

THE IMPOSSIBLE PRESENTED THE BILL

FERDINANDO FREGA · GILLETTENARRATIVE · GILLETTEVATICANO

FOREWORD

I remember my father taking us out for Sunday lunch when I was a child. Always to the same restaurant: Sala Bella. The owner was a large woman, always smiling, always welcoming. The food was good. Delicious. Unique.

Quite often his supervisor would join us. A Friulian by origin, six foot five, weighing well over two hundred and fifty pounds, blessed with a healthy appetite. He would drive down from Messina with his family.

At the end of the meal the bill would come. My father never got up from his chair to pay it. He simply left the cash folded inside the napkin, resting on the empty plate.

I never saw them split the bill. Never saw a different arrangement. Never heard a discussion.

He was the supervisor. My father was the salesman.

And the salesman pays.

Then one evening, as we were parking the car in the garage, he said to me:

"You always see me paying. You always see me reaching for the money first. So you think I am the one paying the bill. I am not."

I did not understand.

It took me a month.

One Sunday, sitting at the same table, the supervisor pulled a notebook from his inside pocket and started writing while my father talked.

Who had opened a new shop. Who had closed one. Who was late paying invoices. Whose son had taken over the family business. Who still had the competitor's products displayed in the window.

Nobody paid attention to me, because I was a child, and children do not count at the table.

On Monday morning those notes would travel to Milan under the supervisor's signature.

My father paid for dinner. The supervisor paid for everything else.

Twenty years without a single warning. Without a single disciplinary note. And, most importantly, without a single denied salary increase.

My father could be considered one of the three highest-paid men in Gillette Italy, right after the Managing Director and the Sales Director. Not because he sold more than everybody else. Because nobody else possessed the added value of the stories unfolding every day in front of customers.

The bill is always paid by someone who is not sitting at the table.

Remember that sentence. You will need it at the end.

Why this long introduction?

To explain what happened today. And what I narrated, hoping that one day it might actually happen. Whether in the near future or much later, I do not know.

It was a Sunday afternoon in mid-August. Scorching heat. Dry air. The kind of temperature that feels even hotter precisely because there is so little humidity.

The air conditioning was working hard and my wife, as always, was reminding me to switch it off, because electricity bills have become expensive enough without adding extra salt to them.

It was around 6:30 PM. I was stretched out in my red armchair when my mobile phone rang.

The prefix was +1. United States. Who on earth would be calling me from America at this hour, when over there it should still be lunchtime?

I answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

A calm voice. Deep. Slightly guttural.

"I would like to speak with Ferdinando."

"Speaking. Who am I talking to?"

"This is Robert. Good evening. The American with the French surname."

I laughed.

"Thank you for the phone call, but honestly, whoever organized this prank deserves credit. I completely fell for it. Although, now that I think about it, you are calling me from an American number while sitting in Rome?"

"Yes. This is my personal mobile phone. I did not use any official channel, because this is not institutional communication. It is one of the few privileges I am still allowed. If you have doubts, I will give you the Vatican switchboard and you can verify it."

"No. This is fine. Please continue."

I was skeptical. Suspicious. Careful. But I did not want to hang up. Being rude has never been part of my nature. Instead I raised my internal threat detection system to maximum and tried to understand where exactly I had landed.

"Tell me, Your Holiness. What can I do for you today?"

"We can use first names, Nando. We are not that far apart in age."

"True. We are only far apart in roles. You are Number Two in the Catholic Church. I am the last of the scribes."

"Why Number Two? I was under the impression I was Number One."

"Forgive me if that sounds uncomfortable. Number One is the man who built it all: Jesus. My former colleague from Gillette. The only one who knew exactly what he was doing. Since he could not publicly appoint his CEOs, he invented the title of Pope and gave you the freedom to personalize it."

He burst out laughing.

"Now I understand," he said, "why every corridor in my house echoes with the same question: have you checked GilletteNarrative today, to see what the colleague has written now?"

I had no difficulty keeping pace with him. A good salesman recognizes a game when one begins. But he was intelligent enough to recognize it too, and he adjusted immediately.

"You know I am calling from the number linked to my American bank account? Some time ago I called that bank directly and they hung up on me, because they thought it was a prank."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

"No, Nando. Please. Call me Robert. At least in private. Without protocol. It makes life easier."

"Well then, Robert, you have chosen the wrong bank. In your position they should be coming to you. In fact, opening a branch inside Vatican City ought to be considered almost mandatory. Prestige alone would justify it. An opportunity no serious banker would even dare to discuss."

"You are right. But economics is not my field. And this phone call is exploratory. Just like the letter you sent me. In the end we do the same job."

"Which is?"

"We are both trying to understand our fellow human beings."

PART II

"You know, Nando, I have read all the stories you have written about your GilletteVatican. My first question is this."

1. Why twenty-two languages? Twenty-two worlds? Even in places where the Church is practically marginal. Take India.

"Because there is a market rule you have never really applied.

Consumers are not customers. A customer is someone who already buys from you. A consumer is someone who still could.

You count customers. The baptized. The practicing faithful. The registered believers. And you forget everybody else.

Markets are not won where you are already strong. Markets are won where you are absent and nobody expects you to arrive.

Twenty-two languages are not twenty-two translations. They are twenty-two open doors."

"Hold on a second. Are you saying faith is a product, and that people switch religions the same way they switch toothpaste brands?"

"I am saying people move. And if that statement offends you, look at what happened to your dioceses across Latin America during the last thirty years, and tell me who moved them."

Silence. Then:

"Continue."

"Besides, I do not want to write economic literature. I am just a salesman who got a four in Italian at school."

2. Why did you write that it would be logical and appropriate to bring Gillette back inside the Church?

"For three reasons, in this order. Identity. Belief. Relationship.

Identity first. Do you really think that being an American with a French surname happened by accident? You carry two worlds inside one name without completely belonging to either of them. Gillette did exactly the same thing for a century. One object. One blade. A hundred different faces, depending on the country where it landed. Identity is not what you are. Identity is what other people recognize in you within three seconds. You have that. And you are wasting it.

Second comes belief. Nobody buys a razor because of the handle. People buy it because they believe tomorrow morning will hurt less than yesterday. It is an act of trust repeated every day before anything else happens. Alone. In front of a mirror. Tell me another product in the world that achieves that.

Then comes relationship. The only thing nobody can buy. My father built relationships across thirty years of shop counters and coffee cups. We do not sell books. We build relationships. It stands at the bottom of everything I publish. It is not a slogan. It is a balance sheet.

And the real parallel is not market share. You do not need market share. The real parallel is frequency.

Gillette became Gillette because it understood one simple fact: a blade wears out. Consumption forces return.

You have a product that wears out every single day. It is called conscience. Yet you treat it as if people only needed to replace it once a year, at Christmas and at Easter."

"And there is one image I have been wanting to tell you about."

"Tell me."

"A man opens a new razor pack. Inside he finds a small insert. Not a holy card. The face of Jesus. As he really looked, before everything else. Clean-shaven."

Robert did not laugh. I could hear him breathing. Then he said:

"Nando, you know we do not have that face. Nobody has ever seen it."

"Exactly. It is the only face in the world that two thousand years of paintings have failed to consume. And you would place it in the hands of an ordinary man at six-thirty in the morning. Alone. Standing in front of the mirror. Not praying. Because that is the only moment of the day when nobody is performing."

A long silence. Then:

"Continue."

3. What does all this mean in practical terms?

"It means I reserve the right to perform a serious due diligence before giving you a single number. I do not promise returns I have not verified. That is what consultants do. And consultants send the invoice anyway.

What I can tell you right now is this. Your marketing — because yes, you do marketing, and you do it badly — became obsolete twenty years ago. Nobody gathers followers through campaigns anymore. Not in any industry.

One thing works. Becoming the gesture a person performs before deciding to perform it.

So there is only one question left. And it is for you."

"Go ahead."

"Do you want to be remembered as the Pope of history? Or do you want to be remembered as the Pope who made history?"

"They sound close."

"They are worlds apart. And the answer depends entirely on you."

EPILOGUE

"Well," he said, "thank you for your time, for your availability, and above all for your interest.

I must tell you something. I was not speaking to you merely as a narrator. Or a sociologist. Or a writer. Or an economist. I was speaking to you as a systems strategist.

I reserve the right to make a decision and to formally let you know what I think."

Then he paused.

"There is one question I would like to ask you, Nando. All of this. The twenty-two languages. The due diligence. The leaflet inside the razor pack. Who pays for it?"

And suddenly I was back in a garage in 1975, standing beside a man who had just paid for a dinner he was not really paying for.

"Robert. The people always pay. Always the same people. You call it an offering. We called it retail price. But it is the same hand opening up.

The difference is never who pays. The difference is how much of that money comes back in the form of something useful, and how much remains trapped, feeding people who are paid too much to produce too little.

My father paid for dinner and paid nothing. Because what he gave away was worth more than what he spent.

Now it is up to you to decide on which side of the table you are sitting."

"Is there anything you would like to ask me?" he said.

"Yes. Take care of yourself. Pay attention to where you are. It is the most beautiful place in the world. Not the safest. The dangers come from inside. And they are invisible precisely when you try to dismantle what you do not yet understand.

And one more thing, Your Holiness. Thank you."

PRAISED BE JESUS CHRIST.

Ferdinando