

THE CASE OF GIUSEPPE RICCARDI: AN UNUSUAL DROP-IN COMMUNICATOR IN ITALY

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ABSTRACT

At a mediumistic sitting held in 1948 in Tuscany, Italy, a communicator identified himself as Giuseppe Riccardi saying that he had been a priest of Canton, Ohio (U.S.A.), who had been shot by a crazed woman just after he had said mass in his church. In 1987 investigations in the United States showed that all these details were correct. Father Joseph Riccardi had been murdered on 10 March, 1929 in Canton, Ohio. Of two brief newspaper reports of the murder published in Italy one identified the site as Canton only, without further details of its location; and the other misprinted the name of the state of Ohio as 'Chio'. The medium was a youth of 16 when Father Riccardi was murdered. His family lived in a village of Tuscany and received no newspaper. Father Riccardi's family lived first in Sicily and then, about two decades before the time of the murder, migrated to the United States. It is extremely unlikely that the medium learned normally about Father Riccardi's murder about which, two of the authors believe, he somehow obtained knowledge paranormally.

INTRODUCTION

A 'drop-in' communicator is defined as one who is completely unknown to the medium and sitters at the time of the communication; after the sitting they verify the existence of a person corresponding to the details the communicator furnishes. Cases of this type that seem authentic do not occur frequently. Nevertheless, over the years a number have been published, and an incomplete list would include those reported by Gauld, 1971; Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1975; Hill, 1917; Myers, 1890; Stevenson, 1970; Tyrrell, 1939; and Zorab, 1940.

Drop-in communicators have great theoretical (and practical) importance for the question of survival after bodily death. Neither normal clues given to the medium by the sitters nor telepathy between the sitters and the medium can be plausibly adduced as interpretations. Attributing unlimited paranormal powers to the medium—the interpretation sometimes known as the 'super-ESP' hypothesis—seems also unacceptable, because it does not address the question of why the medium selects one deceased person instead of another as the purported communicator. It must be admitted that not all drop-in communicators explain satisfactorily why they communicated at a particular time and place, but some of them have given pertinent explanations for their communications.

However, drop-in communicators are a type of case easy to fake, and some instances have also been shown to be due to normal sources of information (Podmore, 1897, pp. 131–2; Stevenson & Beloff, 1980).

In 1987 a drop-in communicator who had manifested at a sitting in Italy as far back as 1948 was found to have furnished correct information about a murder that itself had occurred nearly twenty years before the sitting. The unusual delay in verifying the existence of the communicator together with some other features of the case warrant reporting it in detail. One of us (S.R.) has already published a report of it in *Luce e Ombra* (Ravaldini, 1987). However, this journal may not be

accessible to many readers in English-speaking countries, and perhaps only a few of them read Italian. The present report, in addition to repeating the essentials of the Italian report, supplies some important additional information obtained during the investigation of the case.

CASE REPORT

The medium concerned in this case never practised as a professional, and he wishes to remain anonymous. We have therefore given him the pseudonym of Luigi Pisano.

Background Information about Luigi Pisano

Luigi Pisano was born in Tuscany in about 1913. He is still living, but relatives who might give information about his early life have died, and he himself does not wish to be interviewed about his mediumship or biographical facts of his life.

He grew up in a large village in the environs of Florence. It happens that one of us (S.R.), although born in Genoa, grew up in the same village of Tuscany. It has a population of perhaps 5,000 people. Luigi Pisano's family lived near the poverty level, and he received only an elementary school education. He engaged in a variety of occupations, being at different times a barber, a salesman, and a secretary.

When Luigi Pisano was still a young man, he had a number of spontaneous visions that were said to correspond to events beyond the reach of his normal senses. He also seems to have been a focus of psychokinetic effects. In the late 1930s he became a trance medium, and a wide variety of phenomena, including direct voice communications, occurred during his mediumship, which lasted from 1937 to 1952. One of us has given an account of this mediumship (Ravaldini, 1972). Sr. Pisano's sittings were given in S.R.'s own house in the village. There were usually about ten persons present. One of the sitters made notes (close to verbatim) of the communications received or other phenomena observed.

During the sittings the medium was in a profound trance, and afterwards he was amnesic for whatever had occurred. The communications were in the direct voice mode. The medium had several controls, and the one at the time of the Riccardi communications was called Mariòl.

A large number of deceased persons purported to communicate through Sr. Pisano. Some communicators were known to the sitters, but there were also more than 100 communicators who were ostensibly persons unknown to anyone present. Most of these communicators, who could be regarded as 'drop-in communicators', failed to give sufficient information for verification of their existence. Giuseppe Riccardi, the communicator of the present case, is the only one clearly identified with a person who lived; but two other communicators may still be verified.

The Communications from Giuseppe Riccardi

On 18 November 1948, the sitting was held, as usual, at the home of S.R. in the village near Florence where he and Sr. Pisano then lived. Besides the medium

there were ten sitters who were all members of S.R.'s family and a circle of friends.

After the medium went into a trance, the control, Mariòl, made some preliminary remarks. A communicator then manifested who spoke about having drowned himself, seemed to relive the moments of dying, but gave no particulars of who he had been or where he had drowned.

Then came the following communication:

I cannot see you, but I feel that you exist just as I once existed. I was a priest, I am happy. I am glad that you finally know the truth. I was killed with a revolver. I bear no grudge. I was a priest in Canton, Ohio. Giuseppe Riccardi. I do not know who you are; I only know that we are brothers. We are not against one another; we are brothers.

A woman shot me after I had celebrated mass. The priest does not matter; what matters is brother Giuseppe Riccardi. When shot, I felt very warm. I raised myself up and wanted to ask this woman why she had shot me with a pistol. She was in a sort of hysterical state, and she paid no attention to me. She did not seem aware that I had asked her to lift me up. But that does not matter any more.

We are all brothers, I wish for you light and the beautiful flowers of Ohio. Light, everything that is good, everything that is good for all your dear ones and much light to you.¹

Following the above communication, at least two other communicators manifested at the same session; but like the first communicator, they gave no verifiable details of their existence.

Giuseppe Riccardi communicated briefly at two later sittings with Luigi Pisano. At a sitting on May 4, 1949, the following was recorded:

I was struck down by the altar. That does not matter. We live eternally and justice prevails. Light to you, to everyone. Love and greetings, greetings to you.

At the sitting of November 14, 1950, the following was recorded:

I was a man and I died—maybe near you, maybe far away. Giuseppe. I was a priest. I understand the reason for your interest and I am happy.

Verification of the Communicator's Statements

None of the sitters (or the medium) had ever heard of a Father Giuseppe Riccardi of Canton, Ohio. The communicator had given no date for his death, and the chances of verifying what he had said seemed exceedingly slight.

Nevertheless, in October 1979 S.R. wrote to I.S. and asked whether he would try to verify the existence of Giuseppe Riccardi and learn how he had died. It happened that I.S. was abroad when S.R.'s letter arrived, and an assistant replied briefly, explaining that without a date for Father Riccardi's death the task of searching records would be enormously time-consuming. She suggested that S.R. himself should write to the office of the Roman Catholic diocese to which Canton, Ohio, belongs and ask its staff to make enquiries.

Later, in 1984, M.B. wrote to another of I.S.'s assistants and asked him whether he could help trace Father Giuseppe Riccardi. However, the team at the University of Virginia did nothing about the matter, and I.S. could not later

¹ I.S. made all translations from documents or newspapers in Italian.

remember ever having seen the correspondence from Italy in 1979 and 1984. In June 1986, I.S. was in Verona, where he had gone to visit Gastone de Boni, an old friend. S.R. was also in Verona then, and he brought up once more the possible verification of Giuseppe Riccardi's death. I.S. promised to look into the matter, and when he returned to the University of Virginia, he looked up the correspondence of 1979 and decided that an effort should be made to learn whether a Giuseppe Riccardi had ever lived and died in Canton, Ohio.

Accordingly, Susan Adams, I.S.'s research assistant at that time, learned that Canton is within the diocese of Youngstown, Ohio, and she wrote to the diocesan office. A reply dated 7 May, 1987, stated that a Father Giuseppe Riccardi of St. Anthony Parish, Canton, had died on 10 March, 1929. He had served in that parish since 1925. This letter gave no other information. However, the information it did give sufficed to trace accounts of Father Riccardi's death in American newspapers. Susan Adams also notified S.R. about the information she had obtained, and M.B. (who lives in Rome) began a search for reports of the death in the newspaper files of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Vittorio Emanuele II in Rome. We shall first give the relevant information in the American newspapers and then report what we found in the Italian ones. Following these sections, we will describe the results of further inquiries we made about the life of Father Riccardi.

Reports of Father Riccardi's Death in American Newspapers

We have examined reports of Father Riccardi's death in the *Youngstown Vindicator*, the *Youngstown Telegram*, the *Canton Evening Repository*, and the *New York Times*, all of 11 March, 1929. We also examined the *Canton Evening Repository* for 12 March, 1929.

The accounts stated that Father Riccardi had finished saying mass (on 10 March), and most of the congregation had left the church when he was shot. He was going to baptize a baby, when a woman, Mrs. Mamie Guerrieri, approached him in the vestibule, exchanged a few words with him, and then opened fire with a revolver. Although she fired five times, only two bullets wounded Father Riccardi. He lived long enough to make a statement and died, nine hours after being shot. His death was attributed to hemorrhage. Before he died, he said that Mrs. Guerrieri had accused him of molesting her five-year-old daughter, who attended the parish school. Father Riccardi said these charges were completely false, and a medical investigator later agreed with him. There was speculation that Mrs. Guerrieri may have been acting on behalf of disgruntled members of the congregation who had strongly objected to a recent change in the location of the church. Father Riccardi had been instrumental in moving the church to a new site, and a lawsuit arising from the move showed how this move had embittered some of the parishioners.

The *Youngstown Telegram* and the *Canton Repository* gave a few details about Father Riccardi's life. He was 32 years old when he died. He attended St. Ignatius College in Cleveland, Ohio. After graduating, he attended seminaries in Cleveland, Ohio, and Rochester, N.Y. Later, he studied at Capranica College in Rome, and he was ordained there in 1924. He then returned to the United States and took up his duties at St. Anthony's Church, Canton, Ohio, in 1925. Both his parents, three brothers, and three sisters were living in Cleveland, Ohio, at the

time of his death. The reports gave no information about where Father Riccardi had been born or whether other members of his family were still living in Italy when he died.

The *New York Times* attributed its account to the Associated Press.

Reports of Father Riccardi's Death in Italian Newspapers

From his knowledge of the village where the medium and he had lived in 1928, S.R. can state that only two daily newspapers reached the village at that time. These were *Il Telegrafo* of Livorno and *La Nazione* of Florence. Even these newspapers, however, came into the village only in small numbers delivered to the homes of educated or wealthy persons. Luigi Pisano's family subscribed to no newspapers and, for that matter, neither did S.R.'s in the 1920s. Nevertheless, a search of the newspapers that were known to reach the village seemed an important step in the investigation.

La Nazione published no report of Father Riccardi's murder, but *Il Telegrafo* printed the following on March 12, 1929:

A Tragic Event in the Catholic Church of Canton

Canton (Chio) [sic] 11th evening

A tragic event occurred suddenly this morning in the Catholic church. Father Giuseppe Riccardi had just finished celebrating Mass and was getting ready to leave the altar, when a woman, who is apparently suffering from mental illness, suddenly confronted the priest and, at pointblank range, shot him with a revolver. Hit by five bullets, Father Riccardi fell to the ground and was taken to the hospital, where he died soon afterward.

We wish to draw readers' attention to the typographic error in *Il Telegrafo's* report in the spelling of Ohio as Chio. When most people hear a reference to Canton, they think of the city of that name in China, which has more than two million inhabitants. Canton, Ohio, in contrast, is a small city with about 120,000 inhabitants (today), and it is little known even in the United States. S.R. and M.B. conducted an informal survey among some educated Italian acquaintances and found that they invariably located Canton in China. We believe that this association may have influenced the typographer of *Il Telegrafo* to print Chio, instead of Ohio, under the mistaken impression that the report came from a province of China. In this connection we wish to emphasize that the medium pronounced the word *Ohio* distinctly twice during the first Riccardi communication. The word *Chio* in Italian would sound like 'keeyo' in English and would not be confused with Ohio properly pronounced.

In 1987 M.B. and S.R. examined the files of one other newspaper, a weekly, *La Domenica del Corriere*. However, it contained no report of Father Riccardi's death. In November 1988, I.S. was in Bologna, and he suggested that the examination of Italian newspapers should be extended further. Accordingly, assisted by Sr. Orfeo Fiocchi, he visited the Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio in Bologna and examined six more Italian newspapers, most of them dailies, for the four or five days following Father Riccardi's murder.

This further search showed that *L'Avvenire d'Italia* had also printed an account of Father Riccardi's death in its issue of 12 March, 1929. This newspaper is a

Catholic publication printed in Bologna, but having a national distribution. Its account of Father Riccardi's murder was almost identical to that in *Il Telegrafo*. One difference was that the place of the murder was identified simply as Canton, without a further location. Also, the report was attributed to a radio communication, but this referred to a transatlantic message and did not imply any radio broadcast of the news within Italy.

After the discovery of a second report of Father Riccardi's murder in an Italian newspaper, it seemed important to continue examining them. M.B. did this in Rome. In the end, we studied twelve Italian newspapers for the period of the murder; but we found no other report of it in them.

It will be appropriate to add here that one of I.S.'s assistants examined the files of the London *Times*, but found no report of the murder in that newspaper.

Further Inquiries about the Life of Father Riccardi

We considered it essential to learn where Father Riccardi had been born. None of the newspaper reports had given this information.

We thought the information might be included in the transcript of the trial of Mrs. Mamie Guerrieri for the murder of Father Riccardi, but when we applied for this from the record office of Stark County (where Canton, Ohio, is located), we learned that the transcript could not be found.

I.S. corresponded with John Carroll University in University Heights, Ohio. This institution had absorbed St. Ignatius College and had preserved its records. Its supervisor of records was able to tell us that Father Riccardi had studied there from September 1917 to June 1918. The college had recorded his date of birth as 27 August, 1896, but had not noted his birthplace.

We next applied to Capranica College in Rome, where M.B. was shown and personally examined some letters and documents concerned with Father Riccardi. From these we learned that Father Riccardi had already nearly completed his theological studies in the United States and had even received the first level of his ordination there. He returned to Italy toward the end of 1923 mainly in order to improve his knowledge of the Italian language. (As we mentioned earlier, Father Riccardi received his final ordination in 1924 and, having returned to the United States, took up his duties at St. Anthony's Church in Canton, Ohio, in 1925.) More importantly, the college's preserved dossier on Father Riccardi showed that he had been baptized (on 30 August, 1896) and confirmed (on 1 June, 1901) at Alcara li Fusi in the diocese of Patti, Sicily. It was clear also that his parents had been married in the same parish. We have also obtained a birth certificate of Father Riccardi from the village of Alcara li Fusi. We know also that he and his parents lived in Sicily for at least the first five years of his life. We have not learned when the family emigrated to the United States, but this probably occurred in the first decade of the century.

The residence of the family in Sicily and the emigration to the United States at least fifteen years before Father Riccardi's murder in 1929 makes it extremely unlikely that anyone in Tuscany would have given the murder any attention, even if they had read of it in the newspapers. We can also exclude, even more firmly, the possibility of a broadcast of the news on a radio in Tuscany. The Tuscans would have little interest in the murder of a Sicilian priest in the United States. Apart from this, the radio stations of that period were tightly controlled

by Mussolini's fascist regime, and almost entirely given over to its purposes, which did not include attention to a murder in America.

DISCUSSION

In this case the hypothesis of fraud seems to have almost nothing in its favor. If Luigi Pisano had wished to cheat, he could easily have studied obituaries of persons who had died in Italy whose existence could be verified without much difficulty. There is little point in hoaxing unless you are going to get some satisfaction or credit for what you have done. Some hoaxers have the motive of showing the ineffectiveness of experts, and Van Meegeren, who faked paintings by Vermeer (Tietze, 1948), as well as the still not clearly identified hoaxer of Piltown man (Weiner, 1955) seem to have been in this category. One hoax exposed by the S.P.R. (Anon., 1924) may have had this motive, but we cannot be sure. The commonest motive of hoaxing mediums must surely be the hope of influencing clientele by impressive productions of verifiable communications (or physical phenomena). If Luigi Pisano produced the communication from Giuseppe Riccardi fraudulently, he certainly did nothing to assist in the verification that would have led to his being given credit for having 'brought through' an identifiable person instead of one who, for all his or her plausibility, might be purely imaginary. Thirty-nine years elapsed between the time of the first Riccardi communication and the verification of the details communicated. Even then, the statements would probably have remained unverified, if I.S. had not happened to meet S.R. in Verona in June 1986 and been persuaded by him to make a determined effort to verify the communications.

The communications ostensibly from Giuseppe Riccardi contained nothing that was verifiable that was not included in the reports of Father Riccardi's death that the Italian newspapers published. The communicator stated one detail that we hoped to verify, but could not. He said that after being shot by the woman he had tried to lift himself up and that he had asked the woman who had shot him to help him get up. None of the American newspaper reports mentioned that Father Riccardi had done this. However, it remains plausible that he did do so. The shooting took him entirely by surprise. Furthermore, although Mrs. Guerrieri, as we mentioned, fired at Father Riccardi five times, only two bullets hit him—in the neck and abdomen; and he lived about nine hours after being wounded before dying of hemorrhage. Therefore, after he had been shot and had fallen down, he almost certainly would have had strength enough to lift himself up, and he later spoke sufficiently to deny Mrs. Guerrieri's allegations. Nevertheless, the detail in the communication that Father Riccardi wanted to get up and asked the woman to help him do so remains unverified. That the communication contains no more and no less of verifiable information than the newspapers of Italy reported may seem to favor interpreting the case as one of cryptomnesia. However, two of us (S.R. and I.S.) do not believe this is the correct interpretation of the case for the following reasons.

Luigi Pisano was a youth of only sixteen when Father Riccardi's murder occurred. Although copies of *Il Telegrafo* came into the village where he lived, his family were not subscribers. We cannot exclude the possibility that Luigi Pisano somewhere casually read an account of Father Riccardi's death, perhaps in a

copy of the paper lying around in a café or restaurant of the village; but we think this extremely improbable. However, if he had happened to read the report of Father Riccardi's death in *Il Telegrafo* (or the report in *L'Avvenire d'Italia*), he would probably have located the death in Canton, China, not Canton, Ohio.

Another possibility is that Luigi Pisano overheard other persons talking about Father Riccardi's murder. This might also have occurred in a café or restaurant. Father Riccardi, however, came from Sicily, and there would have been no reason for persons in Tuscany to talk about his murder in cafés and restaurants. We think the long latent period of nineteen years between Father Riccardi's death (in 1929) and the first communication (in 1948) would make this case a record for delay before the germination of a cryptomnesic communication. However, in the Blanche Poynings case (Dickinson, 1911) the information was latent in the medium's mind for an estimated twelve years.

If cryptomnesia is the correct interpretation for this case and Luigi Pisano derived the correct information in the communications from *hearing* instead of *reading* about Father Riccardi's death, the case would still be unusual, because exceedingly few documented cases of cryptomnesia have derived from aural exposure to the normal source of information (Stevenson, 1983). However, our main reason for rejecting an aural source of cryptomnesia is the same as that for rejecting a newspaper source: by either route of transmission the Canton referred to would probably have been placed in China, not in Ohio.

We ourselves believe that fraud is not a tenable explanation for the case. Two of us (S.R. and I.S.) also believe that cryptomnesia has been satisfactorily excluded, and we favor the spiritist hypothesis, that is, that the communications derived from a discarnate Giuseppe Riccardi who had survived death. S.R. adopts this interpretation unreservedly, I.S. with acknowledgement that we have not absolutely excluded other possible explanations. M.B., for his part, believes that we have not even excluded cryptomnesia, and he suspends judgment about the best interpretation of the case.

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