In memoriam of Rodolfo Paoletti

A Tribute to a Friend

by Antonio M Gotto

On June 29, 2021, we lost our dear friend and colleague, Rodolfo Paoletti. Rodolfo had been disabled for some time, following a cerebral vascular accident. Dr. Cesare Sirtori and colleagues have prepared a detailed obituary of Rodolfo’s academic career, which will be published in Atherosclerosis. I would like to express personal observations about my friendship with Rodolfo.

I first met Rodolfo fifty years ago, in Houston, Texas, where he was meeting Drs. Evan and Margie Horning, two lipid chemists. We struck an immediate friendship, initially centered around lipid metabolism, but then over the years, it was many different common interests beyond science and medicine. These included art, history, Italian politics, The Vatican, Popes, the Catholic Church, and many others. Rodolfo was truly a Renaissance man with many interests, with a keen intelligence, and a wonderful, outgoing personality. We had attended our first scientific meeting together in Toronto, under the sponsorship of Dr. Daria Haust, with whom we interacted through the International Atherosclerosis Society, over many years. We began our collaboration which involved many different organizations. We began with the Giovanni Lorenzini Foundation. At that time, the Foundation sponsored cultural and scientific programs while conducting scientific meetings. I recall one outstanding exhibition of art and medicine at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. Over the years, Rodolfo sent many young Italian colleagues to work in my laboratory and my department in Houston. Many of these have gone on to establish positions of leadership in the field of atherosclerosis, lipid metabolism, and academic medicine. We in Houston benefitted greatly from their collaboration, contribution to the research in the department and through the formation of lifetime friendships. Rodolfo did much to develop and further the academic careers of his younger colleagues, who have prepared a detailed obituary covering his academic achievements.

Rodolfo and I were both involved in the International Atherosclerosis Society. We helped organize several triennial congresses jointly. I served as president from 1984 to 1996, after which Rodolfo succeeded me as the next president. These triennial meetings brought together scientists and others in the field of lipidology from all over the world. In another activity, Rodolfo and I also inherited the meeting Drugs Affecting Lipid Metabolism from David Kritchevsky and William Holmes. These meetings were also held every third year. These meetings were jointly sponsored by the Baylor College of Medicine and the Methodist Hospital, with the Lorenzini Foundation. Subsequently, Weill Cornell Medical College became the academic partner for the Lorenzini Foundation and these meetings. One of the most memorable meetings took place in New York during the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. During this time, there were some 1500
attendees, many from overseas, who were stranded almost a week in New York before they were able to arrange transportation back to their home country. In addition to Proceedings of the IAS Symposia and Drugs Affecting Lipid Metabolism meetings, Rodolfio and I collaborated editing the volumes of the Atherosclerosis Reviews, published by Raven Press. There were many editions of this over several years. Another area where Rodolfio and I collaborated was over NIH sponsored US-Italian cardiovascular exchange. This program was under the overall leadership of Dr. Claude Lenfant, director of the National Heart, Blood and Lung Institute. This program led to extensive collaborative studies between scientists in the United States and Italy, particularly in the area of atherosclerosis and led to the formation of lipid clinics in Italy.

At the scheduled meetings of the Italian and American colleagues—it was usual for all of the Italian participants to change from one meeting to the next, the only exception being that Rodolfio was always present. Rodolfio was also very involved with NATO, and with the Italian equivalent of the Food and Drug Administration. He had many interactions and collaborations with academic institutions, government agencies, and the pharmaceutical industry. He had insight into the workings of these organizations, as well as many others and always conducted himself in a highly professional and ethical manner.

Rodolfio’s personality was such that he made friends easily. He traveled all over the world. There was no other person that I knew who was as knowledgeable about science, medicine, and politics worldwide as Rodolfio. He established a collaborative relationship with scientists in Havana, Cuba. This collaboration continued over his lifetime and he helped guide his colleagues in Havana to develop a laboratory that has made many important discoveries.

Rodolfio taught me a great deal about many subjects. He had remarkable insight into Italian politics. He would list the numerous parties, at least half a dozen or more, and give me their predicted percentage of the vote they would receive in the upcoming election. His predictions were much more accurate than any Gallup poll carried out in the United States. Rodolfio had a very insightful interest in world politics, art, history, the Vatican, and the Catholic Church. He taught me a great deal about the interactions of with the Vatican curia. At one of the triennial meetings of the IAS in Rome in 1988, one of his Italian colleagues, Gaetano Crepaldi was able to meet to John Paul the Second.

Rodolfio was an intensely religious individual and a man of great faith. When I first met him, the Hornings warned me not to invite him to any social occasion on Sundays, as he kept this for strictly religious observance.

Rodolfio was warm, personable, brilliant, and empathetic. I do remember one occasion at a social event in Houston where the attendees were invited to dance, and Rodolfio accepted an invitation from my wife to dance. He expressed to her that it was only a very rare occasion when he danced. I never saw him dance on another occasion, although we spent many evenings together.

Rodolfio suffered a cerebral vascular accident while he was giving a lecture in Japan. He was disabled for a number of years but was well-cared for by faithful attendees and friends. My last visit with him was approximately ten years ago. I will never forget his warm smile when we met, and when we finally parted. I join many colleagues in our remembrance, affection, and admiration of Rodolfio. An individual like him does not come by very often. We will greatly miss him and never forget him.