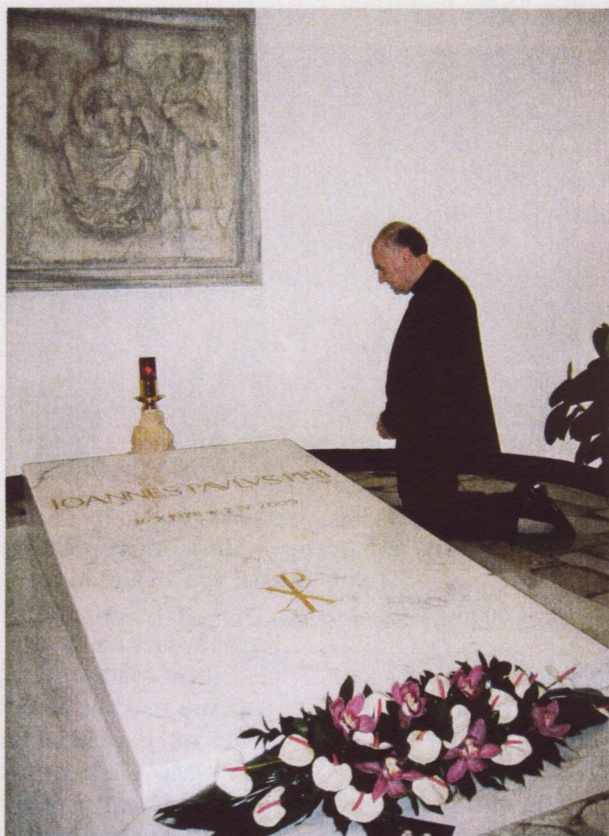
guarantee that its visitors can hear and receive the message of this "sacred place."

You are a respected administrator, an excellent preacher, and a prolific author. Which of these talents gives you the greatest satisfaction and why?

ANGELO COMASTRI: Above all I try to be a good priest. I take care that my every word and that my every gesture leads to Jesus.

From your personal book collection you lent manuscript pages from the diaries of St. Therese of Lisieux to the exhibition, "Petros Eni," still on in the Charlemagne Wing until March 8. Tell us about her, please.

ANGELO COMASTRI: I "met" St. Therese of Lisieux during my formative years and I was fascinated by her holiness. This petite, very young Carmelite from Lisieux understood that the heart of Christianity, its core, is found in one awesome phrase: "God is Love." She saw to it that her life would become one



continuous act of love. At the end of her brief life she said: "Jesus loves me and I my Mother Church. I know that the tiniest act of love is more useful, beneficial, than everything else put together."

Your favorite saint and why?

ANGELO COMASTRI: St. Francis of Assisi. I relate to him, find myself in him, my dreams, my aspirations, my sensibilities, my ideals. By this, I don't mean to compare myself to him. That would be hubris. I feel very far away from St. Francis, unworthy, but it does me good to confront myself with him every day so I can learn to love Jesus without attenuation, without discounts, without fear and with great simplicity and humbleness.

You are a bibliophile and a collector; can you tell us a bit about your love of books and your collection?

ANGELO COMASTRI: I love books because behind every book there is a life, a story, a richness that helps me to become a better person. I write books to share with others that which the Lord generously gives me every morning. If I didn't write, I'd feel like a thief because I have to give, share with others what I have.

At what time of day do you write?

ANGELO COMASTRI: My books are usually born during the night. They are the fruit of many hours of fervent labor, which forces me to give up many, many other activities.

During Jubilee 2000, the Holy Father talked about the importance of art in transmitting faith. Which work of art before all others transmits faith to you and why?

ANGELO COMASTRI: The work of art that I admire the most is in St. Peter's. It's Michelangelo's *Pietà*.

The silent dialog between Christ and the Madonna – the face of the Madonna and the face of Christ – move me deeply.

Mary is depicted as young. Her youth is that of a young woman who has never sinned. Jesus is represented in the abandonment of death, resignation and relief at the end of his earthly existence. Yet it is an abandonment full of hope, which gives the viewer the impression that all of a sudden he will soon be born again.

St. Peter's Basilica is the largest monument, testament of sacred art in the world. Sacred art reflects the beauty of faith. It tells us: "Make yourselves beautiful too, do good and beautiful things for the grace of God." We want people to realize that each one of us is a work of art, of God's art.

I've been told that you preach every Sunday after Vespers; where and at what time?

ANGELO COMASTRI: I celebrate Mass every Sunday at 5:30 p.m. at the Cathedra or See of St. Peter's. I feel it's one of the duties of my mission as bishop. I have to announce the Word of God; I have to share with others the great richness of the Holy Eucharist.

Since you are such a passionate and charismatic preacher, what are your favorite parables or passages of the Bible?

ANGELO COMASTRI: The passage of the New Testament that

moves me the most is Chapter 15 of the Gospel according to St. Luke. It's the photograph of God as a mystery of unlimited and irresistible love. When I read the three parables through which Jesus paints the face of God, the air is knocked out of me. I'm left breathless. These parables are too beautiful. I never tire of rereading them over and over every day. Each time I do so, my heart is filled with optimism and a desire to respond to Divine Love with my little everyday love and good deeds.

For many years you were the archbishop of Loreto and the archbishop pontifical delegate of the Loreto Sanctuary. Did you witness a miracle that you found particularly moving?

ANGELO COMASTRI: Not one event, but the fact that Mary is not far from Jesus; she is the example to follow, the path to take, to reach him. At Loreto I rediscovered Mary's splendid mission and renewed my love for her.

You were very close to Pope John Paul II. What did you learn from him?

ANGELO COMASTRI: John Paul II gave his very self to the cause of the Gospel. I am convinced that the entire world loved him especially for his faith and bravery during his long illness. Three days before his death he wanted to appear at the window of his apartments to bless the crowd in St. Peter's Square below. It was a silent benediction, but it was awesome that John Paul II wanted to dedicate even his last drop

of energy to Jesus.

Since taking your vows, what has been the most difficult task you've had to carry out?

ANGELO COMASTRI: Any task can be difficult, but any task becomes easy for me when I give myself to Jesus with the humble faith of Mary.

If you had not become a priest, what profession or work would you have liked to carry out?

ANGELO COMASTRI: I have no idea. Being a priest is my life's vocation. I can't imagine any other life.

You were the head of the Center of National Vocations. What advice did you give to young seminarians about to take their final vows?

ANGELO COMASTRI: I advised (and still do advise) young people, not just priests, not to waste their lives. Life is God's capital; it is an investment made by God. If we waste it, it's our fault; it's a tremendous responsibility, a terrible shame and we condemn ourselves to the sadness of emptiness and meaninglessness.

You have accomplished much. Do you still have a dream?

ANGELO COMASTRI: Yes, Paradise. Every day I wait for Jesus. I can't wait to see his face and feel his embrace which is what I desire heart and soul.

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