

# **Don Elia Comini: martyr priest at Monte Sole**

*On December 18, 2024, Pope Francis officially recognized the martyrdom of Don Elia Comini (1910-1944), a Salesian of Don Bosco, who will thus be beatified. His name joins that of other priests—such as Don Giovanni Fornasini, already Blessed since 2021—who fell victim to the brutal Nazi violence in the Monte Sole area, in the Bologna hills, during World War II. The beatification of Don Elia Comini is not only an event of extraordinary significance for the Bologna Church and the Salesian Family, but also constitutes a universal invitation to rediscover the value of Christian witness: a witness in which charity, justice, and compassion prevail over every form of violence and hatred.*

## **From the Apennines to the Salesian courtyards**

Don Elia Comini was born on May 7, 1910, in the locality of “Madonna del Bosco” in Calvenzano di Vergato, in the province of Bologna. His birthplace is adjacent to a small Marian sanctuary dedicated to the “Madonna del Bosco,” and this strong imprint in the sign of Mary will accompany him throughout his life.

He is the second child of Claudio and Emma Limoni, who were married at the parish church of Salvaro on February 11, 1907. The following year, the firstborn Amleto was born. Two years later, Elia came into the world. Baptized the day after his birth—May 8—at the parish of Sant’Apollinare in Calvenzano, Elia also received the names “Michele” and “Giuseppe” that day.

When he was seven years old, the family moved to the locality of “Casetta” in Pioppe di Salvaro in the municipality of Grizzana. In 1916, Elia began school: he attended the first three elementary classes in Calvenzano. During that time, he also received his First Communion. Still

young, he showed great involvement in catechism and liturgical celebrations. He received Confirmation on July 29, 1917. Between 1919 and 1922, Elia learned the first elements of pastoral care at the "school of fire" of Mons. Fidenzio Mellini, who had known Don Bosco as a young man and had prophesied his priesthood. In 1923, Don Mellini directed both Elia and his brother Amleto to the Salesians of Finale Emilia, and both would treasure the pedagogical charisma of the saint of the young: Amleto as a teacher and "entrepreneur" in the school; Elia as a Salesian of Don Bosco.

A novice from October 1, 1925, at San Lazzaro di Savena, Elia Comini became fatherless on September 14, 1926, just a few days (October 3, 1926) before his First Religious Profession, which he would renew until Perpetual, on May 8, 1931, on the anniversary of his baptism, at the "San Bernardino" Institute in Chiari. In Chiari, he would also be a "trainee" at the Salesian Institute "Rota." He received the minor orders of the ostiariate and lectorate on December 23, 1933; of the exorcist and acolyte on February 22, 1934. He was ordained subdeacon on September 22, 1934. Ordained deacon in the cathedral of Brescia on December 22, 1934, Don Elia was consecrated a priest by the imposition of hands of the Bishop of Brescia, Mons. Giacinto Tredici, on March 16, 1935, at just 24 years old: the next day he celebrated his First Mass at the Salesian Institute "San Bernardino" in Chiari. On July 28, 1935, he would celebrate with a Mass in Salvaro.

Enrolled in the Faculty of Classical Letters and Philosophy at the then Royal University of Milan, he was always very well-liked by the students, both as a teacher and as a father and guide in the Spirit: his character, serious without rigidity, earned him esteem and trust. Don Elia was also a fine musician and humanist, who appreciated and knew how to make others appreciate "beautiful things." In the written compositions, many students, in addition to following the prompt, naturally found it easy to open their hearts to Don Elia, thus providing him with the opportunity to accompany and guide them. Of Don Elia "the Salesian," it was said that

he was like a hen with chicks around her ("You could read all the happiness of listening to him on their faces: they seemed like a brood of chicks around the hen"): all close to him! This image recalls that of Mt 23:37 and expresses his attitude of gathering people to cheer them and keep them safe.

Don Elia graduated on November 17, 1939, in Classical Letters with a thesis on Tertullian's *De resurrectione carnis*, with Professor Luigi Castiglioni (a renowned Latinist and co-author of a famous Latin dictionary, the "Castiglioni-Mariotti"): focusing on the words "*resurget igitur caro*", Elia comments that it is the song of victory after a long and exhausting battle.

### **A one-way journey**

When his brother Amleto moved to Switzerland, their mother—Mrs. Emma Limoni—was left alone in the Apennines: therefore, Don Elia, in full agreement with his superiors, would dedicate his vacations to her every year. When he returned home, he helped his mother but—as a priest—he primarily made himself available in local pastoral work, assisting Mons. Mellini.

In agreement with the superiors and particularly with the Inspector, Don Francesco Rastello, Don Elia returned to Salvaro in the summer of 1944: that year he hoped to evacuate his mother from an area where, at a short distance, Allied forces, partisans, and Nazi-fascist troops defined a situation of particular risk. Don Elia was aware of the danger he faced leaving his Treviglio to go to Salvaro, and a confrere, Don Giuseppe Bertolli SDB, recalls: "As I said goodbye to him, I told him that a journey like his could also be without return; I also asked him, of course jokingly, what he would leave me if he did not return; he replied in my same tone that he would leave me his books...; then I never saw him again." Don Elia was already aware that he was heading towards "the eye of the storm" and did not seek a form of protection in the Salesian house (where he could easily have stayed): "The last memory I have of him dates back to the summer of

1944, when, during the war, the Community began to dissolve; I still hear my words that kindly addressed him, almost jokingly, reminding him that he, in those dark times we were about to face, should feel privileged, as a white cross had been drawn on the roof of the Institute and no one would have the courage to bomb it. However, he, like a prophet, replied to me to be very careful because during the holidays I might read in the newspapers that Don Elia Comini had heroically died in the fulfillment of his duty." "The impression of the danger he was exposing himself to was vivid in everyone", commented a confrere.

Along the journey to Salvaro, Don Comini stopped in Modena, where he sustained a serious injury to his leg: according to one account, he interposed himself between a vehicle and a passerby, thus averting a more serious accident; according to another, he helped a gentleman push a cart. In any case, he helped his neighbor. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "When a madman drives his car onto the sidewalk, I cannot, as a pastor, be content to bury the dead and console the families. I must, if I find myself in that place, jump and grab the driver at the wheel."

The episode in Modena expresses, in this sense, an attitude of Don Elia that would emerge even more in Salvaro in the following months: to interpose, mediate, rush in personally, expose his life for his brothers, always aware of the risk this entails and serenely willing to pay the consequences.

### **A pastor on the front line**

Limping, he arrived in Salvaro at sunset on June 24, 1944, leaning on a cane as best he could: an unusual instrument for a 34-year-old young man! He found the rectory transformed: Mons. Mellini was hosting dozens of people, belonging to families of evacuees; moreover, the 5 Ancelle del Sacro Cuore sisters, responsible for the nursery, including Sister Alberta Taccini. Elderly, tired, and shaken by the war events, that summer Mons. Fidenzio Mellini struggled to make

decisions; he had become more fragile and uncertain. Don Elia, who had known him since childhood, began to help him in everything and took a bit of control of the situation. The injury to his leg also prevented him from evacuating his mother: Don Elia remained in Salvaro, and when he could walk well again, the changed circumstances and the growing pastoral needs would ensure that he stayed there.

Don Elia revitalized the pastoral work, followed catechism, and took care of the orphans abandoned to themselves. He also welcomed the evacuees, encouraged the fearful, and moderated the reckless. Don Elia's presence became a unifying force, a good sign in those dramatic moments when human relationships were torn apart by suspicion and opposition. He put his organizational skills and practical intelligence, honed over years of Salesian life, at the service of many people. He wrote to his brother Amleto: "Certainly, these are dramatic moments, and worse ones are foreseen. We hope everything in the grace of God and in the protection of the Madonna, whom you must invoke for us. I hope to be able to send you more news."

The Germans of the Wehrmacht were stationed in the area, and on the heights, there was the partisan brigade "Stella Rossa." Don Elia Comini remained a figure estranged from any claims or partisanship: he was a priest and asserted calls for prudence and pacification. He told the partisans: "Boys, watch what you do, because you ruin the population...", exposing it to reprisals. They respected him, and in July and September 1944, they requested Masses in the parish church of Salvaro. Don Elia accepted, bringing down the partisans and celebrating without hiding, instead preferring not to go up to the partisan area and, as he would always do that summer, to stay in Salvaro or nearby areas, without hiding or slipping into "ambiguous" attitudes in the eyes of the Nazi-fascists.

On July 27, Don Elia Comini wrote the last lines of his Spiritual Diary: "July 27: I find myself right in the middle of the war. I long for my confreres and my home in Treviglio; if I could, I would return tomorrow."

From July 20, he shared a priestly fraternity with Father Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, born on September 20, 1912, in Nembro in the Bergamo area, and already a teacher of Sacred Scripture in Bologna, also a guest of Mons. Mellini and helping with the pastoral work.

Elia and Martino are two scholars of ancient languages who now have to attend to more practical and material matters. The rectory of Mons. Mellini becomes what Mons. Luciano Gherardi later called "the community of the ark," a place that welcomes to save. Father Martino was a religious who became passionate when he heard about the Mexican martyrs and wished to be a missionary in China. Elia, since he was young, has been pursued by a strange awareness of "having to die," and by the age of 17, he had already written: "The thought that I must die always persists in me! – Who knows?! Let us act like the faithful servant: always prepared for the call, to 'render account' of the management."

On July 24, Don Elia begins catechism for the children in preparation for their First Communions, scheduled for July 30. On the 25th, a baby girl is born in the baptismal font (all spaces, from the sacristy to the chicken coop, were overflowing) and a pink bow is hung.

Throughout August 1944, soldiers of the Wehrmacht are stationed at the rectory of Mons. Mellini and in the space in front. Among Germans, displaced persons, and consecrated individuals... the tension could have exploded at any moment: Don Elia mediates and prevents even in small matters, for example, acting as a "buffer" between the too-loud volume of the Germans' radio and the now too-short patience of Mons. Mellini. There was also some praying of the Rosary together. Don Angelo Carboni confirms: "In the constant effort to comfort Monsignore, Don Elia worked hard against the resistance of a company of Germans who, having settled in Salvaro on August 1, wanted to occupy various areas of the Rectory, taking away all freedom and comfort from the families and displaced persons hosted there. Once the Germans were settled in Monsignore's archive, they again disturbed,

occupying a good part of the church square with their vehicles; with even gentler manners and persuasive words, Don Elia also obtained this other liberation to comfort Monsignore, who the oppression of the struggle had forced to rest." In those weeks, the Salesian priest is firm in protecting Mons. Mellini's right to move with a certain ease in his own home – as well as that of the displaced persons not to be removed from the rectory –: however, he recognizes some needs of the Wehrmacht men, which attracts their goodwill towards Mons. Mellini, whom the German soldiers will learn to call the good pastor. From the Germans, Don Elia obtains food for the displaced persons. Moreover, he sings to calm the children and tells stories from the life of Don Bosco. In a summer marked by killings and reprisals, with Don Elia, some civilians even manage to go listen to a bit of music, evidently broadcast from the Germans' device, and to communicate with the soldiers through brief gestures. Don Rino Germani sdb, Vice-Postulator of the Cause, states: "Between the two warring forces, the tireless and mediating work of the Servant of God intervenes. When necessary, he presents himself to the German Command and, with politeness and preparation, manages to win the esteem of some officers. Thus, many times he succeeds in avoiding reprisals, looting, and mourning."

With the rectory freed from the fixed presence of the Wehrmacht on September 1, 1944 – "On September 1, the Germans left the Salvaro area free, only a few remained for a few more days in the Fabbri house" – life in Salvaro can take a breath of relief. Don Elia Comini continues in his apostolic initiatives, assisted by the other priests and the nuns.

Meanwhile, however, Father Martino accepts some invitations to preach elsewhere and goes up into the mountains, where his light hair gets him into big trouble with the partisans who suspect him of being German, while Don Elia remains essentially stationary. On September 8, he writes to the Salesian director of the House of Treviglio: "I leave you to imagine our state of mind in these moments. We have gone through very dark and dramatic days. [...] My thoughts are

always with you and with the dear confreres there. I feel a deep nostalgia [...]"

From the 11th, he preaches the Exercises to the Sisters on the theme of the Last Things, religious vows, and the life of the Lord Jesus.

The entire population – declared a consecrated person – loved Don Elia, also because he did not hesitate to spend himself for everyone, at every moment; he did not only ask people to pray, but offered them a valid example with his piety and the little apostolate that, given the circumstances, was possible to exercise.

The experience of the Exercises gives a different dynamic to the entire week and involves both consecrated and lay people. In the evening, in fact, Don Elia gathers 80-90 people: he tried to ease the tension with a bit of cheerfulness, good examples, and charity. During those months, both he and Father Martino, along with other priests, first among them Don Giovanni Fornasini, were on the front lines in many works of charity.

### **The massacre of Montesole**

The most brutal and largest massacre carried out by the Nazi SS in Europe during the war of 1939-45 was that which took place around Monte Sole, in the territories of Marzabotto, Grizzana Morandi, and Monzuno, although it is commonly known as the "massacre of Marzabotto."

Between September 29 and October 5, 1944, there were 770 casualties, but overall the victims of Germans and fascists, from the spring of 1944 to liberation, were 955, distributed across 115 different locations within a vast territory that includes the municipalities of Marzabotto, Grizzana, and Monzuno and some portions of the surrounding territories. Of these, 216 were children, 316 were women, 142 were elderly, 138 were recognized partisans, and five were priests, whose fault in the eyes of the Germans was being close, with prayer and material help, to the entire population of Monte Sole during the tragic months of war and military



occupation. Along with Don Elia Comini, a Salesian, and Father Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, three priests from the Archdiocese of Bologna were also killed during those tragic days: Don Ubaldo Marchioni, Don Ferdinando Casagrande, and Don Giovanni Fornasini. The cause for beatification and canonization is underway for all five. Don Giovanni, the "Angel of Marzabotto," fell on October 13, 1944. He was twenty-nine years old, and his body remained unburied until 1945, when it was found heavily mutilated; he was beatified on September 26, 2021. Don Ubaldo died on September 29, shot by a machine gun on the altar step of his church in Casaglia; he was 26 years old and had been ordained a priest two years earlier. The German soldiers found him and the community engaged in the prayer of the rosary. He was killed there, at the foot of the altar. The others – more than 70 – in the nearby cemetery. Don Ferdinando was killed on October 9, shot in the back of the neck, along with his sister Giulia; he was 26 years old.

### **From the Wehrmacht to the SS**

On September 25, the Wehrmacht leaves the area and hands over command to the SS of the 16th Battalion of the 16th Armored Division "Reichsführer – SS," a division that includes SS elements "Totenkopf – Death's Head" and was preceded by a trail of blood, having been present at Sant'Anna di Stazzema (Lucca) on August 12, 1944; at San Terenzo Monti (Massa-Carrara, in Lunigiana) on the 17th of that month; at Vinca and surroundings (Massa-Carrara, in Lunigiana at the foot of the Apuan Alps) from August 24 to 27.

On September 25, the SS establish the "High Command" in Sibano. On September 26, they move to Salvaro, where Don Elia is also present: an area *outside* the immediate influence of partisans. The harshness of the commanders in pursuing total contempt for human life, the habit of lying about the fate of civilians, and the paramilitary structure – which willingly resorted to "scorched earth" techniques, in disregard of any code of war or legitimacy of orders given

from above – made it a death squad that left nothing intact in its wake. Some had received training explicitly focused on concentration and extermination, aimed at: the suppression of life, for ideological purposes; hatred towards those who professed the Jewish-Christian faith; contempt for the small, the poor, the elderly, and the weak; persecution of those who opposed the aberrations of National Socialism. There was a veritable catechism – anti-Christian and anti-Catholic – of which the young SS were imbued.

“When one thinks that the Nazi youth was formed in the contempt for the human personality of Jews and other ‘non-chosen’ races, in the fanatical cult of an alleged absolute national superiority, in the myth of creative violence and of the ‘new weapons’ bringing justice to the world, one understands where the roots of the aberrations lay, made easier by the atmosphere of war and the fear of a disappointing defeat.”

Don Elia Comini – with Father Capelli – rushes to comfort, reassure, and exhort. He decides to welcome primarily the survivors of families in which the Germans had killed in retaliation. In doing so, he removes the survivors from the danger of finding death shortly after, but above all, he tears them – at least to the extent possible – from that spiral of loneliness, despair, and loss of the will to live that could have translated into a desire for death. He also manages to speak to the Germans and, on at least one occasion, to dissuade the SS from their intention, making them pass by and thus being able to subsequently warn the refugees to come out of hiding.

The Vice-Postulator Don Rino Germani sdb wrote: “Don Elia arrives. He reassures them. He tells them to come out because the Germans have left. He speaks with the Germans and makes them go on.”

Paolo Calanchi, a man whose conscience reproaches him nothing and who makes the mistake of not fleeing, is also killed. It is still Don Elia who rushes, before the flames attack his body, trying at least to honor his remains, having

not arrived in time to save his life: "The body of Paolino is saved from the flames by Don Elia who, at the risk of his life, collects him and transports him with a cart to the Church of Salvaro."

The daughter of Paolo Calanchi testified: "My father was a good and honest man ['in times of ration cards and famine, he gave bread to those who had none'] and had refused to flee, feeling at peace with everyone. He was killed by the Germans, shot, in retaliation; later, the house was also set on fire, but my father's body had been saved from the flames by Don Comini, who, at the risk of his own life, had collected him and transported him with a cart to the Church of Salvaro, where, in a coffin he built with spare planks, he was buried in the cemetery. Thus, thanks to the courage of Don Comini and, very likely, also of Father Martino, after the war, my mother and I were able to find and have our dear one's coffin transported to the cemetery of Vergato, alongside that of my brother Gianluigi, who died 40 days later while crossing the front."

Once, Don Elia had said of the Wehrmacht: "We must also love these Germans who come to disturb us." "He loved everyone without preference." Don Elia's ministry was very precious for Salvaro and many displaced persons during those days. Witnesses have stated: "Don Elia was our fortune because we had a parish priest who was too old and weak. The entire population knew that Don Elia had this interest in us; Don Elia helped everyone. One could say that we saw him every day. He said Mass, but then he was often on the church steps watching: the Germans were down, towards the Reno; the partisans were coming from the mountain, towards the Creda. Once, for example, (a few days before the 26th) the partisans came. We were coming out of the Church of Salvaro, and there were the partisans there, all armed; and Don Elia urged them so much to leave, to avoid trouble. They listened to him and left. Probably, if it hadn't been for him, what happened afterward would have happened much earlier"; "As far as I know, Don Elia was the soul of the situation, as with his

personality he knew how to keep many things in hand that were of vital importance in those dramatic moments.”

Although he was a young priest, Don Elia Comini was reliable. This reliability, combined with a deep rectitude, had accompanied him for a long time, even as a cleric, as evidenced by a testimony: “I had him for four years at the Rota, from 1931 to 1935, and, although still a cleric, **he gave me help that I would have found it hard to get from any other older confrere.**”

### **The triduum of passion**

The situation, however, deteriorates after a few days, on the morning of September 29, when the SS carry out a terrible massacre in the locality “Creda.” The signal for the start of the massacre is a white rocket and a red one in the air: they begin to shoot, the machine guns hit the victims, barricaded against a porch and practically without a way out. Hand grenades are then thrown, some incendiary, and the barn – where some had managed to find refuge – catches fire. A few men, seizing a moment of distraction from the SS in that hell, rush down towards the woods. Attilio Comastri, injured, is saved because the lifeless body of his wife Ines Gandolfi shielded him: he will wander for days, in shock, until he manages to cross the front and save his life; he had lost, in addition to his wife, his sister Marcellina and his two-year-old daughter Bianca. Carlo Cardi also manages to save himself, but his family is exterminated: Walter Cardi was only 14 days old, he was the youngest victim of the Monte Sole massacre. Mario Lippi, one of the survivors, attests: “I don’t even know how I miraculously saved myself, given that of the 82 people gathered under the porch, 70 were killed [69, according to the official reconstruction]. I remember that besides the fire from the machine guns, the Germans also threw hand grenades at us, and I believe that some shrapnel from these slightly injured me in the right side, in the back, and in the right arm. I, along with seven other people, took advantage of the fact that on [one] side of the porch there was a small door

leading to the street, and I ran away towards the woods. The Germans, seeing us flee, shot at us, killing one of us named Gandolfi Emilio. I specify that among the 82 people gathered under the aforementioned porch, there were also about twenty children, two of whom were in swaddling clothes, in the arms of their respective mothers, and about twenty women."

In Creda, there are 21 children under 11 years old, some very small; 24 women (including one teenager); almost 20 "elderly." Among the most affected families are the Cardi (7 people), the Gandolfi (9 people), the Lolli (5 people), and the Macchelli (6 people).

From the rectory of Mons. Mellini, looking up, at a certain point, smoke is seen: but it is early morning, Creda remains hidden from view, and the woods muffles the sounds. In the parish that day – September 29, the feast of the Archangels – three Masses are celebrated, in immediate succession: that of Mons. Mellini; that of Father Capelli, who then goes to bring Extreme Unction in the locality "Casellina"; that of Don Comini. And it is then that the drama knocks at the door: "Ferdinando Castori, who also escaped the massacre, arrived at the Church of Salvaro smeared with blood like a butcher and went to hide inside the spire of the bell tower." Around 8, a distraught man arrives at the rectory: he looked "like a monster for his terrifying appearance," says Sister Alberta Taccini. He asks for help for the wounded. About seventy people are dead or dying amid terrible tortures. Don Elia, in a few moments, has the clarity to hide 60/70 men in the sacristy, pushing an old wardrobe against the door that left the threshold visible from below, but was nonetheless the only hope of salvation: "It was then that Don Elia, he himself, had the idea to hide the men next to the sacristy, then putting a wardrobe in front of the door (one or two people who were in Monsignore's house helped him). The idea was Don Elia's; but everyone was against the fact that it was Don Elia who did that work... He wanted it. The others said: 'And what if they discover us?'" Another account: "Don Elia managed to hide about sixty men in a room adjacent to the

sacristy and pushed an old wardrobe against the door. Meanwhile, the crackle of machine guns and the desperate screams of people came from the nearby houses. Don Elia had the strength to begin the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the last of his life. He had not yet finished when a terrified and breathless young man from the locality 'Creda' arrived asking for help because the SS had surrounded a house and arrested sixty-nine people, men, women, and children."

"Still in sacred vestments, **prostrated at the altar, immersed in prayer**, he invokes for all the help of the Sacred Heart, the intercession of Mary Help of Christians, St. John Bosco, and St. Michael the Archangel. Then, with a brief examination of conscience, reciting the act of sorrow three times, he prepares them for death. He commends all those people to the care of the sisters and to the Superior to lead the prayer strongly so that the faithful may find in it the comfort they need."

Regarding Don Elia and Father Martino, who returned shortly after, "some dimensions of a priestly life spent consciously for others until the last moment are evident: their death was a prolongation in the gift of life of the Mass celebrated until the last day." Their choice had "distant roots, in the decision to do good even if it were the last hour, even willing to martyrdom": "Many people came to seek help in the parish, and unbeknownst to the parish priest, Don Elia and Father Martino tried to hide as many people as possible; then, ensuring that they were somehow assisted, they rushed to the site of the massacres to bring help to the most unfortunate; even Mons. Mellini did not realize this and continued to look for the two priests to get help to receive all those people" ("We are certain that none of them was a partisan or had been with the partisans").

In those moments, Don Elia demonstrates great clarity, which translates into both organizational spirit and the awareness of putting his own life at risk: "In light of all this, and Don Elia knew it well, we cannot therefore seek that charity which leads to the attempt to help others, but

rather that type of charity (which was the same as Christ's) that leads **to participating fully in the suffering of others**, not even fearing death as its ultimate manifestation. The fact that his choice was **lucid and well-reasoned** is also demonstrated by the organizational spirit he manifested until just a few minutes before his death, trying promptly and intelligently to hide as many people as possible in the hidden rooms of the rectory; then the news of the Creda and, after fraternal charity, heroic charity."

One thing is certain: if Don Elia had hidden with all the other men or even just stayed next to Mons. Mellini, he would have had nothing to fear. Instead, Don Elia and Father Martino took the stole, the holy oils, and a container with some consecrated Hosts: "They then set off for the mountain, armed with the stole and the oil of the sick": "When Don Elia returned from having gone to Monsignore, **he took the Ciborium with the Hosts** and the Holy Oil and turned to us: that face again! It was so pale that he looked like someone already dead. And he said: 'Pray, pray for me, because I have a mission to fulfill.' 'Pray for me, do not leave me alone!' 'We are priests and we must go and we must do our duty.' '**Let us go to bring the Lord to our brothers.**'

Up at the Creda, there are many people dying in agony: they must hurry, bless, and – if possible – try to intercede regarding the SS.

Mrs. Massimina [Zappoli], also a witness in the military investigation in Bologna, recalls: "Despite the prayers of all of us, they quickly celebrated the Eucharist and, driven only by the hope of being able to do something for the victims of such ferocity, at least with a spiritual comfort, they **took the Blessed Sacrament and ran towards the Creda**. I remember that while Don Elia, already launched in his run, passed by me in the kitchen, **I clung to him in a last attempt to dissuade him**, saying that we would be left at the mercy of ourselves; he made it clear that, as serious as our situation was, there were those who were worse off than us and it was from them that they had to go."

He is unyielding and refuses, as Mons. Mellini later suggested, to delay the ascent to the Creda when the Germans had left: "It was [therefore] a passion, before being bloody, [...] of the heart, the passion of the spirit. In those times, everyone was terrified by everything and everyone: there was no longer trust in anyone: anyone could be a decisive enemy for one's life. When the two priests realized that someone truly needed them, they had no hesitation in deciding what to do [...] and above all they did **not resort to what was the immediate decision for everyone, that is, to find a hiding place**, to try to cover themselves **and to be out of the fray**. The two priests, on the other hand, went right in, consciously, knowing that their lives were 99% at risk; and they went in to be truly priests: that is, to assist and to comfort; to also provide the service of the Sacraments, therefore of prayer, of the comfort that faith and religion offer."

One person said: "Don Elia, for us, was already a saint. **If he had been a normal person [...] he would have hidden too, behind the wardrobe, like all the others.**"

With the men hidden, it is the women who try to hold back the priests, in an extreme attempt to save their lives. The scene is both frantic and very eloquent: "Lidia Macchi [...] and other women tried to prevent them from leaving, they tried to hold them by the cassock, they chased them, they called out loudly for them to come back: driven by an inner force that is the ardor of charity and missionary solicitude, they were now decisively walking towards the Creda bringing religious comforts."

One of them recalls: "I hugged them, I held them firmly by the arms, saying and pleading: – Don't go! – Don't go!"

And Lidia Marchi adds: "I was pulling Father Martino by the robe and holding him back [...] but both priests kept repeating: – We must go; the Lord is calling us."

"We must fulfill our duty. And [Don Elia and Father Martino,] like Jesus, went to meet a marked fate."



"The decision to go to the Creda was made by the two priests out **of pure pastoral spirit; despite everyone trying to dissuade them**, they wanted to go driven by the hope of being able to save someone among those who were at the mercy of the soldiers' rage."

At the Creda, almost certainly, they never arrived. Captured, according to a witness, near a "little pillar," just outside the parish's field of vision, Don Elia and Father Martino were later seen loaded with ammunition, at the head of those rounded up, or still alone, tied up, with chains, near a tree while there was no battle going on and the SS were eating. Don Elia urged a woman to run away, not to stop to avoid being killed: "Anna, for charity, run, run."

"They were loaded and bent under the weight of many heavy boxes that wrapped around their bodies from front to back. Their backs curved so much that their noses were almost touching the ground."

"Sitting on the ground [...] very sweaty and tired, with ammunition on their backs."

"Arrested, they are forced to carry ammunition up and down the mountain, witnesses of unheard-of violence."

"[The SS make them] go up and down the mountain several times, under their escort, and also committing, under the eyes of the two victims, the most gruesome acts of violence."

Where are the stole, the holy oils, and above all the Blessed Sacrament now? There is no trace of them left. Far from prying eyes, the SS forcibly stripped the priests of them, getting rid of that Treasure of which nothing would ever be found again.

**Towards the evening of September 29, 1944**, they were taken with many other men (rounded up and not for reprisal or because they were pro-partisan, as the sources show), to the house "of the Birocciai" in Pioppe di Salvaro. Later, they, divided, would have very different fates: few would be released after a series of interrogations. The majority, deemed fit for work, would be sent to forced labor camps and

could – later – return to their families. Those deemed unfit, for mere age criteria (cf. concentration camps) or health (young, but injured or pretending to be sick hoping to save themselves) would be killed on the evening of October 1 at the “Botte” of the Canapiera in Pioppe di Salvaro, now a ruin because it had been bombed by the Allies days before.

Don Elia and Father Martino – who were interrogated – were able to move until the last moment in the house and receive visits. Don Elia interceded for everyone and a very troubled young man fell asleep on his knees: in one of them, Don Elia received the Breviary, so dear to him, which he wanted to keep with him until the last moments. Today, careful historical research through documentary sources, supported by the most recent historiography from a secular perspective, has shown how no attempt to free Don Elia, made by Cavalier Emilio Veggetti, ever succeeded, and how Don Elia and Father Martino were never truly considered or at least treated as “spies.”

## **The Holocaust**

Finally, they were included, although young (34 and 32 years old), in the group of the unfit and executed with them. They lived those last moments praying, making others pray, having absolved each other and giving every possible comfort of faith. Don Elia managed to transform the macabre procession of the condemned up to a walkway in front of the canapiera reservoir, where they would be killed, into a choral act of entrustment, holding the Breviary open in his hand for as long as he could (then, it is said, a German violently struck his hands and the Breviary fell into the reservoir) and above all singing the Litanies. When the fire was opened, Don Elia Comini saved a man because he shielded him with his own body and shouted “Pity.” Father Martino instead invoked “Forgiveness,” struggling to rise in the reservoir, among the dead or dying companions, and tracing the sign of the Cross just moments before dying himself, due to a huge wound. The SS wanted to ensure that no one survived by throwing some hand grenades. In the following days, given the impossibility of

recovering the bodies immersed in water and mud due to heavy rains (the women tried, but even Don Fornasini could not succeed), a man opened the grates and the impetuous current of the Reno River carried everything away. Nothing was ever found of them: consummatum est!

They had shown themselves willing “even to martyrdom, even if in the eyes of men it seems foolish to **refuse one’s own salvation to give a miserable relief to those already destined for death.**” Mons. Benito Cocchi in September 1977 in Salvaro said: “Well, here before the Lord we say that our preference goes to these gestures, to these people, to those who **pay personally**: to those who at a time when only weapons, strength, and violence mattered, when a house, the life of a child, an entire family were valued as nothing, knew how to perform gestures that have no voice in the war accounts, but which are true treasures of humanity, resistance, and an alternative to violence; to those who in this way were laying **roots for a more humane society and coexistence.**”

In this sense, “The martyrdom of the priests constitutes the fruit of their conscious choice to share the fate of the flock until the ultimate sacrifice, when the efforts of mediation between the population and the occupiers, long pursued, lose all possibility of success.”

Don Elia Comini had been clear about his fate, saying – already in the early stages of detention –: “To do good we find ourselves in so much suffering”; “It was Don Elia who, pointing to the sky, greeted with tear-filled eyes.” “Elia leaned out and said to me: ‘Go to Bologna, to the Cardinal, and tell him where we are.’ I replied: ‘How can I go to Bologna?’ [...] Meanwhile, the soldiers were pushing me with the rifle barrel. Don Elia greeted me saying: ‘We will see each other in paradise!’ I shouted: ‘No, no, don’t say that.’ He replied, sad and resigned: ‘We will see each other in Paradise.’”

With Don Bosco...: “[I] await you all in Paradise”!

It was the evening of October 1, the beginning of

the month dedicated to the Rosary and Missions.

In the years of his early youth, Elia Comini had said to God: “Lord, **prepare me to be the least unworthy to be an acceptable victim**” (“Diary” 1929); “Lord, [...] **receive me as a victim of atonement**” (1929); “**I would like to be a victim of holocaust**” (1931). “[To Jesus] I asked for death rather than failing in my priestly vocation and in my **heroic love for souls**” (1935).

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## Vera Grita, pilgrim of hope

Vera Grita, daughter of Amleto and Maria Anna Zacco della Pirrera, was born in Rome on January 28, 1923, and was the second of four sisters. She lived and studied in Savona, where she obtained her teaching qualification. At the age of 21, during a sudden air raid on the city (1944), she was overwhelmed and trampled by the fleeing crowd, suffering serious consequences for her body, which remained marked by suffering forever. She went unnoticed in her short earthly life, teaching in the schools of the Ligurian hinterland (Rialto, Erli, Alpicella, Deserto di Varazze), where she earned the esteem and affection of all for her kind and gentle character.

In Savona, at the Salesian parish of Mary Help of Christians, she participated in Mass and was a regular at the Sacrament of Penance. From 1963, her confessor was the Salesian Don Giovanni Bocchi. A Salesian Collaborator since 1967, she realized her calling in the total gift of herself to the Lord, who extraordinarily gave Himself to her, in the depths of her heart, with the “Voice,” with the “Word,” to communicate to her the Work of the Living Tabernacles. She submitted all her writings to her spiritual director, the Salesian Don Gabriello Zucconi, and kept the secret of that

calling in the silence of her heart, guided by the divine Master and the Virgin Mary, who accompanied her along the path of hidden life, of self-denial, and of annihilation of self.

Under the impulse of divine grace and welcoming the mediation of spiritual guides, Vera Grita responded to God's gift by witnessing in her life, marked by the struggle of illness, the encounter with the Risen One and dedicating herself with heroic generosity to the teaching and education of her students, meeting the needs of her family and witnessing a life of evangelical poverty. Centred upon and steadfast in the God who loves and sustains, with great inner firmness, she was made capable of enduring the trials and sufferings of life. Based on such inner solidity, she bore witness to a Christian existence made of patience and constancy in good.

She died on December 22, 1969, at the age of 46, in a small room of the hospital in Pietra Ligure, where she had spent the last six months of her life in a crescendo of accepted suffering lived in union with Jesus Crucified. "The soul of Vera," wrote Don Borra, Salesian, her first biographer, "with the messages and letters, enters the ranks of those charismatic souls called to enrich the Church with flames of love for God and for Jesus Eucharistic for the expansion of the Kingdom."

### **A life devoid of human hope**

Humanly, Vera's life has been marked since childhood by the loss of a horizon of hope. The loss of her family's economic independence, then the separation from her parents to go to Modica in Sicily to stay with her aunts, and especially the death of her father in 1943, put Vera in front of the consequences of particularly painful human events.

After July 4, 1944, the day of the bombing of Savona that would mark Vera's entire life, her health conditions would also be compromised forever. Therefore, the Servant of God found herself a young girl without any prospects for the future and had to repeatedly revise her

plans and give up many desires: from university studies to teaching and, above all, to having her own family with the young man she was seeing.

Despite the sudden end of all her human expectations between the ages of 20 and 21, hope was very present in Vera: both as a human virtue that believes in a possible change and commits to realising it (despite being very ill, she prepared for and won the competition to teach), and especially as a theological virtue – anchored in faith – that infused her with energy and became a tool of consolation for others.

Almost all the witnesses who knew her noted this apparent contradiction between compromised health conditions and the ability to never complain, instead attesting to joy, hope, and courage even in humanly desperate circumstances. Vera became a “bringer of joy.”

**A niece says:** «She was always sick and suffering, but I never saw her discouraged or angry about her condition; she always had a light of hope sustained by great faith. [...] My aunt was often hospitalised, suffering and delicate, but always serene and full of hope for the great Love she had for Jesus».

**Vera's sister Liliana also** drew encouragement, serenity, and hope from their afternoon phone calls, even though the Servant of God was then burdened by numerous health problems and professional constraints: «She instilled in me, she says – trust and hope, making me reflect that God is always close to us and leads us. Her words brought me back into the arms of the Lord, and I found peace».

**Agnese Zannino Tibirosa**, whose testimony is particularly valuable as she spent time with Vera at the “Santa Corona” hospital in her last year of life, attests: «Despite the severe suffering that illness caused her, I never heard her complain about her state. She brought relief and hope to all those she approached, and when she spoke of her future, she did so with enthusiasm and courage».

Until the end, Vera Grita maintained this: even in

the last part of her earthly journey, she kept a gaze toward the future, hoping that with treatment, the tuberculoma could be reabsorbed, hoping to be able to take the chair at the Piani di Invrea for the 1969-1970 school year, as well as to dedicate herself, once out of the hospital, to her spiritual mission.

### **Educated in hope by her confessor and in her spiritual journey**

In this sense, the hope attested by Vera is rooted in God and in that sapiential reading of events that her spiritual father Don Gabriello Zucconi and, before him, her confessor Don Giovanni Bocchi taught her. Don Bocchi's ministry – a man of joy and hope – had a positive influence on Vera, whom he welcomed in her condition as a sick person and taught to value the sufferings – not sought – with which she was burdened. Don Bocchi was the first master of hope. It has been said of him: «With always cordial and hope-filled words, he opened hearts to magnanimity, forgiveness, and transparency in interpersonal relationships; he lived the beatitudes with naturalness and daily fidelity». «Hoping and having the certainty that as it happened to Christ, it will also happen to us: the glorious Resurrection», Don Bocchi carried out through his ministry an announcement of Christian hope, founded on the omnipotence of God and the Resurrection of Christ. Later, from Africa, where he had gone as a missionary, he would say: «I was there because I wanted to bring and give them Jesus Who is Alive and present in the Most Holy Eucharist with all the gifts of His Heart: Peace, Mercy, Joy, Love, Light, Union, Hope, Truth, Eternal Life».

Vera became a provider of hope and joy even in environments marked by physical and moral suffering, by cognitive limitations (as among her small hearing-impaired students) or suboptimal family and social conditions (as in the «heated climate» of Erli).

**Her friend Maria Mattalia** recalls: «I still see Vera's sweet smile, sometimes tired from so much struggle and suffering; remembering her willpower, I try to follow her

example of kindness, great faith, hope, and love [...]».

**Antonietta Fazio** – a former janitor at the Casanova school – testified about her: «She was very well-liked by her students, whom she loved so much, especially those with intellectual difficulties [...]. Very religious, she transmitted faith and hope to everyone, even though she herself was suffering very much physically but not morally».

In those contexts, Vera worked to revive the reasons for hope. For example, in the hospital (where the food is not very satisfying), she deprived herself of a special bunch of grapes to leave part of it on the bedside table of all the patients in the ward. She also always took care of her appearance so as to present herself well, orderly, with composure and refinement, thus also contributing to countering the environment of suffering in a clinic, and sometimes the loss of hope in many patients who risk “letting themselves go.”

Through the **Messages of the Work of the Living Tabernacles**, the Lord educated her to a posture of waiting, patience, and trust in Him. Indeed, there are countless exhortations about *waiting for the Bridegroom or the Bridegroom who awaits His bride*:

“Hope in your Jesus always, always.

May He come into our souls, may He come into our homes; may He come with us to share joys and sorrows, labours and hopes.

Let my Love do, and increase your faith, your hope.

Follow me in the dark, in the shadows because you know the «way».

Hope in Me, hope in Jesus!

After the journey of hope and waiting, there will be victory.

To call you to the things of Heaven”.



## **Provider of hope in dying and interceding**

Even in illness and death, Vera Grita witnessed Christian hope.

She knew that when her mission was completed, her life on earth would also end. «This is your task, and when it is finished, you will say goodbye to the earth for Heaven»: therefore, she did not feel as an “owner” of time rather she sought obedience to God’s will.

In the last months, despite being in an increasingly serious condition and being exposed to a worsening clinical situation, the Servant of God attested serenity, peace, and an inner perception of a “fulfilment” of her life.

In the last days, although she was naturally attached to life, Don Giuseppe Formento described her as «already at peace with the Lord». In this spirit, she was able to receive Communion until a few days before her death and received the Anointing of the Sick on December 18.

When her sister Pina visited her shortly before her death – Vera had been in a coma for about three days – contrary to her usual reserve, she told her that she had seen many things during those days, beautiful things that unfortunately she did not have time to recount. She had learned of the prayers of Padre Pio and the Good Pope for her, and she added – referring to Eternal Life – «You all will come to paradise with me, be sure of it».

**Liliana Grita** also testified that, in the last period, Vera «knew more about Heaven than about earth». From her life, the following assessment was drawn: «She, suffering so much, consoled others, infusing them with hope and she did not hesitate to help them».

Finally, many graces attributed to Vera’s interceding mediation concern Christian hope. Vera – even during the Covid-19 Pandemic – helped many to rediscover the reasons for hope and was for them a safeguard, a sister in spirit, a help in the priesthood. She helped a priest who, following a stroke, had forgotten the prayers, unable to

articulate them due to his extreme pain and disorientation. She ensured that many returned to pray, asking for the healing of a young father struck by haemorrhage.

**Sister Maria Ilaria Bossi**, Mistress of Novices of the Benedictines of the Most Holy Sacrament of Ghiffa, also notes how Vera – a sister in spirit – is a soul that directs to Heaven and accompanies toward Heaven: «I consider her as a sister on the journey to heaven... Many [...] who recognise themselves in her, and refer to her, in the evangelical journey, in the race toward heaven».

In summary, it is understood how the entire story of Vera Grita has been supported not by human hope, by merely looking to “tomorrow”, hoping it would be better than the present, but by a true theological Hope: «She was serene because faith and hope always sustained her. Christ was at the centre of her life; from Him, she drew strength. [...] She was a serene person because she had in her heart the theological Hope, not the superficial hope [...], but that which derives only from God, which is a gift and prepares us for the encounter with Him».

In a prayer to Mary of the Work of the Living Tabernacles, one can read: «Lift us [Mary] from the earth so that from here we may live and be for Heaven, for the Kingdom of your Son».

It is also nice to remember that **Don Gabriello** also had to accomplish a pilgrimage in hope through many trials and difficulties, as he writes in a letter to Vera dated March 4, 1968, from Florence: «However, we must always hope. The presence of difficulties does not take away the fact that in the end, what is right, good, and beautiful will all triumph. Peace, order, and joy will return. The man, Son of God, will regain all the glory he had from the beginning. Man will be saved in Jesus and will find in God every good. Then all the beautiful things promised by Jesus come to mind, and the soul in Him finds its peace. Come on: now it is as if we are in combat. The day of victory will come. It is certainty

in God».

In the Church of *Santa Corona* in Pietra Ligure, Vera Grita participated in Mass and went to pray during her long periods of hospitalisation. Her testimony of faith in the living presence of Jesus Eucharistic and the Virgin Mary in her short earthly life is a sign of hope and comfort for those in this place of care who will ask for her help and intercession before the Lord to be lifted and freed from suffering.

Vera Grita's journey through daily laborious work also offers a new secular perspective on holiness, becoming an example of conversion, acceptance, and sanctification for the 'poor,' the 'fragile,' the 'sick' who can recognise themselves in her and find hope.

Saint Paul writes, «that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us». With «impatience», we await to contemplate the face of God because «in hope we have been saved» (*Rom* 8:18, 24). Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to hope against all hope, «*Spes contra spem*». Because, as Charles Péguy wrote, Hope is a «irreducible» child. Compared to Faith, which «is a faithful bride», and Charity, which «is a Mother», Hope seems, at first glance, to be worth nothing. And instead, it is exactly the opposite: it will be Hope, writes Péguy, «that came into the world on Christmas Day» and that «bringing the others, will traverse the worlds».

«Write, Vera of Jesus, I will give you light. The flowering tree in spring has borne its fruits. Many trees will have to bloom again in the appropriate season so that the fruits may be abundant... I ask you to accept with faith every trial, every pain for Me. You will see the fruits, the first fruits of the new flowering». (*Santa Corona* – October 26, 1969 – Feast of Christ the King – Penultimate message).

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# Profiles of families wounded in the history of Salesian holiness

## 1. Stories of wounded families

We are used to imagining the family as a harmonious reality, characterized by the coexistence of multiple generations and the guiding role of parents who set the norm, and of children who – in learning it – are guided by them in the experience of reality. However, families are often affected by dramas and misunderstandings or marked by wounds that undermine their ideal structure, leaving a distorted, misleading, and deceptive image of them.

The history of Salesian holiness is also marked by stories of wounded families: families where at least one parental figure is absent, or where the presence of the mother and father becomes, for various reasons (physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual), detrimental to their children, who are now on the path towards sainthood. Don Bosco himself, who experienced the premature death of his father and the separation from his family due to the prudent plan of Mama Margaret, desired – it is no coincidence – that the Salesian work be particularly dedicated to the “poor and abandoned youth” and did not hesitate to reach out to the young people who were formed in his Oratory with an intense vocational pastoral care (demonstrating that no wound from the past is an obstacle to a full human and Christian life). It is therefore natural that Salesian holiness, which draws from the lives of many of Don Bosco’s young people who were later consecrated through him to the cause of the Gospel, bears within itself traces of wounded families. This is a logical consequence of

its origins.

Of these boys and girls who grew up in contact with Salesian works, three will be presented, whose story is to be “grafted” into the biographical legacy of Don Bosco. The main characters are:

- Blessed Laura Vicuña, born in Chile in 1891, orphaned of her father and whose mother began a cohabitation in Argentina with the wealthy landowner Manuel Mora; Laura, therefore, wounded by her mother’s morally irregular situation, was ready to offer her life for her;

- The Servant of God Carlo Braga, from Valtellina, born in 1889, abandoned as a very young child by his father, while his mother was sent away due to a mix of ignorance and malicious gossip, being deemed mentally unstable. Carlo, therefore, had to face great humiliations and saw his Salesian vocation called into question multiple times by those who feared in him a compromising resurgence of the mental distress falsely attributed to his mother;

- Finally, the Servant of God Ana María Lozano, born in 1883 in Colombia, who followed her father to the leper colony, where he was forced to move due to the appearance of dreaded leprosy. She was hindered in her religious vocation, but was finally able to realise it thanks to her providential encounter with Blessed Luigi Variara, *sdb*.

## **2. Don Bosco and the search for the father**

Like Laura, Carlo, and Ana María – marked by the absence of or the “wounds” by one or more parental figures – before them, and in a certain sense “on their behalf”, Don Bosco also experienced the absence of a strong family unit.

The *Memoirs of the Oratory* soon dwelt on the early loss of the father: Francesco died at 34, and Don Bosco – not without resorting to an expression that is, in some respects, disconcerting – acknowledged that, “God, *merciful* as He is, struck them all with a great misfortune”. Thus, among the very first memories of the future saint of the young, a lacerating experience emerged: that of his father’s lifeless body, from

which his mother tried to take him away, but encountered Johnny's resistance, "I absolutely wanted to stay", explains Don Bosco, and then added, "If Dad doesn't come, I don't want to go [away]". Margaret then responded, "Poor son, come with me, you no longer have a father". She cried, and Johnny, who lacked a rational understanding of the situation, intuitively grasped the full extent of the drama. With an emotional intuition, he empathised and shared in his mother's sadness, "I cried because she cried, since at that age I certainly could not understand how great a misfortune the loss of a father was".

In front of his dead father, Johnny shows that he still considered him the centre of his life. He indeed said, "I don't want to go [with you, Mom]" and not, as we would expect, "I don't want to come". His point of reference is his father – the starting point and the hoped-for point of return – in relation to whom every distancing appears destabilising. In the tragedy of those moments, moreover, Johnny had not yet understood what the death of a parent means. He indeed hoped ("if Dad doesn't come...") that his father could still remain close to him: yet he already sensed the immobility, the silence, the inability to protect and defend him, and the impossibility of being taken by the hand to become a man in his turn. The immediately subsequent events then confirm John in the certainty that the father lovingly protects, directs, and guides, and that, when he is missing, even the best of mothers, like Margaret, can only provide partial support. On his path as an exuberant boy, the future Don Bosco, however, encounters other "fathers": his near peers Luigi Comollo, who awakened in him the emulation of virtues, and Saint Joseph Cafasso, who called him "my dear friend", gave him a "gracious gesture to come closer", and, in doing so, confirmed him in the persuasion that fatherhood is closeness, confidence, and concrete interest. But there is above all Fr Calosso, the priest who "bumped into" the curly-haired Johnny during a "popular mission" and became decisive for his human and spiritual growth. The gestures of Fr Calosso operated a true

revolution in the pre-adolescent John. Fr Calosso first of all *spoke to him*. Then he *allowed him to speak*. Then he *encouraged* him. Still: he took an *interest* in the story of the Bosco family, showing that he knew how to contextualize the “moment” of that boy within the “whole” of his story. Moreover, he revealed the world to him, or rather, in some way, he brought him back to life, introducing him to new things, gifting him new words, and showing him that he had the abilities to do much and well. Finally, he *watched over* him with his gestures and gaze, and provided for his most urgent and real needs, “While I spoke, he never took his gaze off me. ‘Be of good cheer, my friend, I will take care of you and of your studies’”.

In Fr Calosso, John Bosco thus experienced that true fatherhood deserves a total and all-encompassing entrustment; it leads to self-awareness; it opens up an “ordered world” where rules provide security and educate to freedom:

“I immediately placed myself in the hands of Fr Calosso. It was then that I learned what it means to have a stable guide [...], a faithful friend of the soul. He encouraged me; all the time I could, I spent with him. From that time on, I began to taste what spiritual life truly is, since before I acted more materially, like a machine doing something without knowing the reason behind it.”

The earthly father, however, is also the one who would always like to be with his son, but at a certain point can no longer do so. Fr Calosso also died; even the best father, at a certain point, steps aside, to give his son the strength of that detachment and autonomy which are typical of adulthood.

What then is, for Don Bosco, the difference between successful and failed families? One would be tempted to say that it all lies here: a “successful” family is characterised by parents who educate their children to be free, and if they let them go, it is only due to an unforeseen

impossibility or for their own good. A “wounded” family, on the other hand, is one where the parent/s no longer give life, but carry within themselves problems of various kinds that hinder the child’s growth: a parent who is indifferent to them and, in the face of difficulties, even abandons them, with an attitude so different from that of the Good Shepherd.

The biographical events of Laura, Carlo, and Ana María confirm this.

### **3. Laura: a daughter who “gives life” to her own mother**

Born in Santiago, Chile, on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1891, and baptized on May 24<sup>th</sup> of the same year, Laura was the eldest daughter of José D. Vicuña, a disgraced nobleman who married Mercedes Pino, daughter of modest farmers. Three years later, a little sister, Julia Amanda, arrived, but soon after, their father died, having suffered a political defeat that undermined his health and compromised also their honour, along with the family’s economic support. Devoid of any “protection and future perspective”, Laura’s mother landed in Argentina, where she sought the protection of the landowner Manuel Mora: a man “of proud and haughty character”, who “did not hide hatred and contempt for anyone who opposed his plans”. A man, in short, who only seemingly offered protection, but was actually accustomed to taking, if necessary, by force, whatever he wanted, manipulating people. Meanwhile, he paid for Laura and her sister’s studies at the boarding school of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Their mother – who was under the psychological influence of Mora – lived with him without finding the strength to break the bond. However, when Mora began to show signs of improper interest towards Laura herself, and especially when she embarked on the path of preparation for her First Holy Communion, she suddenly understood the gravity of the situation. Unlike her mother – who justified an evil (cohabitation) in view of a good (her daughters’ education at the boarding school) – Laura understood that this was a morally illegitimate argument,



which put her mother's soul in grave danger. Around this time, Laura also expressed the desire to become a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians herself; but her request was rejected, because she was the daughter of a 'public concubine'. And it is at this point that a change took place in Laura – received into the boarding school when 'impulsiveness, ease of resentment, irritability, impatience and propensity to appear' still dominated in her – that only Grace, combined with the person's commitment, can bring about: she asked God for her mother's conversion, offering herself for her. At that moment, Laura could move neither 'forwards' (entering the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) nor 'backwards' (returning to her mother and Mora). With a gesture imbued with the creativity typical of saints, Laura embarks on the only path still available to her: one that reached towards the heights of transcendence and the depths of inner transformation. In her First Holy Communion resolutions she had written down:

I propose to do all that I know and can to [...] repair the offenses that you, Lord, receive every day from people, especially from those of my family; my God, grant me a life of love, mortification, and sacrifice.

Then she finalised her intention in an "Act of Offering", which included the sacrifice of her very life. Her confessor, recognising that the inspiration came from God but ignoring its consequences, consented, and confirmed that Laura was "aware of the offering she had just made". She lived her last two years in silence, joy, and with a smile, and a disposition that was rich in human warmth. Yet the gaze she directed at the world – as confirmed by a photographic portrait quite different from the well-known hagiographic stylisation – revealed all the deep awareness and pain that dwelt within her. In a situation where she lacked both the "freedom from" (conditioning, obstacles, struggles) and the "freedom to" do many things, this pre-adolescent testified to "freedom for": that of the total gift of self.

Laura did not despise but loved life: her own and

that of her mother. For this reason, she offered herself. On April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1902, Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked: "If He gives his life... what prevents me from doing so for my mother?" Dying, she added: "Mom, I am dying, I myself asked Jesus for this... I have been offering my life for you for almost two years, to obtain the grace of your return!"

These are words free of regret and reproach, but full of great strength, great hope, and great faith. Laura had learned to accept her mother for who she was. She even offered herself to give her what she could not achieve by herself. When Laura died, her mother converted. *Laurita de los Andes*, the daughter, thus contributed to giving life to her mother in faith and grace.

#### **4. Carlo Braga and his mother's shadow**

Carlo Braga, who was born two years before Laura, in 1889, was also marked by his mother's fragility: when her husband abandoned her and the children, Matilde "almost stopped eating and was visibly declining". She was then taken to Como, where she died four years later of tuberculosis, although everyone was convinced that her depression had turned into a real madness. Carlo then began to be "pitied as the son of an irresponsible [father] and an unhappy mother". However, three providential events helped him.

He later rediscovered the meaning of the first event, which occurred when he was very small: he had fallen into the hearth and his mother Matilde, in rescuing him, had consecrated him to the Virgin Mary at that very instant. Thus, the thought of his absent mother became for Carlo as a child 'a painful and consoling memory at the same time': sorrow for her absence; but also, the certainty that she had entrusted him to the Mother of all mothers, Mary Most Holy. Years later, Fr Braga wrote to a Salesian confrere struck by the loss of his own mother:

"Now your mother belongs to you much more than when she was alive. Let me tell you about my personal experience. My mother left me when I was six years old [...].

But I must confess that she followed me step by step, and when I cried desolately at the murmur of the Adda [river], while, as a little shepherd, I felt called to a higher vocation, it seemed to me that Mom was smiling at me and drying my tears”.

Carlo then met Sister Giuditta Torelli, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians who “saved little Carlo from the disintegration of his personality when at nine he realised he was just tolerated and sometimes heard people say about him, ‘Poor child, why is he even in the world?’” There were indeed those who claimed that his father deserved to be shot for the betrayal of abandonment, and regarding his mother, many schoolmates replied to him, “Shut up, your mother was crazy, anyway”. But Sr Giuditta loved him and helped him in a special way; she looked at him with a “new” gaze; moreover, she believed in his vocation and encouraged it.

After entering the Salesian boarding school in Sondrio, Carlo experienced the third and decisive event: he met Fr Rua, of whom he had the honour of being the little secretary for a day. Fr Rua smiled at Carlo and, repeating the gesture that Don Bosco had once performed with him (“Little Michael, you and I will always go halves”), he “put his hand inside his own and said to him, ‘we will always be friends’”. If Sr Giuditta had believed in Carlo’s vocation, Fr Rua allowed him to realise it, “helping him overcome all obstacles”. Certainly, Carlo Braga would not lack difficulties at every stage of life – as a novice, young Salesian, and even as Provincial – manifested as *prudent* delays and sometimes taking the form of slander; but he had learned to face them. Meanwhile, he became a man capable of radiating extraordinary joy, humble, active, and marked by a gentle sense of irony—all traits that reflect his personal balance and sense of reality. Under the action of the Holy Spirit, Fr Braga himself developed a radiant fatherhood, joined by a great tenderness for the young entrusted to him. Fr Braga rediscovered love for his father, forgave him, and embarked on a journey to reconcile with him. He underwent countless hardships just to

be always among his Salesians and boys. He defined himself as one who had been “put in the vineyard to act as a pole”, that is, without seeking recognition but for the good of others. A father, in entrusting his son to him as a Salesian aspirant, said, “With a man like you, I would let him go even to the North Pole!” Fr Carlo was not scandalised by the needs of the children; rather, he educated them to express them, to increase their desire, “Do you need some books? Don’t be afraid, write a longer list”. Above all, Fr Carlo learned to look at others with that gaze of love from which he himself had once felt reached thanks to Sr Giuditta and Fr Rua. Fr Joseph Zen, now a cardinal, testified in a long passage that deserves to be read in full and begins with his mother’s words to Fr Braga:

“Look, Father, this boy is not so good anymore. Perhaps he is not suitable to be accepted in this institution. I wouldn’t want you to be deceived. Ah, if you only knew how he troubled me this last year! I really didn’t know what to do anymore. And if he gives you trouble here too, just let me know, and I’ll come to pick him up right away”. Fr Braga, instead of responding, looked me in the eyes; I too looked at him, but with my head down. I felt like a defendant accused by the prosecutor, rather than defended by my own lawyer. But the judge was on my side. With his gaze, he understood me deeply, immediately and better than all my mother’s explanations. He himself, writing to me many years later, applied to himself the words of the Gospel: “*Intuitus dilexit eum* (‘looking at him, he loved him’)”. And, from that day on, I had no more doubts about my vocation.

## **5. Ana María Lozano Díaz and the fruitful illness of her father**

The parents of Laura and Carlo had – in various ways – revealed themselves to be “distant” and “absent”. One final figure, that of Ana María, instead attests to the opposite dynamism: that of a father *too* present, who, with his presence, opened up a new path to sanctification for his

daughter. Ana was born on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1883, in Oicatà, Colombia, into a large family, characterised by the exemplary Christian life of her parents. When Ana was very young, her father – one day, while washing – discovered a concerning mark on his leg. It was leprosy, which he managed to hide for some time, but was ultimately forced to acknowledge, first accepting to separate from his family, then reuniting with them at the leper colony of Agua de Dios. His wife heroically told him, “Your fate is our fate”. Thus, the healthy accepted the conditions imposed on them by adopting the rhythm of life of the sick. In this context, her father’s illness conditioned Ana María’s freedom of choice, forcing her to plan her life within the leper colony. Like Laura before her, she was unable to pursue her religious vocation due to her father’s illness. She then experienced, inwardly, the profound rift that leprosy causes in the lives of the sick. However, Ana María was not alone. Just as Don Bosco found help through Fr Calosso, Laura in her confessor, and Carlo in Fr Rua, so she found a friend of the soul in Blessed Luigi Variara, sdb, who assured her, “If you have a religious vocation, it will be realized”, and involved her in the founding of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in 1905. It was the first Institute to welcome leprous women or daughters of lepers. When Lozano died on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1982, at almost 99 years old, after more than fifty years as Mother General, Fr Variara’s insight had fully manifested in an experience that confirmed and reinforced the Salesian charism’s *victim and reparative* dimension.

## **6. The saints teach**

In their inescapable difference, the stories of Laura Vicuña (blessed), Carlo Braga, and Ana María Lozano (servants of God) are united by several noteworthy aspects:

a) Laura, Ana, and Carlo, like Don Bosco, suffered situations of discomfort and difficulty, variously related to their parents. One cannot forget Mama Margaret, who was forced

to send Johnny away from home when the absence of paternal authority facilitated the clash with his brother Anthony; nor forget that Laura was threatened by Mora and rejected by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as their aspirant; and that Carlo Braga suffered misunderstandings and slanders; or that her father's leprosy seemed at one point to rob Ana María of all hope for the future.

A family, wounded in various ways, therefore caused an *objective harm* to those who were part of it: to fail to acknowledge or attempt to downplay the extent of this damage would be as illusory as it is unjust. Indeed, every suffering is associated with an element of loss that the "saints", with their realism, capture and learn to name.

b) Johnny, Laura, Ana María, and Carlo then took a second, more arduous step: instead of passively enduring the situation or lamenting it, they moved with increased awareness to address the problem. In addition to a lively realism, they demonstrated the ability, which is typical of saints, to react promptly, avoiding any self-centred withdrawal. They expanded through the gift and integrated it into the concrete conditions of life. In doing so, they bound the 'da mihi animas' to the 'cetera tolle'.

c) The limits and wounds are never erased: they are always recognised and named; in fact, they are 'lived with'. Even Blessed Alexandrina Maria da Costa and Servant of God Nino Baglieri, Venerable Andrea Beltrami and Blessed Augusto Czaratoryski, were "reached" by the Lord in the debilitating conditions of their illness. Blessed Titus Zeman, Venerable José Vandor, and Servant of God Ignatius Stuchlý – part of larger historical events that seemed to overwhelm them – taught the difficult art of persevering through hardships and allowing the Lord to make the person flourish within them. Here, the freedom of choice takes on the highest form of a freedom of adherence, in the 'fiat'!

#### *Bibliographic Note:*

To preserve the character of "witness" rather than

“report” of this writing, a critical apparatus of notes has been avoided. However, it should be noted that the quotes present in the text are taken from the *Memoirs of the Oratory of St John Bosco*; from Maria Dosio, *Laura Vicuña. A Path of Salesian Youth Holiness*, LAS, Rome 2004; from *Fr Carlo Braga Recounts His Missionary and Educative Experience* (autobiographical testimony of the Servant of God) and from the *Life of Fr Carlo Braga, “The Don Bosco of China”*, written by Fr Mario Rassiga, sdb and now available in stencilled form. To these sources are added the materials from the beatification and canonisation causes, which are accessible for Don Bosco and Laura, while still reserved for the Servants of God.

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## **The Servant of God Andrej Majcen: a Salesian completely dedicated to the young**

*This year marks the 25th anniversary of the passing into eternity of the Servant of God Fr Andrej Majcen. As a teacher in Radna, he came to the ranks of the Salesians out of love for the young. A life of self-giving.*

The first thing is that **Fr Andrej loved young people very much**: for them he consecrated his life to God as a Salesian, a priest, a missionary. Being a Salesian does not only mean giving one's life to God: it means giving one's life for the young. So without the young, Fr Andrej Majcen would not have been a Salesian, a priest, a missionary: for the young, he made demanding choices, accepting conditions of

poverty, hardship, worries so that 'his boys' would find a roof over their heads, a plate to fill their stomachs, and a light to guide them through life.

The first message, then, is that Fr Majcen loved young people and interceded for them!

The second is that **Andrej was a young man capable of listening**. Born in 1904, still a child during the First World War, sick and poor, scarred by the death of a little brother, Andrej kept great desires in his heart and above all many questions: he was open to life and wanted to understand why it deserved to be lived. He never discounted questions and was always committed to seeking answers, even in environments other than his own, without closures or prejudices. At the same time, Andrej was docile: he paid attention to what his mother, father, educators told him and asked him... Andrej trusted that others might have some answers to his questions and that in their suggestions there was not a desire to replace him, but to point him in a direction that he would then follow in his own freedom and on his own two feet.

**His father**, for example, advised him to always be good to everyone and that he would never regret it. He worked for the court, dealt with probate cases, with many difficult things where people often quarrel and even the most sacred ties are offended. From his father, Andrej learnt to be good, to bring peace, to reconcile tensions, not to judge, to be in the world (with its tensions and contradictions) as a just person. Andrej listened to and trusted his father.

**His mother** was a great woman of prayer (Andrej considered her a religious in the world and confided that she had not achieved her devotion even as a religious). In his teenage years, when he could have lost touch with ideas and ideologies, she asked him to go to church for a few moments every day. Nothing in particular, or too long: *"When you go to school, don't forget to enter the Franciscan church for a moment. You can enter through one door and leave through the other; you make the sign of the cross with holy water, say a*



*short prayer and entrust yourself to Mary.*" Andrej obeyed his mother and every day he came to greet Mary in the church even though – 'out there' – many companions and lively discussions awaited him. Andrej listened to and trusted his mother, and discovered that therein lay the roots of many things, there was a bond with Mary that would accompany him forever. It is these small drops that dig great depths in us, almost without us realising it!

**A teacher** invited him to go to the library and there he was given a book with the *Aphorisms* of Th. G. Masaryk: politician, man of government, today we would say a 'layman'. Andrej read that book and it became decisive for his growth. There he discovered what a certain amount of work on himself, character formation, commitment meant. Andrej listened to the advice and listened to Masaryk, not letting himself be too influenced by his 'Curriculum' but seeing the good even in someone far from the Catholic way of thinking of his own family. He discovered that there are universal human values and that there is a dimension of commitment and seriousness that is 'common ground' for all.

A teacher at the Salesians, in Radna, young Majcen finally listened to those who – in different ways – gave him the idea of a **possible consecration**. There were many reasons why Andrej could have backed out: the family's investment in his education; the job he had found only a few months before; having to leave everything and exposing himself to total uncertainty if he failed... He was at that moment a young man looking towards the future, who had not considered that proposal. At the same time, he was looking for something more and different and, as a man and as a teacher, he realised that the Salesians not only taught, but oriented to Jesus, Master of Life. Don Bosco's pedagogy for him was that 'piece' he was missing. Andrej listened to the vocational proposal, he faced a hard struggle during prayer, on his knees, and decided to apply for admission to the novitiate: he did not let much time pass, but he thought seriously, prayed and said yes. He did not miss the opportunity, he did not let the moment pass...:

he listened, he trusted, he decided by agreeing and knowing so little of what he was going to encounter.

Often we all believe that we see ourselves right in our own lives, that we hold the keys to it, its secret: sometimes, however, it is precisely others who invite us to straighten our gaze, our ears and our hearts, showing us paths towards which we would never have gone on our own. If these people are good and want our good, obeying them is important: therein lies the secret of happiness. Fr Majcen trusted, he did not waste years, he did not waste life... He said yes. Deciding in time was also the great secret recommended by Don Bosco.

The third thing is that **Andrej Majcen allowed himself to be surprised**. He always welcomed surprises, proposals and changes: the meeting with the Salesians, for example; then the encounter with a missionary that made him burn with the desire to be able to spend himself for others in a faraway land. He also received some not-so-good surprises: he went to China and found Communism there; they chased him out, he entered North Vietnam and Communism did damage there too; they chased him out, he went south, then arrived in South Vietnam; but Communism reached that area too and they chased him out again (it sounds like an action film, with a long chase with sirens wailing!). He returned home, to his beloved Slovenia, and – in the meantime – the Communist regime was established there, and there was persecution of the Church. What is this? A joke? Andrej did not complain! He lived for decades in countries at war or in situations at risk, with persecution, emergencies, mourning... He slept for more than twenty years while outside the window, over there, they were shooting... At other times he cried... Yet – even though he had positions of responsibility and so many lives to save – he was almost always serene, with a beautiful smile, so much joy and love in his heart. How did he do it?

He did not place his heart in external events, into things, into what you cannot control or... into his own

plans ('it has to be like this because I have decided so': when it 'isn't like this' you go into crisis). He had put his heart in God, in the Congregation and in his dear young people. Then he was truly free, the world could fall away, but the roots were safe. The roots were in *relationships*, in a good way of *spending oneself for others*; the foundation was in *something that does not pass away*.

So many times, all we need is for them to move a small thing and we get angry because it is not according to our needs, desires, plans or expectations. Andrej Majcen tells me, he tells us: "be free!", "entrust your heart to those who will not steal it or damage it", "build on something that will remain forever!", "then you will be happy even if they take everything away from you and you will always have ALL."

The fourth thing is that **Fr Andrej Majcen made his examination of conscience well**. Every day he examined himself to see where he had done well, less well or badly. When he had the chance (i.e. when there were no more bombs near his home or the Viet Cong at a short distance, etc.) he would take a notebook, write down questions, reflect on the Word of God, verify that he had put it into practice... He would question himself.

Today we live in a society that places great importance on outward appearances: it too is a gift (e.g. taking care of oneself, dressing with propriety, presenting oneself well), but it is not everything. We have to dig inside ourselves, go deep -maybe with the help of someone.

Andrej always had the courage to look himself in the face, to peer into his own heart and conscience, to ask for forgiveness. In doing so, he has encountered some not very beautiful aspects of himself, on which to work and to entrust: but he has also seen so much good, beauty, purity, love that would otherwise have remained 'under the radar'.

Many times, it takes more courage to travel within ourselves than to go to the other side of the world! Fr Andrej Majcen faced both of these journeys: from Slovenia he

reached the Far East, and yet the most demanding itinerary always remained – right to the end – within his own heart.

St Augustine, a young man who sought the truth in so many ways before encountering it in the person of Jesus, within himself, says: *“Noli foras ire, redi in te ipsum, in interiore homini habitat veritas”* (“Do not want to go outside, return within yourself, the truth dwells in human inwardness”).

And so I have concluded with a little exercise in Latin: a language very dear to Andrej and linked to his vocational discernment. But that would really be..., at least for now, another story!

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## Meeting Vera Grita of Jesus, Servant of God

*Vera Grita, together with Alexandrina Maria da Costa (from Balazar), both Salesian Cooperators, were two privileged witnesses of Jesus present in the Eucharist. They are a gift of Providence to the Salesian Congregation and to the Church, reminding us of the last words of Matthew’s Gospel: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

### **The invitation to an encounter**

Vera Grita (1923-1969), laywoman, consecrated with private vows, Salesian Cooperator, mystic, has been included in recent years among the Salesian Family’s figures of holiness. Vera is now a Servant of God (the diocesan phase has been concluded and the Roman phase of the Cause is currently underway) and her importance for us derives essentially from two reasons: as a Cooperator she charismatically belongs to the great Family of Don Bosco and we can feel that she is a

“sister”; as a mystic, the Lord Jesus “dictated” to her the Work of the Living Tabernacles (a Eucharistic Work of broad ecclesial scope) which, by the will of Heaven, is entrusted first and foremost to the Salesians. Jesus strongly calls the Salesians so that they may know, live, deepen and bear witness to this Work of Love of his in the Church, for every human being. To know Vera Grita therefore means, today, to become aware of a great gift given to the Church through the sons of Don Bosco, and to be in tune with Jesus’ request that it be the Salesians themselves who guard this precious treasure and give it to others, putting themselves profoundly at stake.

The fact that this Work is first and foremost Eucharistic (... “Living Tabernacles”) and Marian (Mary Immaculate, Our Lady of Sorrows and Our Lady Help of Christians ,Mother of the Work) can only bring us back to Don Bosco’s “dream of the two pillars”, in which the ship of the Church finds safety from the enemies’ attack by anchoring itself to the two pillars of the Virgin Mary and the Most Holy Eucharist.

There is therefore a great, constitutive Salesianity running through Vera’s life: this helps us to feel her close, a new friend and sister in spirit. She takes us by the hand and leads us – with her typical gentleness and strength – to a renewed encounter of great beauty with Jesus in the Eucharist, so that He may be received and brought to others. This too is a gesture of preparation for Christmas, because Mary (“golden tabernacle”) brings and gives Jesus to us: the Word of life (cf. 1 Jn 1:1), made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14).

### **Biographical-spiritual profile of Vera Grita**

Vera Grita was born in Rome on 28 January 1923, the second child of the four daughters of Amleto Grita and Maria Anna Zacco della Pirrera. Her parents were originally from Sicily: Amleto belonged to a family of photographers; Maria Anna was the daughter of a Modican baron and, by marrying against her father’s wishes, had lost every privilege and the very possibility of cultivating any ties with her

family of origin, forever. Vera was born from this emotional rift, but also out of a great love which her parents remained faithful to through many trials.

Her father Amleto's anti-fascism, a theft of photographic equipment and, above all, the 1929-30 crisis had serious repercussions for the Grita family: in a short time, they found themselves poor and unable to provide for their daughters' growth. So, while Amleto, Maria Anna and their youngest daughter Rosa remained together and started again from Savona in Liguria, Vera grew up with her sisters Giuseppina and Liliana in Modica with her father's aunts: women of faith and talent, fully in the world but "not of the world" (cf. Jn. 17). In Modica – the Sicilian UNESCO heritage town due to the splendours of its Baroque – Vera attended the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and received First Communion and Confirmation. She was attracted to the life of prayer and attentive to the needs of her neighbour, keeping silent about her own sufferings to be a "mother" to her little sister Liliana. On the day of her First Communion, she no longer wanted to take off her white dress because she was aware of the value of what she experienced and all that it signified.

Returning to the family in 1940, Vera obtained her teacher's certificate. The early death of her father Amleto in 1943 forced her to help the family with work, but she gave up her desired teaching.

On 3 July 1944 – at the age of 21 and while seeking shelter from an air raid – Vera was run over and trampled by the fleeing crowd: she lay on the ground for hours, lacerated, bruised, with serious injuries, believed dead. Her body was scarred for life and, over time, ailments such as Addison's disease (which depletes the hormone responsible for stress management) and continuous surgery, including the removal of her uterus at a young age, took their toll. The events of 3 July and the compromised clinical picture prevented her from forming a family as she would have wished. *"From then on it was a succession of hospitalisations,*

*operations, analyses, excruciating pains in the head and all over the body. Terrible diseases were diagnosed, various cures were tried. The affected organs did not respond to treatment and, in that inexplicable disorder, one of her attending physicians, amazed [,] declared: 'It is not understood how it is possible that the patient could have found her balance.'*"

For 25 years, until the end of her earthly life, Vera Grita courageously bore a suffering that would deepen into a moral and spiritual one, and she would veil it with discretion and a smile, without ceasing to dedicate herself to others. Hers became a "heavy" body (although a graceful one: Vera was always very feminine and beautiful), a body that imposed constraints, slowness and fatigue at every step.

Thirty-five years old, she realised her dream of teaching with great strength of will and from 1958 to 1969 she was a teacher in schools almost all in the Ligurian hinterland: difficult to reach, with small classes and sometimes disadvantaged or handicapped students to whom she gave confidence, understanding and joy, going so far as to give up her medicine so she could buy the tonics necessary for their growth. Even in the family, she was more a "mum" with her nieces than their own mother, testifying to a very fine educational sensitivity and a unique generative capacity, humanly inseparable from her tried conditions (cf. Is. 54). When the relationship with others, situations, problems seemed to get the upper hand and Vera experienced human discouragement or was tempted to rebel because of a perceived sense of injustice, she was able to reread the situation in the light of the Gospel and remember her "place" as a "little victim": "*Today [...],*" she would write one day to her spiritual father "*I see things in their value.*" "*Let us remain calm in obedience*" this priest recommended to her.

On 19 September 1967, while she was praying before the Blessed Sacrament exposed in the little church of Mary Help of Christians in Savona, she inwardly felt the first of a long series of Messages that Heaven communicated to her in the brief space of two years and which constitute the "Work of the

Living Tabernacles”: a Work of Love with which Jesus in the Eucharist wants to be known, loved and brought to souls, in a world that believes him and seeks him less and less. For her, it was the beginning of a relationship of growing fullness with the Lord, who entered into her daily life with his Presence, within a real conversation like that of two lovers, participating in Vera’s life in everything (Jesus dictated his own thoughts even as Vera wrote them down, so the letter was written by “four hands” with the greatest familiarity). From *“bringing to Jesus”* to *“bringing Jesus”*.

Vera submitted everything to her spiritual father and obedience to the Church, with a high concept of dependence on them, much obedience, an immense humility: Jesus had taken a “teacher” and placed her in the school of his Love, teaching her through the Messages and above all calling her to consistency of faith and life. He was a very sweet and yet very demanding Bridegroom in training her in this virtuous path: he resorted to the images of digging, of work, of the chisel, of the hammer with its “blows” to teach Vera how much she must remove from herself, how much work must be done in a soul so that it may be a true Temple of God’s Presence: *“I am working in you with chisel blows [...]. The barrenness, the small and large crosses, are my hammer. So, at intervals the blow will come, my blow. I must take many, many things away from you: resistance to my love, distrust, fears, selfishness, useless anxieties, non-Christian thoughts, worldly habits.”*. Vera’s docility was a daily asceticism, the humility of one who touches the limit but makes it available to God’s omnipotence and mercy. Jesus, through her, teaches a path of holiness that – while clearly oriented to be able to welcome the fullness of His Life – is expressed through a “less” of what we are and how we resist him: holiness... by “subtraction” to become transparency of him. The first characteristic of the Tabernacle is, in fact, to be empty and willing to welcome a Presence. As the novice Mistress of a Benedictine Monastery of the Blessed Sacrament wrote: *“The thoughts she writes are of Jesus. How clean the texts are, even! Sometimes, even in the*



*spiritual diaries of holy and beautiful souls, how much subjectivity emerges [...] and it is right that it should be so. [...] Vera [instead] disappears, she is not there [,] she is not speaking of herself"*

Vera would one day write: *"My pupils are part of me, of my love for Jesus."* It is the ripe fruit of a Eucharistic life that made her "broken bread" with the One Victim. Without Jesus, she could no longer live: *"I want Jesus no matter what. I can no longer live without Him, I cannot."* An "ontological" statement that speaks of the indissoluble bond between her and her Eucharistic Bridegroom.

Vera Grita had received a first Message, followed by eight years of silence, in Alpicella (Savona) on 6 October 1959. On 2 February 1965 she took the vows of perpetual chastity and to be a "little victim" for priests, whom she served with particular delicacy and dedication. She became a Salesian Cooperator on 24 October 1967. She intensely loved Mary, to whom she had consecrated herself, and lived her filial relationship to her in the spirit of de Montfort's "slavery of love". Later she offered herself for different intentions of an ecclesial nature: in particular for priests who during the late 60s abandoned their vocation, yet remained beloved sons, never far from the Heart of Christ as he himself assured her.

Considered worthy of faith, much loved and esteemed, with a reputation for holiness, Vera died at the Santa Corona hospital in Pietra Ligure (Savona) on 22nd December 1969 of hypovolemic shock from massive haemorrhage and consequent multi-organ failure: "bride of blood", as she had been called by Jesus in the Messages, long before she understood what this meant.

A few moments later the chaplain – with a gesture as spontaneous as it was unusual – raised her remains to Heaven, praying and offering everything, presenting Vera as a welcome offering: *consummatum est!* It was the last in a series of gestures that punctuated the life of the Servant of God and that, in other ways, she herself had performed: the sign of

the cross; the genuflection well done, slowly; the Holy Staircase on her knees with the Booklets in which she transcribed the Messages of the Work; the offering of herself brought even to St Peter's. When she did not understand, in weariness and sometimes in doubt, Vera Grita acted: she knew that the most important thing was not her own feeling, but the objectivity of God's Work in her and through her. She had written of herself: *"I am 'earth' and of no use except to write under dictation"; "Sometimes I understand and do not understand"; "Jesus does not leave me but uses this rag for his divine Plans."* Her spiritual director, astonished, commented one day – referring to the words of the Messages: *"I find them splendid, even beatifying. And how can you remain dry?"* Vera had never looked at herself and, as for every mystic, a stronger light had become for her dark night, bright darkness, proof of faith.

Eight years later, on 22 September 1977, Pope Paul VI (already the recipient of some of the Work's Messages, and who had instituted the Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist in 1972), received Vera Grita's spiritual father, Fr Gabriello Zucconi sdb, in audience and blessed the Work of the Living Tabernacles.

On 18 May 2023, the Bishop of Savona-Noli, Bishop Calogero Marino, *"approved the Statutes of the Association known as 'Opera dei Tabernacoli Viventi' and on 19 May erected it as a private Association of the faithful, also recognising its juridical personality."* The Rector Major of the Salesians, Card. Arttime, already in 2017 authorised and charged the SDB Postulation to *"accompany all the necessary steps so that the Work [...] continues to be studied, promoted in our Congregation and recognised by the Church, in a spirit of obedience and charity."*

## **Being and becoming "Living Tabernacles"**

At the centre of the Messages to Vera is Jesus in the Eucharist: we all have experience of the Eucharist, however it should be noted (cf. theologian Fr. François-Marie

Léthel, OCD) how the Church has deepened over time the significance of the Sacrament of the Altar, from discovery to discovery: for example, from the celebration to the *Eucharistic Reserve* and from the *Reserve to the Exposition* during the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament... Jesus asks, through Vera, for a further step: from Adoration in church, where one must go to meet Him, to that *"Take me with you!"* (cf. below) through which he himself, having made his dwelling in his Living Tabernacle (us), wants to leave the churches to reach those who would not spontaneously enter a church; those who do not believe him; do not seek him; do not love him or even lucidly exclude him from their life. The **charismatic grace** linked to the Work is in fact that of the **Eucharistic permanence of Jesus in the soul**, so that whoever receives Jesus-Eucharist in the Holy Mass and lives sensitive to his calls and to his Presence, radiates him in the world, to every brother and sister and especially to the most needy. Thus, Vera Grita becomes the example and model (in the literal sense of the term: one who has already lived what is required of each one) of a life spent in a profound body-to-body with the Eucharistic Lord, until he himself watches, speaks, acts, through the "soul" that carries and gives him. Jesus says: *"I will use your way of speaking, of expressing yourself, to speak, to reach other souls. Give me your faculties, that I may meet with everyone and in every place. In the beginning will be for the soul a work of attention, of vigilance, to discard from itself everything that poses an obstacle to my Permanence in her. My graces in the souls called to this Work will be gradual. Today you bring Me into the family, My kiss; another time, something more and more, until, almost unbeknownst to the soul itself, I will do, act, speak, love, through her as many as will approach this soul, that is to say, Me. There are those who act, speak, look, work feeling guided only by my Spirit, but I am already the Living Tabernacle in this soul, and it does not know it. It must know it, however, because I want its adhesion to my EUCHARISTIC PERMANENCE in its soul; I also want this soul to give me its*

*voice to speak to other people, its eyes so that mine may meet the gaze of its brothers, its arms so that I may embrace others, its hands to caress the little ones, the children, the suffering. This Work, however, has **love** and **humility** as its basis. The soul must always have before it its own miseries, its own nothingness, and never forget of what dough it has been kneaded.*" (Savona, 26 December 1967).

One can then also understand a further aspect of the "Salesian" relevance of the charism: being for others; sent in particular to the little ones, the poor, the least, the distant; living an "apostolic interiority" that means being all in God and all for one's brother and sister; the great gentleness of those who do not bear themselves, but radiate the meekness, meekness and joy of the crucified and risen Lord; the privileged attention to the young, who are also called to participate in this vocation.

Vera – whose confessor in life was a Salesian (Fr Giovanni Bocchi) and whose spiritual father was also a Salesian (Fr Gabriello Zucconi) and a reference person of the mystical experience (Fr Giuseppe Borra) – returns today to knock on the door of Don Bosco's sons. The Work itself was born in Turin, in the cradle of the Salesian charism.

Bibliographic references:

– Centro Studi "Opera dei Tabernacoli Viventi" (ed.), [\*Portami con Te! L'Opera dei Tabernacoli Viventi nei manoscritti originali di Vera Grita\*](#), ElleDiCi, Turin 2017.

– Centro Studi "Opera dei Tabernacoli Viventi" (ed.), [\*Vera Grita una mistica dell'Eucaristia. Epistolario di Vera Grita e dei Sacerdoti Salesiani don G. Bocchi, don G. Borra e don G. Zucconi\*](#), ElleDiCi, Torino 2018.

Both texts include studies of historical-biographical, theological-spiritual, Salesian and ecclesial contextualisation of the Work.

*"Mother of Jesus, Mother of beautiful Love, give love to my poor heart, give purity and holiness to my soul, give will to*

*my character, give holy enlightenment to my mind, give me Jesus, give me your Jesus forever.” (Prayer to Mary that Jesus teaches Vera Grita)*

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# **Laura Vicuña: a daughter who “begets” her mother**

## **Stories of wounded families**

We are used to imagining the family as a harmonious reality, characterised by the co-presence of several generations and by the guiding role of parents who set the norm and of children who – when they learn this – are guided by them in life’s experiences. Nonetheless, families often find themselves beset by dramas and misunderstandings, or marked by wounds that attack their optimal configuration and give them a distorted and false image.

The history of Salesian holiness also has stories of wounded families: families where at least one of the parental figures is missing, or the presence of the mother and father becomes, for different reasons (physical, psychic, moral and spiritual), penalising for their children, now on their way to the honours of the altars. Don Bosco himself, who had experienced the premature death of his father and the estrangement from the family by the prudent wish of Mamma Margaret, wanted – and this is no coincidence – the Salesian work to be particularly dedicated to “poor and abandoned youth” and did not hesitate to reach out to the young people formed in his oratory with an intense vocational pastoral (demonstrating that no wound from the past is an obstacle to a full human and Christian life). It is therefore natural that Salesian holiness itself, which draws on the lives of many of Don Bosco’s young people later consecrated through him to the

cause of the Gospel, bears within itself – as a logical consequence – traces of wounded families.

Of these boys and girls who grew up in contact with Salesian works, we present Blessed Laura Vicuña, born in Chile in 1891, fatherless and whose mother began a cohabitation in Argentina with the wealthy landowner Manuel Mora; Laura, therefore, hurt by her mother's situation of moral irregularity, was ready to offer her life for her.

### **A short but intense life**

Born in Santiago de Chile on 5 April 1891, and baptised on the following 24 May, Laura was the eldest daughter of José D. Vicuña, a fallen nobleman who had married Mercedes Pino, the daughter of modest farmers. Three years later a little sister, Julia Amanda, arrived, but soon her father died, after suffering a political defeat that undermined his health and compromised, along with the family's financial support, also his honour. Deprived of any "protection and prospect of a future", the mother landed in Argentina, where she resorted to the guardianship of the landowner Manuel Mora: a man "of proud and haughty character" who "did not hide his hatred and contempt for anyone who opposed his plans." A man, in short, who guaranteed protection only on the surface, but was actually used to taking what he wanted by force if necessary, exploiting people. In the meantime, he paid for the studies for Laura and her sister at the boarding school run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Their mother – who was under Mora's psychological influence – lived with him without finding the strength to break the bond. However, when Mora began to show signs of unhealthy interest in Laura herself, and especially when the latter embarked on the path of preparation for her First Communion, she suddenly realised the gravity of the situation. Unlike her mother – who justified one evil (cohabitation) in view of a good (her daughters' education at boarding school) – Laura understood that this was a morally illegitimate argument, which put her mother's soul in grave

danger. At this time, Laura also wanted to become a Sister of Mary Help of Christians herself: but her request was rejected because she was the daughter of a “public concubine”. And it is at this point that a change took place in Laura (received into the boarding school when “impulsiveness, ease of resentment, irritability, impatience and wanting to be seen” still dominated in her) that only Grace, combined with her own commitment, could bring about: she asked God for her mother’s conversion, offering herself for her. At that moment, Laura could move neither “forwards” (entering the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) nor “backwards” (returning to her mother and Mora). With a gesture then charged with the creativity typical of saints, Laura embarked on the only road still accessible to her: one of height and depth. In her First Communion resolutions she had noted:

*I resolve to do all I know and can to [...] make reparation for the offences that you, Lord, receive every day from people, especially from people in my family; my God, give me a life of love, mortification and sacrifice.*

The intention in an “Act of Offering” was now finalised, which includes the sacrifice of her very life. Her confessor, recognising that the inspiration was from God, but ignorant of the consequences, agreed, and confirmed that Laura was “aware of the offering she has just made”. She spent the last two years in silence, cheerfulness and with a smile. And yet, the gaze she cast on the world – as confirmed by a photographic portrait, very different from the familiar hagiographic stylisation – also speaks of the painful awareness and pain that she felt. In a situation where she lacked both the “freedom from” (conditioning, obstacles, hardships) and the “freedom to” do many things, this pre-teen testified to the “freedom for” of total self-giving.

Laura did not despise, but loved life: her own and her mother’s. For this she offered herself. On 13 April 1902, Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked herself, “If He gives life... what is

stopping me from giving mine for Mum?" Dying, she added. "Mum, I am dying, I myself have asked Jesus... for almost two years I have been offering Him my life for you..., to obtain the grace of your return!"

These are words devoid of regret and reproach, but loaded with great strength, great hope and great faith. Laura had learnt to accept her mother for what she was. Indeed, she offered herself to give her what she alone could not achieve. When Laura died, her mother converted. Laurita de los Andes, the daughter, had thus helped to generate her mother in the life of faith and grace.

**Venerable                      Constatine**  
**Vendrame: apostle of Christ**

*The cause for the canonisation of the servant of God, Constantine Vendrame, is advancing. On 19 September 2023, the volume of the “Positio super Vita, Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis” was delivered to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican. Let us briefly introduce this professed priest of the Society of St Francis de Sales.*

## From the hills of Veneto to the hills of North-East India

The Servant of God Fr Constantine Vendrame was born in San Martino di Colle Umberto (Treviso) on 27 August 1893. San Martino, a hamlet of the larger town of Colle Umberto, is a charming Italian town in the Veneto region in the province of Treviso: From its hills, San Martino faces both the plains furrowed by the Piave river, and the foothills of the Alps in the Belluno area. This same dual nature – a hill town that looks towards the mountains and the plains, the proximity to the larger population centres and ideal projection to the more



sober world of the mountains, is what the future missionary Fr Costantino would find in North-East India, squeezed between the first spurs of the Himalayan chain and the Brahmaputra valley.

His family also belonged to the world of simple people: his father Pietro, a blacksmith by profession, and his mother Elena Fiori, originally from Cadore, whom he most likely met in the mountains. Fr Vendrame's ties with his siblings were strong: Giovanni, of whom he retained faithful memories; Antonia, the mother of a large family; his beloved Angela, to whom he was united by deep affection, in harmony of works and intentions. Angela would remain – with exuberant creativity – at the service of the parish and would offer her suffering and merits for her brother's apostolic, missionary enterprise. Vivid in the family was also the memory of her elder brother Canciano, who flew to heaven at only 13 years of age. He was baptised the day after his birth (28 August) and confirmed in November 1898, and then lost his father. Constantine Vendrame made his first communion on 21 July 1904 and spent his childhood with the usual routine tasks. And this is how the priestly vocation took shape as a child. It perhaps has its roots in little Constantino's entrustment to Our Lady – through his mother's initiative: an entrustment that then matured into a more complete gift of self.



However, the reality of the seminary – which the Servant of God attended in Ceneda (Vittorio Veneto) with complete success – lacked the missionary inspiration that he felt was his. So, he turned to the Salesians and it was in the Salesian house at Mogliano Veneto that “'in the small porter's lodge in 1912 with the good Fr Dones that my Salesian and missionary vocation was decided.”

He completed the stages of formation as a religious among the

Sons of Don Bosco, in particular as an aspirant (from October 1912 in Verona), novice (from 24 August 1913 in Ivrea), temporary professed (in 1914) and perpetual professed confrere (from 1 January 1920 in Chioggia). He was ordained a priest in Milan on 15 March 1924. From the time he was admitted to the novitiate, he was described a “’very firm in practice, and well educated.” His marks at the seminary had always been excellent and he did well in the Society of St Francis de Sales.

His preparatory course was marked by compulsory military service. These were the years of the Great War: 1914-1918 (for Italy: 1915-1918). In those moments Vendrame as a cleric did not go backwards; he opened up to his superiors; he kept his commitments. The years of the First World War further forged in him the courage that would be so useful to him in his missions.

## **Missionary of fire**



Fr ConstantineVendrame received the missionary crucifix in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin on 5 October 1924. A few weeks later he embarked from Venice for India: destination Assam, in the North-East. He arrived there in time for Christmas. On a little picture he wrote, “Sacred Heart of Jesus, everything I have confided in you, everything I have hoped for from you and I have not been deceived.” With the confreres, he meditated during the journey on *Meeting the King of Love*: “Everything is here: the whole Gospel, the whole Law. I have loved you [...]”, “I have loved you more than my life, because I gave my life for you – and when one has given one’s life, one has given everything”. This is the programme of his missionary commitment.

Compared to the younger Salesians – who would have completed most of their formation in India – he arrived there already

complete, in full vigour: he was 31 years old and was able to benefit not only from his tough experience in the war, but also from his practical training in the Italian oratories. A beautiful and difficult land awaited him, where paganism of an “animist” stamp dominated and some Protestant sects were openly prejudiced towards the Catholic Church. He chose contact with the people, decided to take the first step: he started with the children, whom he taught to pray and allowed to play. It was these “‘little friends” (a few Catholics, some Protestants, almost all non-Christians) who talked about Jesus and the Catholic missionary in the family, who helped Father Vendrame in his apostolate. He was flanked by his confreres – who over the years would recognise him as the “pioneer” of Salesian missionary activity in Assam – and by valid lay collaborators, trained over time.

Of this early period, traces remain of a missionary of “fire”, animated by the sole interest in the glory of God and the salvation of souls. His style became that of the Apostle to the Gentiles, to whom he would be compared for the propulsive efficacy of his proclamation and the strong attraction of the pagans to Christ. “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!” (cf. 1 Cor 9:16), says Fr Vendrame with his life. He exposed himself to all wear and tear, as long as Christ is proclaimed. Truly for him too “Countless journeys, dangers from the rivers [...], dangers from the pagans [...]; hardship and toil, vigils without number, hunger and thirst, frequent fasting, cold and nakedness” (cf. 2 Cor 11:26-27). The Servant of God became a walker in North-East India with all kinds of dangers; he supported himself with a very meagre diet; he faced late night returns or nights spent almost freezing cold.

### **Always in the trenches**

At the outbreak of the Second World War and in the years that followed, Fr Costantino Vendrame was able to benefit from – at times of particular “environmental” fatigue (military camps; extreme poverty in South India) and “ecclesial” hardship (harsh opposition in North East India) – a whole range of

prior training: in the custody of the Gurkhas; in Deoli; in Dehra Dun; missionary in Wandiwash in Tamil Nadu; in Mawkhar in Assam. In Deoli he was “rector” of the religious in the camp; also in Dehra Dun he set an example.

Liberated at the end of the war, but prevented by political reasons completely foreign to him as a person from returning to Assam, Fr Vendrame – who was over 50 and worn out by privations – was assigned by Louis Mathias, Archbishop of Madras, to Tamil Nadu. There Fr Costantino had to start all over again: once again, he knew how to make himself deeply loved, aware – as he wrote in a 1950 letter to his brother priests in the Diocese of Vittorio Veneto – of the extremely harsh conditions of his missionary mandate:

He was convinced that there was good to be done everywhere and wherever there were souls to be saved. Remaining “ad experimentum”, so as to guarantee continuity to the poor mission, he finally returned to Assam: he could rest, but plans were made to establish a Catholic presence in Mawkhar, a district of Shillong then considered the “fort” of the Protestants.

And it was precisely in Mawkhar that the Servant of God achieved his “masterpiece”: the birth of a Catholic community that is still flourishing today, in which – in years far removed from today’s ecumenical sensibility – the Catholic presence was first harshly opposed, then tolerated, then accepted and finally esteemed. The unity and charity witnessed by Fr Vendrame was for Mawkhar an unprecedented and “scandalous” proclamation, which won over the hardest hearts and attracted the benevolence of many: he had brought the “honey of St Francis”- that is, Salesian loving-kindness, inspired by the gentleness of Salesian – to a land where souls had closed.

### **Towards the finish line**

When pain became insistent, he admitted in a letter: “with difficulty I was able to manage the work of the day.” The last stretch of the earthly journey unfolded. The day arrived when

he asked to check if there was any food left: a unique request for Fr Vendrame, who made himself enough of the essentials and, returning late, never wanted to disturb for dinner. That evening he could not even articulate a few sentences: he was exhausted, aged prematurely. He had kept silent until the very end, prey to an arthritis that also affected his spine.

Hospitalization then loomed, but at Dibrugarh: it would spare him the constant flocking of people; the pain of helplessly witnessing their father's agony. The Servant of God would go so far as to faint from pain: every movement became terrible for him.

Bishop Orestes Marengo – his friend and former cleric, Bishop of Dibrugarh, the Sisters of the Child Mary, some lay people, the medical staff including many nurses, won over by his gentleness.

Everyone recognised him as a true man of God: even non-Christians. Fr Vendrame in his suffering could say, like Jesus "I am not alone, for the Father is with me"(cf. Jn 16:32).

Tried by illness and complications from pneumonia, he died on 30 January 1957 on the eve of the feast of St John Bosco. Just a few days earlier (24 January), in his last letter to his sister Angela he was still thinking of his apostolate, lucid in suffering but a man of hope always.

He was so poor that he did not even have a suitable burial robe: Bishop Marengo gave him one of his own so that he could be more worthily clothed. One witness recounts how handsome Fr Costantino looked in death, even better than in life, finally freed from the "fatigues" and "strains" that had marked so many decades.

After an initial funeral / farewell service in Dibrugarh, the wake and solemn funeral took place in Shillong. The people flocked with so many flowers that it looked like a Eucharistic procession. The crowd was immense, many approached the sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion: this generalised attitude of drawing closer to God, even on the part of those who had turned away from Him, was one of the greatest signs that accompanied Fr Constantine's death.