 Reading time: 5 min.

Alberto Marvelli (1918-1946), a young man formed in the Salesian oratory in Rimini, lived his short life in the daily commitment of service to others, with all the intensity that his strengths allowed. His normal but intensely Christian life led him to sanctity, being beatified in 2004 by Pope Saint John Paul II.

Alberto Marvelli, “engineer of charity”, has the charm of an extraordinarily normal holiness. Alberto’ father was a bank manager father and his family was very Christian. He was born in Ferrara in 1918, but at the age of 13 he and his family settled permanently in Rimini, following his father on his business trips. As a boy his health was health and he had impetuous temperament, but he was also so serious that at times he made one think of a grown man. He went through junior high school amidst study sessions and sensational sports competitions. At the age of 15, he enrolled in the classical high school. But in those very months, the family was hit hard by the death of his father. He was already an aspiring delegate and leader in the oratory at Mary Help of Christians parish. He taught catechism, led meetings, organised the youth mass. At only 18, he became President of Catholic Action. Starting high school, Albert began his Diary and wrote, “God is great, infinitely great, infinitely good.”. But he would record there his growth into manhood and as a Christian throughout his life. There we read of a strict and strong “small regime” that he gave himself. In particular: prayer and meditation in the morning and in the evening, the Eucharist, daily if possible, and struggle against his main faults: laziness, gluttony, impatience, curiosity… A programme that Albert would implement for the whole of his life.

Student commute

Among the 60 candidates for the classical school leaving certificate, Alberto came second. On 1 December 1936 (at the age of 18) he began his first year of engineering at the University of Bologna. Thus began the life of a student commuting between Rimini and Bologna. Study and apostolate in both cities. His aunt’s housekeeper with whom he stayed in Bologna would testify simply, “I used to see him day and night working hard with his uni studies and the apostolate. Sometimes I would find him asleep on his books and with the rosary in his hand. In the morning I would see him in church at 6 a.m. for Mass and Communion. If commitments did not allow him to take communion earlier, he would fast until noon. He imposed a formidable penance on his appetite.”

While Alberto was finishing university, the Second World War broke out over Europe. Italy was also caught up in it. As an engineering graduate, from August to November 1940 Alberto was in Milan, employed at the Bagnagatti foundry, under the first bombings. The industrialist would testify: “He spent a few months with me. He immediately became familiar with all the employees and particularly with the youngest and humblest. He took an interest in the family needs of the workers and pointed out to me the particular needs of each one, soliciting the help he considered appropriate. He visited the sick, encouraged apprentices to attend evening classes. He instilled in everyone an immediate and keen sense of sympathy and warmth.”
30 June 1941. As Italy entered its second year of war, Alberto graduated in industrial engineering with top marks. Soon after, he too put on the grey-green uniform and left to be a soldier.

Military service and the war
In January 1943, the Russians unleashed their offensive on the entire Western Front. The Armir (Italian army in Russia), occupying the front on the Don, was forced into a legendary retreat across the endless frozen fields, while the Russians and the frost were the killers. Raffaello Marvelli had just arrived there and was killed in combat. For Maria, his mother it was a very tough time. Alberto wrote bare, bleeding words in his diary: “War is a punishment for our wickedness, it punishes our lack of love for God and other human beings. The spirit of charity is lacking in the world, and so we hate each other as enemies instead of loving each other as brothers.”
He was destined for barracks in Treviso. And it is here that Marvelli’s “miracle” took place. Fr Zanotto, parish priest of S. Maria di Piave, wrote, “When engineer Marvelli arrived in Treviso, in the barracks with two thousand soldiers, everyone was blaspheming and the underworld reigned. After some time, nobody blasphemed any more, I mean nobody, not even the superiors. The colonel, as a blasphemer, acted to repress blasphemy among the soldiers.” In September, Italy surrendered and Alberto returned home. But the war was not over. German soldiers had occupied Italy, and the allies intensified their bombing of our cities.

Among the refugees in San Marino
On 1 November, Rimini was hit by the first aerial bombardment. It suffered three hundred and was reduced to a carpet of rubble. They had to flee far away, to the free Republic of San Marino. In a few weeks, this postage-stamp-sized piece of free land went from 14 thousand to 120 thousand inhabitants.
Alberto arrived there holding the halter of a donkey. On the buggy was his mother.

Giorgio and Gertrude pushed bicycles laden with food to survive on. They were accepted into one of the dormitories at the Belluzzi college. Other families were in the warehouses of the Republic, many more piled up in the railway tunnels.
It is very easy, at times like these, to close in on oneself, to think about the survival of one's loved ones and that's all. Instead, Alberto was at the centre of care, available to everyone. A witness writes: "In the evening he prayed the rosary loudly in the dormitories at the Belluzzi college, then went got some sleep as best he could at the conventuals; and in the morning, in the church filled with evacuees, he served mass and received communion. Then off again to all the streets and to all the needy. He would take note of the needs, and when he could not go there himself, he would entrust the work to others. He would go into the tunnels from where people did not dare come out." Domenico Mondrone adds: "Every day he would cycle kilometres, collecting food. Sometimes he came home with his haversack punctured by shrapnel bursting from all sides. But with friends who emulated his courage, he did not stop."

They wanted him to be Mayor

21 November 1944. The Allies enter Rimini. All around are villages and woods burning, traffic jams of wagons, trucks, cars. Deaths and desolation. Alberto returned there with his family. He found his house (hit, but still habitable) occupied by British officers. The Marvellis settled into the basement as best they could. In that terrible winter (the last one during the war) Alberto became everybody's servant. The Liberation Committee entrusted him with the housing office, the municipality entrusted him with civil engineering for the reconstruction, the bishop handed him over to the diocese's Catholic graduates. The poor permanently besieged the two small rooms in his office, followed him home when he went to have a bite to eat with his mother. Alberto never turned a single person away. He said, "Let the poor straight in, the others can have the courtesy to wait." After peace, the misery of the people continued. Many had lost everything in the war, 1946 was taken up daily by endless needs, all urgent. Alberto went to Mass, then was on on hand. At the end of that year there were the first local elections. Strong competition between the Communists and Christian Democrats. One Communist, who saw not a Christian Democrat but a Christian in Marvelli every day, said: "Even if my party loses… as long as engineer Marvelli is Mayor." He would not become one. On the evening of 5 October, he dined quickly with his mother, then went out on his bicycle to hold a rally in San Giuliano a Mare. 200 metres from his home, an allied truck running at breakneck speed hit him, throwing him into the garden of a villa and then disappeared into the night. He was picked up by the trolleybus. Two

hours later he died. He was 28 years old. When his coffin passed through the streets, the poor wept and blew kisses. A poster proclaimed in large letters: “The communists of Bellariva bow reverently to greet their son, their brother, who spread so much good on this earth.”

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