LETTER FROM UMBRIA

THE PRINCE OF SOLOMEO

The cashmere utopia of Brunello Cucinelli.

BY REBECCA MEAD

The Quirinal Palace, in Rome, was built by Pope Gregory XIII in the late sixteenth century, and is now the residence of Italy’s Presidents. A heightened formality is observed there, and at an event celebrating recipients of the Leonardo Prize, an annual award for contributions to Italian industry and culture, a dark-blue or black suit was the attire of choice. It was a bright morning in January, and the Salone dei Cartazieri—a vast reception hall painted with architectural frescoes and hung with gorgeous tapestries—could have served as a museum of fine Italian tailoring: guests milled around in subtle navy pinstripes or shimmering black, Brioni brushing impeccable shoulders with Zegna.

A sartorial exception was provided by one of the honorees, Brunello Cucinelli, who makes cashmere sweaters and other luxury sportswear. He wore items from a recent collection: a pliant pigeon-gray sports coat, fastened mid-sternum over a white button-down shirt; a thin blue tie; and pants that were fractionally paler than the sports coat, tapering below the knee to an abbreviated cuff, and barely skimming a pair of tan ankle boots. Cucinelli is fifty-six, but, apart from the graying stubble on his chin, he more closely resembled a provincial schoolboy who had squeezed into his mismatched, almost outgrown Sunday best for an excursion to the big city. When President Giorgio Napolitano—who wore a traditional three-piece suit of a blue so dark and rich that it verged on eggplant—whispered something to Cucinelli as he bestowed the award, he looked like a firm but kindly headmaster admonishing a pupil who had botched the knotting of his tie.

Cucinelli had bowed into Rome that morning from Umbria, a mountainous region north of the capital, where he lives in a hilltop village called Solomeo. Solomeo is not far from Perugia, and dates to the twelfth century. Its population in the last census was four hundred and thirty-six. Over the past thirty years, as his company has grown from a one-man operation to a business employing five hundred people, with an annual turnover of more than two hundred million dollars, Cucinelli has been renovating the village. He has enacted a peculiar fantasy of beneficent feudalism, with himself as the enlightened overlord, and the residents, many of them his employees, as the appreciative underlings. A castle with walls of honey-colored stone, several feet thick, has been converted into a factory; its chambers hum with the sound of knitting machines, its basement rumbles with ceaseless handiwork. A Renaissance villa close by has been turned into a dining hall for employees, with a vaulted ceiling and views of the hills, it is often mistaken for an architectural restoration. Cucinelli contributed to the restoration of the village’s Church of St. Bartholomew, which was founded in the late twelfth century and rebuilt in the seventeenth. He has repaved streets, restored squares, and built a woodland park. In addition, he has constructed a two-hundred-and-forty-seat theatre, crafted in the architectural vernacular of the sixteenth century. It has a pseudo-classical portico whose large Latin inscription, “B. CUCINELLI CVRavit A DoMIINI MVIII,” recalls the façade of the Pantheon, in Rome.

All this has been done with the millions generated by Cucinelli’s clothing, which is favored by the kind of wearers who typically might choose Armani Black Label or Chanel for a formal occasion, such as meeting a President. His clothes are usually described, as they were on the Leonardo Prize program, as “sporty chic,” although it is misleading to suggest that one might wear Cucinelli for doing anything more physically taxing than shopping or lunching. (“I haven’t seen any fleece in his collections,” another designer at the Leonardo ceremony told me.) Cucinelli got his start, in the eighties, by making cashmere sweaters in bright colors, a novelty at the time; these days, his sweaters are more likely to be in subtle shades of goat. He has lately extended his brand into a wider range of sportswear and accessories, and, in addition to selling through high-end department stores, he has established boutiques in cities such as Paris, Tokyo, and New York. His clothes are artisanal indulgences: the current collection includes a cardigan, in fine drapery cashmere, that sells for fifteen hundred dollars; a mink jerkin with long, ribbed-cashmere tube sleeves that is just the thing to keep you warm while walking between your Cesnas and your limousine at the Aspen airport; and what may be the world’s most impractical boot, a toe-ring sandal attached to a guitter of palest-gray suede.

Cucinelli is better known within the fashion industry than he is outside of it. At the Leonardo ceremony, he wrapped an arm around the shoulder of Diego Della Valle and gave Santo Versace an affectionate pinch on the cheek. Cucinelli’s wife, Federica, was as singularly outfitted as her husband—she wore buff-colored jodhpur-like trousers, a close-fitting navy jacket with equestrian tails, and suede ankle boots, as if she had just dismounted from her Lipizzaner—but she hung back shyly. Cucinelli has an abundantly warm and generous manner, and can put those in his orbit at immediate ease. When I asked him what President Napolitano had whispered to him during the ceremony, he said, “He told me he wants to come to Solomeo, because he likes the theatre. And I have a theatre.”

Though Cucinelli enjoys socializing with the cognoscenti in Rome, he remains devoted to Solomeo with the unquestioning fidelity that a bamboccione—one of Italy’s perennial bachelors—gives to his mother’s hearth and cooking. He
In the village of Solomeo, Cucinelli has enacted a fantasy of beneficent feudalism, with himself as the enlightened overlord.
prefers to sleep in his hilltop bed—which is in another restored Renaissance villa in Solomeo—and, after attending a luncheon for the Leonardo Prize recipients, he made the two-hour journey home. His urgency was heightened by an appointment to play soccer in a neighboring village, Castel Rigone, whose team he inaugurated a few years ago. He also built a new stadium there; he and a few middle-aged friends from childhood play on its manicured turf at least twice a week, running around in Nike track suits and cashmere neck warmers, before repairing to a restaurant in a converted castle for spaghetti all'amatriciana and cigars.

Every morning at about six, Cucinelli takes a tour of his domain with his foreman, Carlo Brunetti, to decide on the work of the day. The renovation of Solomeo is a perpetual project: the day I arrived, in late January, a pair of workers were paving up a patch of what looked to me like faultlessly laid cobblestones, then carefully laying them again. Solomeo, in Cucinelli’s reconfiguring, re-creates a past that never existed—the Middle Ages by way of the Magic Kingdom. There are blooming planters in the corners of the castle courtyard, instead of snuffing pigs and their detritus. And the Piazza della Pace, a renovated square in front of the castle, with faultless views over the Solomeo Valley, is edged by a wall just high enough to obscure the less pleasing sight of Cucinelli’s larger, modern factory, which is at the base of the hill.

Cucinelli’s dedication to Solomeo is, in part, a form of benign Umbrian chauvinism; Federica was born in the village, while Cucinelli was born in Castel Rigone, which is equally small and ancient. (When, after the soccer game, I casually asked the restaurant owner to tell me something about the history of the place, he began with its settlement by barbarians, in the years before Christ.) But Cucinelli’s transformation of Solomeo into a quasi-medieval company town is also an effort to create what he calls, in the subtitle of his self-published autobiography-cum-coffee-table book, “A Humanistic Enterprise in the World of Industry”—a business founded upon principles that are derived from his reading in the classics of ethics, theology, and philosophy. Having dropped out of engineering school at twenty-four, Cucinelli has followed a self-imposed curriculum of study, which has resulted in his assembling a personal pantheon of sages, ranging from Socrates to St. Francis of Assisi and Pas-
to meet Obama but never does. “If one time I could meet him—I would walk to Washington if I had to,” he said. Cucinelli has even commissioned busts of Obama, to be made in Carrara marble, which he intends to display in his home, alongside those of other great thinkers. “I have Socrates, Seneca, Aristotle, and Marcus Aurelius, and now Obama,” he said. “I sit in front of the fire and talk to them.”

Cucinelli has distilled an idiosyncratic business philosophy that draws on Renaissance humanism, Senecan stoicism, Benedictine rigor, and the theories of Theodore Levitt, a twentieth-century marketing scholar who argued that the purpose of companies is to keep and serve customers. “I would like to make a profit using ethics, dignity, and morals,” he told me. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to, but I’m trying. Of course, I believe in a form of capitalism. I would just like it to be slightly more human.” He went on, “I wish we could find a new name, instead of calling it capitalism. I like the idea of an enlightened principality. In the early eighteen-hundreds, in Germany, there were princes who built schools, streets, homes. I like that. But not the ownership of the people who work for you.”

Cucinelli pays his employees a higher wage than the market rate—in Italy, a factory worker typically starts at a thousand euros a month. And he attempts to infuse pleasure into the process of making clothes, which he describes as tedious and repetitive. The whole company takes a ninety-minute lunch break; employees can go home to feed their families or eat at the heavily subsidized company cafeteria—they pay less than three euros—and still have time for a nap afterward. (Given the quality of the cafeteria—where long tables are set with bottles of Pellegrino and wine, and local ladies serve minestre, pastas, platters of grilled meat, and salad—a nap is recommended.) Cucinelli has also installed a small library, near the theatre, where workers and visitors are encouraged to browse volumes that look as if they had been selected by an eager undergraduate: there are works by Dante, Kafka, Proust, Ruskin, Rawls, Nietzsche, Derrida, Deleuze, in many different languages.

Cucinelli expects discipline among his employees, and refers frequently to the model of the Benedictine Rule, upon which the saint founded the monastic tradition, five hundred years after Christ. “St. Benedict says _ora et labora_—pray and work,” he said. “Work and pray, and take care of your soul by your work.” In Solomeo, discipline is expected rather than imposed: workers are not asked to clock in or out. They are, however, gently prodded to contemplate ideas; a couple of years ago, Cucinelli installed all over town ceramic plaques inscribed with quotes from various sages. There’s Hadrian outside the factory entrance (“I feel responsible for all the beauty in the world”), and Shakespeare on the pathway to the theatre (“_We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep_”). Not long ago, Cucinelli published a collection of Obama’s speeches, preceded by an imaginary dialogue between Obama and Marcus Aurelius, compiled from their respective quotations. (Marcus Aurelius: “Everything that exists is in a manner the seed of that which will be”; Barack Obama: “We are the keepers of this legacy.”) He has distributed a copy to each of his employees.

Cucinelli also looks to do good works for people not on his payroll. He earmarks twenty per cent of the company’s annual profits, he says, “for humanity.” He underwrote the construction of a hospital in Malawi, after one of his two daughters took a trip to the country. He told me that projects such as the Teatro Cucinelli, in Solomeo, and the soccer stadium in Castel Rigone reflect a Hadrianic commitment to nurture beauty in the world: “If I give you the right conditions to work, and I put you in a beautiful place, where you feel a little bit better about yourself because you know your work is being used for something greater than producing a profit, maybe you will get more creative, maybe you will want to work more.”

Cucinelli’s two Solomeo factories are large enough to make only his sample collections and to exercise quality control over the bulk of the production, which is farmed out to contractors. In recent years, Italian clothing manufacturers have increasingly sought cheaper labor in countries such as India and China. Cucinelli has remained steadfastly committed to keeping his business local; all his clothes are made in Italy, eighty per cent of them in Umbria. Among his larger circle of employees are the residents of a cloistered convent

> “Be truthful with me, Ben—what’s the difference between mid cap and large cap?”
in Perugia, where several nuns do embroidery work.

When the financial crisis hit, in the fall of 2008, Cucinelli called his employees together and assured them that he would not lay anyone off for eighteen months; in return, he asked them to be more expansive in their thinking. (One example of such creativity: a cleaning lady, inspired by the collection of autographed soccer balls that Cucinelli has artfully arranged in a cashmere-lined suitcase in his office, advised him to make a soccer ball from cashmere. Several were produced, as promotional items.) Last spring, Ron Frasch, the president of Saks Fifth Avenue, wrote to Cucinelli to say that he felt lucky to have his company as a close partner. “We all got together, and said, ‘Let’s do something to elevate this business,’” Frasch told me. For a period last fall in New York City, Saks dedicated its windows to Cucinelli and hosted an event at which a chef of Cucinelli’s choosing prepared Umbrian specialties. Frasch said, “We still have people coming up and say they were introduced to Brunello’s product during that time, and they joined the club. He has got an ability to have someone spend a significant amount of money for a beautifully made product, but his product does a lot for the customer.” Cucinelli turned a profit last year, and has hired twenty new people since the financial crisis began.

Cucinelli’s integration of high-end manufacture with a higher purpose is widely admired among his colleagues in the fashion industry. Bob Mitchell, a retailer based in Connecticut who has been selling Cucinelli’s clothes for more than a decade, told me, “You walk around Solomeo, and you see people smiling and happy to be there. There is an intangible that is not something you can create quickly.” Among the workers I encountered in Solomeo, there seemed to be a general contentment. I met Rosella Cianetti, a seamstress in the repair department. (The moth holes of select customers are fixed free.) When we spoke, Cianetti, who was fixing a small hole in a seam of a sweater with the skill of Arachne, told me that she had been making clothes for forty years, the last seven at Cucinelli. “It is better than any other experience I have had,” she said. “We’re treated like humans, and in other places we are treated more like machines. We get respect for what we do with our hands. It doesn’t seem like a lot, but we appreciate it.” She did not, she admitted, have much time for reading Marcus Aurelius.

Among residents of Solomeo, Cucinelli is seen as a local boy made good, who is thought to be making the locale even better. “He’s a good guy,” Don Sandro, who has been the priest of St. Bartholomew’s for the past decade, told me when I met him in the chilly, darkened church one afternoon. “He’s good at what he does. And he tries to work a lot on a social level, and a human level.” Don Sandro was wearing a flat cap and a winter coat, underneath which was a dark-blue Cucinelli sweater. (“Either we get it as a gift or we buy it, but we believe in it,” he said, a little bashfully.) Stefania Natalichi, the proprietress of Solomeo’s only store, a hole-in-the-wall grocery that sells everything from artisanal chocolates to Silly String, told me that she remembered Cucinelli when he was a long-haired teen-ager on a motorbike, roaring into town to court Federica. She could hardly believe that he’d brought anything so grand as a theatre to the town. “My mother was a farmer, and she had never seen anything like it,” Natalichi told me, her eyes filling with tears. “For the inauguration, Brunello put my mother in a reserved seat near the front. She had no idea how something like this could be. It was a beautiful night.”

Teatro Cucinelli, which opened in 2008, has enough buff-colored upholstered seats for half the village’s population, but its audience typically comes from farther afield. It hosts a travelling theatrical company about once a month, in cooperation with a regional-theatre association whose president, for the past eight years, has been Cucinelli. (“We try to choose shows that are in keeping with his philosophy,” Bianca Maria Ragni, who organizes the schedule, told me.) In the summer, the theatre hosts a classical-music festival; at other times, Cucinelli holds sales meetings there, and his agents can admire the busts of Seneca, Hadrian, and Cicero that are displayed in niches. While I was in Solomeo, the theatre presented “La Festa,” by Spiro Scimone, a contemporary playwright. The theatre was only two-thirds full, a situation that could be explained, perhaps, by the cold weather, or by the fact that an important soccer game, Juventus versus Rome, was taking place that evening. The play, an absurdist comedy performed in Sicilian dialect, concerned the interactions of three family members—a brutish father, a downtrodden mother, and a drunken, obnoxious adult son—on the occasion of the parents’ wedding anniversary. Cucinelli sat in the center seat of the front row. “Federica would like to have three rows back, but I want to be immersed,” he explained. Afterward, having declared the work a fascinating commentary on the decline of traditional family values, he and other audience members repaired to the library with the actors for _vin santo_ and biscootti.

Cucinelli’s investment in village life has, naturally, a philosophical foundation. As he told me, “Rousseau said the cities are hell, and we have to go back to living in small towns, and start debating again, and rethink humanity.” In Solomeo, Cucinelli helps to sponsor an annual medieval festival; trestle tables are set out in the streets, a pig is roasted on a spit, and villagers dress up in period costume. (A few years ago, he invited his American clients to participate in a similar event, providing costumes for all comers. He was Lorenzo de’ Medici.) For many years, the residents of Solomeo also performed a Passion play every Easter, in which Cucinelli was invariably cast as Jesus, and Federica took the role of Mary Magdalene. “One year we did it in Latin, another year in _volgare_—the language of Dante,” he told me. “I was Jesus. I would cry, carry the cross barefoot—everything.”

In order to nurture a village culture that values arts and crafts over more modern diversions, Cucinelli has helped subsidize a variety of recreational activities. I had a glimpse of several of them one evening, but first I joined him and his family at their home for supper, prepared by Federica. His daughters, Camilla, who is twenty-eight and works in his design studio, and Carolina, who is nineteen and still in school, were exemplars of Cucinelli’s relaxed chic, in pleated silk pants paired with close-fitting cashmere tops; both were slender enough to be genuinely relaxed in their outfits.

It was a meal of the kind that Cucinelli, in observance of Benedictine simplicity, recommends: bread-and-tomato soup, drizzled with olive oil from trees in a
grove in the hilltop woodland, and accompanied by excellent red wine. We ate on our laps, in accordance with the informality that Cucinelli prefers, and which he extends to even the most illustrious guests. (One day, the Bishop of Perugia came to lunch, Federica told me: “Afterward, Brunello said, ‘Your Excellency, let’s take a nap.’ The Bishop slept on my eighty-seven-year-old mother’s bed.”) Cucinelli showed me the spot by the fireplace intended for the bust of Obama—a pot of lilacs served as a placeholder. There were books piled on every surface in the living room, and the piles themselves were piled with scraps of paper bearing quotations from Henry James (“There are three rules to live a serene life—be kind, be kind, be kind”) and St. Paul (“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”). “I think like a Greek!” Cucinelli told me. Federica said that her husband spends Sunday afternoons sitting in an armchair, poring over his volumes; Cucinelli confided that his studies often languish during soccer season.

Having eaten, we went out into the frosty night and walked to the library, a few minutes away. About twenty members of the village choir were rehearsing Mozart’s Requiem; Cucinelli, buttoned into a packed jacket, perched on the edge of a table and listened, eyes closed. Next, we headed to a small square where, in an upper room, an art class was taking place: a young man painted a landscape with a cat in the foreground. One woman, dressed head to toe in Cucinelli, worked on a still-life.

Our last visit was to the cafeteria, where a dozen women were receiving instruction in embroidery. They worked on squares of linen that looked as if they were being readied for a priest’s vestry. “You’re suddenly very quiet,” Cucinelli said good-naturedly, as we walked in and the conversation stopped. The women giggled. All but one, the embroidery teacher, were wearing his knits. “We have to give her one,” he said.

Cucinelli’s father, Umberto, was an uneducated farmer, and Cucinelli has fond memories of rural life, which came to an abrupt end in his early teens, when the family moved to a suburb of Perugia, and his father began working in a cement factory. “They didn’t beat him,
but still they treated him like a slave," Cucinelli told me one afternoon, as we sat in an airy conference room at the top of the castle, in what was once a granary. The chairs were upholstered in woven grey cashmere; a lampshade was covered with the same fabric, as was a trash can. Downstairs, on the other side of a glass partition, was the C.F.O.’s office—a former bedchamber whose walls contained fresco fragments. (The plaster was also ridged with small incisions, which had been made to permit the insertion of a supposedly curative poultice during an outbreak of plague.)

“My father was humiliated,” Cucinelli continued. “He didn’t make much money at all. His work didn’t do anything to make life more beautiful. He worked in a very tough environment.” Cucinelli, too, found it difficult to adapt to city life. He spoke a rustic dialect that caused him to be teased at school. “And you could see from what we wore that it was not city wear,” he said. “I probably wore the same pair of pants all the time. My mother would iron them each night and have them ready for the next morning.”

At the age of twelve, enamored of the example of another Umbrian entrepreneur, St. Francis, Cucinelli flirted with the idea of joining the priesthood, and went to stay in a seminary. After one night there, he decided that he missed his parents and went home. He was not an industrious student, and was more interested in acquiring a sentimental education at a local café, Bar di Gigino, where his fellow-patrons included a neighborhood prostitute and a university professor. In his autobiography, Cucinelli says that Bar di Gigino “provided a central vantage point to learn about life, and life appeared to me, then and ever after, to be a joyful kind of global theatre, in a constant state of flux.”

Umberto Cucinelli, who is eighty-eight and now lives in Solomeo, across the street from his son, told me that Brunello spent much of his time as a young man lost in thought. “He was smart, and he wanted to do something great,” Umberto said. Eventually, Umberto insisted that Brunello do something productive. “One night, at one-thirty in the morning, I said to him, ‘Stop doing this—stop hanging out in the bar,’” Umberto told me. “It was time for him to start working. Brunello had lots of ideas, but he didn’t know how to start.”

One idea was to take advantage of the local textile industry. With a bank loan and a friend, Cucinelli bought a small amount of cashmere and had it made into half a dozen sweaters that were dyed bright colors, in unapologetic emulation of what Benetton was doing in Shetland wool. Cucinelli took them to northern Italy, where a retailer placed an order for fifty-three pieces. “I had the great fortune of creating something that, at the time, felt new,” Cucinelli said. “That first fifty-three I sold, I felt like Alexander the Great.” He bought out his friend, and expanded the business to Germany—“I was told that Germans pay really well, and they pay on time”—and, eventually, to the United States. Although Cucinelli has no design training, his personal aesthetic has always informed the clothes, and those of his employees who wear Brunello Cucinelli to work end up looking a lot like Brunello Cucinelli. (Cucinelli is often dressed more or less identically to his personal assistant, Francesco Tomassini, as if they were teen-agers who’d coordinated outfits by phone before school.) He usually appears in the company’s advertising campaigns. In one ad, from a few seasons ago, he is shown in a gilded hall at the University of Perugia, lecturing to a class of languid models who are posing, implausibly, as students of philosophy. “According to Dante, Virtue and Knowledge save Man from brutality,” the ad copy reads. “The Umbrians are not afraid of also eating the fruit of that pleasant, yet much feared, tree of paradise.”

In the mid-eighties, Cucinelli bought a section of the Solomeo castle from its owner, a lawyer who lived in a different region. His continuing acquisition of village buildings is, he insists, not predatory. “This offends me—the idea that you can buy everything and everyone,” he said. (He agreed, however, that the vista from his castle to the theatre would be noticeably improved by the demolition of a modern building that stands between them.) He likes to imagine that the buildings he has restored and built in Solomeo will last for another five
hundred years, at least. He has also considered the shorter-term future, by installing multiple kitchens and bathrooms, so that the factory can be turned into luxury apartments at a moment’s notice, should such a transformation be necessary. In his men’s outlet store, which is in a villa he has restored, the knitwear is stacked incongruously on the countertop of a fully equipped kitchen, above a dishwasher.

Umberto Cucinelli, who has the same twinkling eyes as his son, told me that Brunello was always his brightest child. “The fingers of a hand are not all the same,” he said, with pride. (Cucinelli has two brothers; one owns a plumbing business, and the other is a carpenter.) Umberto, who was wearing a gray cashmere sweater—“Brunello gave me four or five of them”—had a somewhat more stoic perspective on the family’s move from rural to industrial life: “The only good thing was each month I had my pay,” he told me. “If you work in industry, you can have more money when you retire.” He did not understand all his son’s choices, Umberto told me, but was humble enough to think that perhaps Brunello knew better. “If it were up to me, I wouldn’t build a theater,” he said, with a shrug. “But he can build whatever he wants.”

The next project that Cucinelli hopes to undertake in Solomeo is the construction of what he calls a “sacred park” in the hilltop woodland, complete with a small ecumenical retreat. An architect’s rendering, suggesting a thirteenth-century municipal building, already hangs on Cucinelli’s office wall. “Say you are a friend of mine and you believe in Islam—you can stay here, and study, and find your own little corner for prayer,” he said, pointing to a window on the upper floor. “And if you are Jewish you can stay here,” he said, indicating the next window over. Cucinelli, who was reared a Catholic but now describes himself as a “religious naturalist,” came up with the idea for the sacred park five years ago. When he heard Obama’s speech in Cairo last summer, he knew that the time had come. “I hope that I can sell a lot of clothes, because this is going to be a great thing for humanity,” he said.

One day, I asked Cucinelli whether he thought St. Benedict would approve of his business, founded as it is upon providing the least needy of people with the most unnecessary of objects. Cucinelli paused for a moment, and told me that he thought St. Benedict would be very happy with his work. He offered to take me to meet the man he refers to as his “spiritual father”—Father Cassian Folsom, a Benedictine monk, and an American. Ten years ago, he explained, Father Cassian reestablished a monastery in Norcia, St. Benedict’s birthplace; it was the first inside the town’s walls since Napoleon closed down Italy’s religious communities, two hundred years ago.

When he picked me up at my hotel the following morning, Cucinelli was wearing cream-colored cargo pants and a cream-colored cashmere sweater, which complemented the cream-colored upholstery of his S.U.V. It took us about an hour and a half to get to the walled town of Norcia, which is in more mountainous territory than Solomeo, with snow-capped peaks visible in the near distance. In a narrow street off the town’s largest piazza, we entered what appeared to be a small monastic gift shop, where a cash register was being manned by a young Indonesian monk. When Cucinelli was announced, a figure in a long black habit and black Birkenstocks emerged from a door at the rear. It was Father Cassian. After pushing back the hood that framed his gaunt, bearded face, he greeted us warmly and led us to his office, a narrow room overlooking a cloister. Inviting Cucinelli to sit, he handed him a sheaf of Xeroxes: plans for the renovation of a ruined Capuchin monastery just outside of Norcia, which the monks had acquired several months earlier. Father Cassian explained that they required a more peaceful spot than the center of Norcia, for all its historical resonance, could provide. “Twenty thousand pilgrims come here a year,” he said. “It’s a beautiful piazza, but in the summer they have rock concerts that start at ten. We go to bed at nine.” The monk raised his eyes Heavenward. “It’s impossible,” he said.

He was hoping to persuade Cucinelli to provide money toward the renovation, and wanted to show him the site. “We need five or six million euros,” Fa-ther Cassian said. “The main work will be three and a half million. But monks take a long view of things, so if it takes fifty years to do it we’ll manage.” After Father Cassian put on a black overcoat and threw around his neck a black cashmere scarf that Federica Cucinelli had given him for Christmas, we climbed into his car and made the short journey. As we drove, Father Cassian explained that most of the fourteen monks in his community were, like him, American. “In Italy, vocations are down in general,” he said. “Our way of life is very demanding. People value comfort over everything else, and they don’t want a sacrificial life.”

At the site, there was an intact if dilapidated church. Vivid green moss crept over its interior walls, revealing the route taken by seeping rainwater. Adjacent to the church were the ruins of the monks’ living quarters, reduced to rubble by earthquakes and neglect. In what had once been the refectory, a strip of metal roofing had been erected to offer a little protection to a fragmentary fresco depicting the Last Supper. “We have faith that this will happen,” Father Cassian said, of the place’s eventual revival. “I move forward, and I hope that sooner or later people follow after me.” Cucinelli asked Father Cassian how much money he had raised toward the renovation so far, then laughed at the monk’s straightforward response: nothing.

Father Cassian had to be in the monastery for prayers, so we drove back to Norcia. Cucinelli told him that over the recent holidays he had spent some time reflecting on his life, and had been able to put order into his soul. “That’s a considerable accomplishment,” Father Cassian said, respectfully. “The great monastic asceticism exists to put order into the soul.”

Then Cucinelli told him that I had wondered whether St. Benedict would approve of his work, and asked for his opinion on the matter. Father Cassian weighed the question. He mentioned the beauty of the workmanship that emerges from Cucinelli’s factories, and the concern for the individual worker that Cucinelli maintains. Benedict, he concluded, would rule in Cucinelli’s favor. “Obviously, Brunello’s work is a little out of our category,” the monk said. “But quality is quality.”