

Constantino Flavius Eutropius

I often visit Ardea, a beautiful ancient town situated on the Via Ardeatina Road linking it to Rome. My old friend Constantino Flavius Eutropius lives there and when we meet, we share a repast on the patio of 'Con Spirito' the name of his small house. He invariably serves up a dish of Ventricina Piccante salami with Mozzarella cheese and to wash it down he prefers a red wine and what better than a bottle of Colle Ticchio from the Cesanese Vineyards in the Lazio Region of Italy. Constantino produces the pièce de résistance, a coffee panna cotta with dark chocolate and rum sauce and finally, a glass of Cointreau 'Curaçao Blanco Triple Sec' to complete the meal. After a short nap on our chairs in the warmth of the Italian sun, we enjoy our game of chess and of course, excellent conversation.

Constantino was born in 1922 in Ardea, where he chose to live for the rest of his life. He enjoyed the landscape, the climate and above all else, the friendliness of the community. He was brought up in the disciplines of the Catholic Religion and he practiced his faith and attended Mass, *the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist*, whenever he could. He lived with his parents and as an only son, he inherited his parents' house. Constantino attended Rome's famous Sapienza University where he studied the social sciences, Political Science, Sociology and Communication Science; gaining valuable insight and a more complete formative experience. He emerged to take up a profession in journalism and found work with the Corriere della Sera newspaper in Milan, which suited his centrist politics. He travelled all over the world on assignments but always on returning home he would spend his leisure moments at 'Con Spirito' in Ardea.

Throughout his life, he had many dalliances with the females, usually on his assignments but never at home and he never married. In his 40-year career, spanning 1947 to 1987, he covered some terrible events in history, the assassinations of Mahatma Gandhi, John F Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Whilst these were in their singularity, he also covered the conflicts of mankind, such as the First Indochina War, Israel War of Independence, Korea, French-Algerian War, Suez Crisis, Cuban Revolution, Vietnam, the Six-Day War, Soviet-Afghan War and the Iran-Iraq War. It was a natural progression that he would pick up a camera and become a photographer, perhaps one of the first true photo-journalists? His articles were well received but the impact on his mind did not bear fruition until he retired and stopped to think.

In 1989, I visited 'Con Spirito' and he was there with his usual smile and a question, *"can you remind me when I first met you because for some reason, I feel I have known you all my life but I don't know how; I don't even know your name?"* I smiled and countered, *"why raise that question when we have had engaging encounters throughout your life; just embrace the happiness and contentment of our meetings, surely that is enough?"* He laughed out loud, welcomed me with a hug and a kiss on both cheeks and replied, *"sit down, you're a clever fox, verbal chess is not my strong point."* After our meal, we settled down on our respective chairs for a nap but I asked the question, *"I know you have become bored with retirement but do you really think that philosophy is the answer?"* He sighed, *"I have started to re-assess my life on Earth; I require answers and I have*

stopped to question everything." His voice drifted away in the breeze; I closed my eyes and shortly afterwards, I heard him snoring.

That afternoon we each had an espresso and sat at the table on the patio. Eventually, he raised his first question, *"what do you know about religion, death and the meaning of life?"* I smiled at him and he smiled back whereby I replied, *"three questions in one, I see you have been studying Socrates or was it Plato but what about the soul, the mind, the brain because they have to be in there somewhere."* I saw him look a little sheepish, *"that was my next question but you already knew that."* I replied, *"yes and I know your last question."* He managed to raise another smile, *"is there a God, is my religion and faith a myth?"* I had to counter and asked him, *"why am I the one you have selected to contribute, for surely we may fall into disagreement, even a loss of friendship; for a man of strong religion might take exception to an answer that challenges his faith."* I decided to answer rather than counter him again, *"I have witnessed many individuals form their own variant of religion and each one bearing a moral compass at the heart. Conformity to the religion instills a hope for resurrection after death and in this way the followers are bound to that religion. There is always good versus evil in the religious teachings and each lay leader acts as the soul and conscience of the congregation."*

Before he could reply, I again countered, *"has your religion not brought you morality, do you not feel a deep sense of contentment in your soul, do you not recognise that every day you live your life in goodness and truth and is that not enough?"* I saw the tears rise in his eyes and run down his cheeks, he wiped them away and I heard him in a soft voice, *"it's just there is so much evil, I have bathed in its light; I have seen so much war and injustice and now the decadence in the young is overwhelming."* He realised that he had weakened and so he changed the subject, *"do you know that I can name most of the stars, I watch them at night when I sit here on the patio and out there, far away in the Universe is Andromeda; I often wonder if the galaxy is the Kingdom of Heaven?"*

I settled him and poured out another espresso into his cup. We sat for a while and watched the breeze flow through the leaves of the trees whilst it brushed our faces in the warmth of the sun. Eventually he voiced, *"despite all my friends, I feel so alone and loneliness is a heavy cross to bear. I find myself analysing every spoken word and every night my head is filled with dreams and what seem like visions. For some reason, I have become preoccupied with understanding what the Universe, God and my life is all about. All of this leads to depression and with no end in sight, except my possible death."* I countered, *"my dear friend you are suffering from two fundamental forces which are impacting on your mind and you must address them. One is post-traumatic stress from your constant exposure to the evils of war and the other, surprisingly enough, is that you are no longer a photo-journalist on a war assignment."* I avoided his wave of the hand to interrupt and continued, *"you must find a new core for your being and build your friends and everything else in life around it. It may be companionship, it may be a hobby, it may even be a partial job or it may be travelling and meeting new people and enjoying new experiences. Select a task, a project that you might enjoy and stick to it but do not confuse loneliness with the loss of purpose and compound it with philosophy."* He poured us another

expresso and rounded with, *"I thought my religion and my faith would hold me together but it has not, so I have started to question it all."*

We sat for a while and I thought how best to answer his questions; slowly the sun began to set in a bright red ball on the horizon. I watched the redness reflect in his eyes and bathe its last rays on his face and I started, *"I would not be so quick to dismiss your religion when you consider that today it is dying out. The human race is more informed and more skeptical but it is a great pity that morality can only be found in old religious teachings because in this century it does not spring from anywhere else. In the years that follow and right into the 21st century, mankind will tread the path of decadence, avarice and be consumed by debt. His societies will fall; not because he has abandoned religion but because he has abandoned his integrity and morality."* He stood up from his chair to catch the last rays of the setting sun and replied, *"interesting analysis but you still have not answered; what happens upon death, is there a God; and is there a heaven?"*

We stood for a while and watched the sun set. Eventually the light fled in the face of the advancing night and before I left his company, I answered his question. *"Life is to be lived and enjoyed, it should not be fraught with thoughts about death, God and heaven. You must continue to maintain a high standard of integrity in your morality, virtue and humility. Whether this is through religion or your own philosophy of life, it matters not; for a soul which strives to remain pure, will move forward. In reality, all the Gods of man amount to the same thing, a faith that there is life after death and a heaven in which to live it."*

He smiled and we parted. I left him standing on the porch of 'Con Spirito'; his house in the village of Ardea near Rome and I would see him again, aye, and on many occasions. In very old age, he would eventually embrace death without fear and with dignity; and I would be there to greet him.

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