



The Edict by Giovannino Guareschi

English translation of "Il Proclama" © Wendell Ricketts.

The hour had grown late when Old Barchini, the village stationer, presented himself at the rectory. Barchini, who happened to possess two crates of movable type and a printing press that had been new in 1870, had placed a sign above his shop: "Typographer." His business at the church was clearly a matter of importance, for he remained behind the closed doors of Don Camillo's studio for quite some time.

As soon as Barchini had gone, Don Camillo hurried to relay the conversation to Jesus, who hung upon His crucifix above the altar.

"Big news!" Don Camillo burst out. "Tomorrow our adversary intends to publish an announcement. Barchini has been engaged to print it, and he brought me a proof copy."

From his pocket, Don Camillo extracted a sheet of paper fresh from the press and read it out loud:

FIRST AND FINAL WARNING

Once again last night a coward has taken up his anonymous hand to write a offensive insult on our notice board.

No matter the identity of the delinquent who carries out his agitating deeds from the safety of the shadows, that hand had better stay on its toes, because in the event this

individual should fail to cease and resist he will come to be sorry for what he has done when the situation is already irrefutable.

Patients has its limits.

*Local Party Secretary
GIUSEPPE BOTTAZZI*

Don Camillo gave a scornful laugh.

"What do You think of that? Quite a masterpiece, is it not? Just imagine what a chuckle people will have tomorrow when they see these notices pasted up around town. So now Peppone has taken to issuing edicts! They're going to be rolling on the ground!"

Jesus made no answer.

"Did You hear the way that announcement was written?" Don Camillo asked, a note of surprise in his voice. "Shall I read it to You again?"

"I heard, I heard," Jesus replied. "Each one of us expresses himself as best he can. You can hardly expect someone who never got beyond the third grade to attend to subtleties of style."

"Master!" Don Camillo exclaimed, spreading his arms in a gesture of amazement. "Gobbledygook like that? You call that a matter of subtleties?"

"Don Camillo, the most disgraceful approach one can take in any dispute is to seize upon his opponent's errors in grammar and syntax. What truly counts in a dispute is the quality of the argument. You ought rather to be telling me, for instance, that you detect an unseemly note of menace in that warning."

Don Camillo returned the piece of paper to his pocket.

"That was implied," he mumbled. "Of course the threatening tone is what is truly deplorable. But what can You expect from people of that kind? Violence is all they're capable of understanding."

"Still," Jesus mused. "Despite his lack of moderation, Peppone impresses me as not an altogether bad sort."

Don Camillo shrugged. "He's like good wine stored in a cask that's rotted through. When a person begins to frequent certain environments and entertain certain sacrilegious ideas and associate with only the worst individuals, he's bound to go bad in the end."

Jesus, however, appeared unconvinced.

"What I would say is that, in Peppone's case, one must look beyond appearances and delve more deeply into the substance. In other words, we must see whether Peppone is acting out of innate

malevolence or whether a provocation of some kind has driven him to such a response. What has him so upset, would you say?"

Don Camillo extended his arms as if to say, "No one could possibly imagine."

"What would be useful to know is the nature of the offense we are dealing with," Jesus persisted. "He mentions an insult that someone wrote on his party's notice board last night. Yesterday evening, when you went out to the tobacconist's, did you perchance pass by the notice board? Try to remember."

Don Camillo spoke honestly. "In fact," he admitted, "I did indeed walk that way."

"Excellent. And did you happen to stop for just for a moment to read the notices on the board?"

"I would scarcely say read, no. Nothing more than the briefest glance, if that. Was I wrong to do so?"

"The farthest thing from it, Don Camillo. It is always worthwhile to keep abreast of what our flock is saying, writing and, if possible, thinking. I ask only because I wonder whether by chance you noticed any strange writing on the board when you stopped."

Don Camillo shook his head. "I can assure You that when I stopped by, I saw nothing unusual written on the notice board!"

Jesus considered this in silence for a few moments.

"And on your way back, Don Camillo, did you notice whether anything strange had been written there?"

Don Camillo pondered the question.

"In fact," he said at last, "now that I think about it, as I made my way back, I have the sensation that I may have seen something scribbled in red pencil on one of the pieces of paper on the notice board. Please excuse me, Master, but I do believe someone has come into the rectory."

Don Camillo made a hurried bow and began to slink toward the door, but the voice of Jesus stopped him in his tracks.

"Don Camillo!"

Don Camillo slowly made his way back to the altar and stood before it sullenly.

"Well?" Jesus demanded sternly.

"Well ... yes, then," Don Camillo stammered. "Some brief phrase may have gotten away from me.... I may inadvertently have written 'Peppone the dunce.' But if You had read what they put there for the people to read, I'm quite sure that even You...."

"Don Camillo! You are barely aware what you, yourself, have done, and yet you presume to know the actions of the Son of God?"

"Forgive me. I have done a very stupid thing. I recognize that now. On the other hand, when Peppone puts up his bullying warning, he'll be doing something just as stupid, so in the end the whole affair comes out to a draw."

"Nothing even remotely like a draw!" Jesus declared. "You took it upon yourself to call Peppone a dunce yesterday evening, and tomorrow the entire town will be doing the same! People will rush here from miles around just to smirk over Peppone's blunders. Think of it. He has himself set up as the spokesman of the masses and everyone is scared to death of him as it is! And the entire affair is your doing. Consider that a job well done, do you?"

Don Camillo had got his courage back. "You are, of course, entirely correct," he said, "but bearing in mind the question of the overall political benefit...."

"I am not interested in the overall political benefit!" Jesus interrupted. "Bearing in mind the overall benefit of simple Christian charity, providing others with the opportunity to ridicule a man solely because he never got beyond the third grade is a despicable trick, Don Camillo, and you are its author!"

"Oh, Master," Don Camillo sighed. "Tell me, what shall I do?"

"It was not I who decided to write 'Peppone the dunce!' Let he who has committed the sin pay the penance. This problem is all yours to resolve, Don Camillo!"

Don Camillo took refuge in the rectory where he began pacing up and down the length of the room. He had the impression that he could hear the laughter of the people as they stood before the announcements Peppone had affixed around the village.

"Imbeciles!" Don Camillo burst out in a fury.

He turned to the statue of the Madonna.

"Virgin Mother," he prayed, "won't You please help me?"

"This is a matter that falls strictly within my Son's jurisdiction," the Madonna murmured. "I could not possibly meddle."

"Might you at least put in a good word?"

"I shall do what I can."

And just then, quite unexpectedly, Peppone appeared.

"Listen," Peppone said. "Let's forget about politics. This is a case in which a man who has gotten himself in a bad way has come to ask a priest for advice. Can I trust you to...."

"I know my duty. Whom did you kill?"

"I'm no murderer, Don Camillo," Peppone retorted. "Me, though, when someone stomps too hard on my toes, I can serve up a big, fat helping of hard knocks, if it comes to that."

“And how is little Libero Camillo Lenin?” Don Camillo asked slyly. His question was sufficient to remind Peppone of the drubbing he’d received on the day of his son’s baptism, and he merely shrugged.

“You know how it is,” he muttered. “Hard knocks, they come and they go. One day you’re getting thrashed, the next day it’s someone else. Anyway, that’s not the point. What we have here is that there’s a scoundrel in this town, a filthy little coward, a Judas Iscariot with a poisoned fang, and every time we put up a notice with my signature on it as party secretary, this individual, he can’t wait to play his little games and write ‘Peppone the dunce’ all over it!”

“Is that the whole trouble?” Don Camillo inquired. “I can’t say as though that strikes me as the world’s greatest tragedy.”

“I’d like to see how you’d feel if you found ‘Don Camillo the dunce!’ scribbled on your liturgical calendar twelve weeks in a row!”

Don Camillo explained that the comparison between the two events held not a drop of water. The notice board of a church was one thing; a notice board outside the local headquarters of a political party was quite another. And it was one thing to call one of God’s chosen priests a dunce, but something else entirely to use the term to describe the leader of a pack of raving lunatics. When he had finished, he asked, “And you have no idea who it might be?”

“It’s a good thing I don’t,” Peppone replied with a baleful air. “If I did, that Barabbas would be walking around right now with both his eyes as black as his heart. He’s already played his lousy trick on me twelve times, that hooligan, and every time it was the same man, I know that for sure. Now I want to warn him that this thing has gone as far as it’s going to. He needs to learn how to behave because if I get hold of him, it’ll be the Earthquake of Messina all over again. So I’m going to get this notice printed up and then I’ll paste it on every street corner so he and his entire pack will be sure to see it.”

Don Camillo shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not exactly running a print shop here,” he said. “Why are you telling me? What you need is a printer.”

“Already got one,” Peppone explained somberly. “But since I don’t like having people take me for a dunce, you need to look at the draft of the notice before Barchini prints it.”

“But Barchini’s no illiterate. If there were errors in your announcement, he would have told you so.”

“Fat chance,” Peppone sneered. “He’s just another Christer ... that is, what I mean to say is that he’s a stinking reactionary with a putrid soul, and even if he saw me write ‘couch’ with a k, he’d keep it to himself just to make me look like an idiot.”

“But what about your men?” Don Camillo argued.

“Right. You expect me to lower myself to having the people who work under me correct my homework! Anyway, that would be quite a sight to see. The lot of them put together couldn’t come up with thirteen letters of the alphabet!”

“Let me have it,” said Don Camillo, and Peppone handed over the draft.

Don Camillo slowly perused the lines that were printed on the page.

“Well, leaving aside the biggest howlers, I must say the tone strikes me as a bit heavy-handed.”

“Heavy-handed?” Peppone shouted. “That damnable snake, that villain, that rabble-rousing louse! If I were to tell him every single thing he deserves, one dictionary wouldn’t be enough!”

Don Camillo took his pencil in hand and carefully corrected the draft.

“You’ll need to rewrite the whole thing over in pen,” he said when he had finished.

Peppone regarded the paper, sadly taking in the crossed-out lines and other marks the priest had made.

“And to think that gutless Barchini told me it was ready to go.... What do I owe you?”

“Nothing at all. What you can do, though, is to keep your big trap shut. I’d rather no one else knew I’d taken to assisting in the production of agitprop.”

“I’ll send you over some eggs.”

Peppone made his exit, and Don Camillo, before taking himself off to bed, went in to say his goodnights to Jesus.

“Thank You for suggesting to him that he come to me.”

“It was the least I could do,” Jesus replied cheerfully. “How did your talk go?”

“A bit touchy, but well, all in all. He doesn’t have the remotest idea that I was the one at the notice board yesterday evening.”

“On the contrary,” Jesus replied. “He knows perfectly well that it was. You, all twelve times. He even saw you at it on a couple of evenings. Use your head, Don Camillo: Next time think seven times before you go about writing ‘Peppone the dunce’ on anything!”

“Whenever I go out from now on,” Don Camillo promised solemnly, “I shall make sure my red pencil stays behind.”

Jesus smiled. “Amen!” he said firmly.