

The Gentlemen

At first sight, all the cardinals photographed by Christian Courrèges appear to look alike. Yet everything about the photographs contradict this first glance: the way in which the cardinals pose; the elements of their costume that work as powerful signifiers of their function – the cross, the ring, the colors of the vestments (the red and black, the white of the lace chasuble and the wintry ermine); the way they hold their hands-folded, in repose, the right hand with the prelatric ring most often covering the left one.

The first glance never holds, confronted by the gaze with which these «men» meet the photographer and the world. These «men»: for indeed, these are all men, men who have all reached the ripe old age of cardinals. They look at the world with an eye more or less kind, more or less complicated, an eye, which they would like neutral, and which sometimes is lit up with a hint of a smile. The portraits show them almost in full length. They are standing, imposing, on a level with the viewer. Less shepherds than figures of authority and trust: their habit speaks for them. Madness, it is said, is when you mistake your function for your being. Power is different. Or, perhaps, it is just the superior form of madness, condensing the moment when function believes itself man.

Following this first glance (which is even less trustworthy than a first impression), each singular detail begins to reveal slight but definitive differences: the differences between rochet, stole, and mantelletta; differences between the various types of pectoral crosses (*crux pendilis*, *quadrata*, *fidelis* or *capitata*). Same differences, based on a constant differentiation of the same. Do these differences have something to do with the cardinals themselves? Of course. Each one asserts the uniqueness of his being through a series of choices. Choices that are made at every moment of their lives, choices which engage them head to foot, and in which preferences, taste, tradition, cultural heritage, and maybe even a degree of coquettishness, are clearly made visible. Each one has marked his preferences in response to (or so we can at least suppose) a set of variables: the pressure of the entourage, the influence of mannerisms, the pull of imitation, and of desire. Even the indifference demonstrated by one cardinal is weighed exactly in proportion to the awareness of his rank. In the beginning, perhaps, he may still have resented such marks of vanity and luxury as impediments.

In this world of the invisible, all that counts is the visible. This is the only aspect that interests the photographer whose aim is to reveal the secret of what he sees through a slow gaze. It is not preposterous to think that these infinite nuances of signs, meaning and language are governed by reading rules and a grammar, which we, the viewers, seeing but red and black, ignore. Bullfighters, magistrates, and by extension almost all official bodies or corporations obey the same linguistic order.

Maybe it would suffice to decipher the organization chart of cardinals with its “Secretaries of State”, “Cardinals Penitentiary” (of which the Cardinal Major penitentiary is represented here), “Prefects of Congregation” and other such “Masters of Papal Liturgical Celebrations”. This little bit of knowledge might be enough to help us understand the system, to order and attribute its marks and significant traits, and distinguish what linguists would call the double articulation of this language. Maybe it would be possible to learn the subtle differences between the choir habit, the abito piano, and other liturgical vestments through deduction or practice, just in the same way that one learns a language, a musical score, a code through practice?

Under the mozetta, the dalmatic, the simars and lappets, the complex and expeditious network of signs of power, of all power, unfolds its script, which is both open book and secret code. The strength of the images and their combination invites new questions. Who is this man, the photographer, that contemporary of ours, one of us yet one so different at the same time, for whom these princes of Church have accepted to reveal their being, and be caught in a moment, when shedding both glory and diffidence, they are just themselves, in the here and now? How does one talk to them? Persuade them? Convince them to take part in this experiment? Who is he, this man, who feels such a puzzling urge to stage his own self in front of subjects?

For him, this invisible stage director, whose presence can only be guessed beyond the frame, the prelates accept to play the game. This attitude is unexpected enough to startle the photographer out of his initial attitude of condescension and invite him to go beyond the first superficial glance.

All these men are wearing robes. They are not the only men to do so. Indeed, their robe is not feminine in the least. Roland Barthes, we learn in a book of memoirs whose author was the critic's companion as a young man, missed the

time when men freely wore gowns: gowns, which are so comfortable, leave the body so free, and allow such freedom of movement. The gown worn by the prelates is not of this kind. Whatever their specific title may be (cardinal auditor, in pectore, nephew, palatine, patronus or ponent), the robes worn by these cardinals are of a different nature from all other gowns they may have worn until then.

Why does it take this time, such a long time, to go back to the face, which we perceive from the start as an anachronism? We think we know the vestment. We haven't yet given our attention to the variable theories of buttons, ermine, belts tied below the chest. These we haven't looked at yet, but we have noticed the face. It is a face of today, a modern face, sporting a very contemporary pair of glasses, a classic but contemporary hairstyle, and shaved in a manner, which is familiar to us from professors and businessmen. The complexion reflects current rules of hygiene and eating habits, the skin tones are more or less cool and "the brow audacious".

« Audacious brow », faithfulness, and obedience, such are some of the qualities, which the French Renaissance poet Joachim Du Bellay attributed to cardinals in sonnet 118 of *Regrets*, a book written in Rome while he lived there under the patronage of a relative who was himself a cardinal. Du Bellay describes the Roman cardinals as men « whose authority / Commands attention anon as befits their rank ». He calls them « these gentlemen ».

Today he would no longer call them « gentlemen ». Gentlemen-like, however, they accept the gaze of the photographer who in return is strong enough to resist either freezing his models' expression in a snapshot or immobilizing them in a pose. He works quickly but takes his time in the moment. Everybody benefits from this manner of subverting photography to record a moment suspended in time. How shall we name this work? It is an exercise in applied anthropology? A collection of portraits? A transversal slice of the most important portion of the ancient world to have survived in our contemporary world? A study in the disappearance of man as man? Of what the hands do when the face poses for the camera?

And what if it were a scientific experiment, an experiment of the senses on the invisible body, on vision? An experiment, which reveals the power, the will and humble reality of mankind?

Francis Marmande

Translation by Larisa Dryansky