 Reading time: 6 min.

On 27 September 2026, in the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna, the Church beatified three young priests killed in the Monte Sole massacre: the Salesian Fr. Elia Comini, the Dehonian Fr. Martino Capelli, and the diocesan priest Fr. Ubaldo Marchioni. Fr. Elia was thirty-four when, on 1 October 1944, he died at the "Botte" in Pioppe di Salvaro, having stayed by his people's side to the very end. Few things remain of him: a black-covered notebook, a rule of life written on the eve of his ordination, and the memories of those who owe him their lives. They are enough to draw out a clear message, addressed to young people, priests, those working for peace and the entire Salesian Family.

Just a few days ago, the Church in Bologna and the Salesian Family took part in a celebration they had long awaited. Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, presided, on behalf of Pope Leo XIV, over the beatification of Fr. Elia Comini, a Salesian, Fr. Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, and Fr. Ubaldo Marchioni, a priest of the Archdiocese of Bologna. They were three young priests: the youngest was twenty-six, the oldest thirty-four. They were killed between 29 September and 1 October 1944, during the Monte Sole massacre in the Bolognese Apennines, where the SS massacred hundreds of civilians, mostly women, elderly people, and children.

Fr. Elia was born in 1910 in Calvenzano di Vergato, in those same mountains. Ordained a priest in 1935, he taught literature at Salesian houses in Chiari and later Treviglio. In the summer of 1944, he returned to Salvaro to be close to his mother and help the elderly parish priest, Monsignor Fidenzio Mellini, in a presbytery that had filled with displaced people. On 29 September, having heard of the massacre at Creda, he rushed there with Fr. Martino to bring the sacraments to the dying. The two were arrested and, on the evening of 1 October, killed alongside other prisoners at the "Botte" of the hemp mill in Pioppe di Salvaro.

A few days after the beatification, it is natural to ask what this young Salesian priest has to say today. From his life and writings, four messages can be drawn, each addressed to a different group.

To young people: leave no one behind, and live a life given for others through the strength of an unarmed heart, capable of love, forgiveness, and hope. Elia began his “dear little notebook”, his personal diary and one of the few “relics” that remain, in Valsalice on 31 December 1927, when he was sixteen and had been a Salesian for only a few months. With this small, black-covered pocket notebook, he learned to educate himself, using it as a mirror:

– **The inner life as an antidote to distraction**. In an age when people’s lives are laid bare on social media, the diary reminds us that there is a private space where we become honest with ourselves and with God. Fr. Elia also encouraged his pupils to keep a personal, private diary where they could freely write down their dreams, learning to know themselves and make mature choices in life.

– **Holiness as a journey, not an improvisation**. The diary shows that giving his life at the Botte in Pioppe was not a sudden heroic act, but the culmination of seventeen years of preparation. Great choices are prepared for through small acts of daily faithfulness.

– **The freedom to obey what is good, even against one’s own wishes**. The final entry, dated 22 July 1944, expresses his longing to return to Treviglio, his Salesian home, while duty kept him in Salvaro. He tells young people that true love sometimes asks them to stay where they would rather not be, because someone there needs them.

To priests: during the spiritual exercises before his priestly ordination in March 1935, Fr. Elia wrote a nine-point Rule of Life, ranging from an aspiration to holiness to reviewing the subjects he had studied. At its heart was responsibility for souls, expressed in a statement that serves as a program for every Salesian priest: “Young people, all young people, will have a special place in my heart.” This Rule of Life is a litmus test of authentic priestly identity, characterized by:

– **Transparency of identity**. Those who approached him were to encounter not the man, but the priest, a servant of Jesus. Not to put oneself on display, but to let Christ shine through;

– **A practical rule of life. S**tudy, prayer, fraternal charity: priestly holiness depends on ordered, verifiable choices, not vague aspirations;

– **Faithfulness to the very end**. At his ordination, he asked Jesus to let him die rather than fail in his priestly vocation. Nine years later, at the “Botte” in Pioppe di Salvaro, those words came to pass;

– **Priestly fraternity**. With Fr. Martino, though they belonged to different congregations, he sought what united them rather than what divided them, choosing cooperation over competition, and putting his youth at the service of an elderly parish priest, Monsignor Mellini. It is a powerful lesson for priests often marked by isolation and weariness.

To those working for peace and reconciliation: the martyrdom of Monte Sole was not reckless heroism. When everyone told Fr. Elia not to go to Creda, where the SS had carried out a massacre, he was so pale he seemed already dead, and asked people to pray for him. Peace is built despite fear, not in its absence.

– **Protecting lives above all**. He hid 60–70 men in a space in the sacristy and pushed a large wardrobe against the door; despite three SS searches, no one was discovered. A peacemaker uses intelligence and practical action, not just good intentions.

– **Going to the victims unarmed**. He set out with Fr. Martino Capelli, carrying a stole, holy oils, and the Eucharist: no weapons, only the signs of mercy. This is the “unarmed hope” of which Pope Leo XIV speaks, a witness that good overcomes evil.

– **Accepting the cost of charity**. When Sister Alberta Taccini asked him why he was a prisoner, he replied: “There’s a price to pay for showing charity.”

– **Not hating, to the very end**. During the execution, he began singing the Litany of Loreto, turning the line of condemned prisoners into a prayerful procession. He shielded a man with his own body, and that man survived, while Father Martino called for forgiveness and traced the sign of the cross over the victims. Their

offering embraced both victims and executioners; to reconcile means not surrendering one's heart to the logic of the enemy. For those working for peace today, amid wars near and far and social polarization, Monte Sole reminds us that the memory of the martyrs belongs to the whole community and calls us always to stand with the victims.

To the Salesian Family: the preventive system put to the test. Fr. Elia shows that reason, religion and loving-kindness still work when the "playground" becomes a war zone.

– **Loving-kindness towards the most vulnerable**. In Chiari and Treviglio, he patiently and kindly supported pupils who were struggling, never humiliating them.

– **Presence and assistance**. In the playground, the youngest pupils would gather around him like chicks around a hen. That same Salesian "assistance" in Salvaro became care for the displaced: his pragmatism, honed over years of looking after others, enabled him to save many lives.

– **Religion as a source, not an ornament**. Before taking action, he had the people pray, invoking the Sacred Heart, Mary Help of Christians, and Don Bosco. In times of trial, the preventive system is not reduced to an educational technique; it remains rooted in faith.

– **A welcoming home**. Salvaro was called the "community of the Ark": two learned priests, teachers of ancient languages, left their lecterns behind to put on the aprons of service. It was the Valdocco oratory adapted to an emergency: a home, parish, school, and playground for those who had lost everything. For Salesian communities working today amid war, migration, and extreme poverty, Fr. Elia proves that the preventive system is not a pedagogy for peaceful times. In difficult moments, it comes down to its very essence, to be present, for and with young people, to the very end.

In short, his resolutions from 1928 sum up everything. His main resolution would be charity, without judging others or considering himself superior, and with gentleness in word and deed. From his diary to his martyrdom, it was the same charity,

growing until it became a total gift of self.

Through the beatification at San Petronio, the Church holds up as a model a thirty-four-year-old Salesian who did what he had promised as a boy in his notebook, and did so even when it cost him his life. Fr. Elia went to the people entrusted to his care and stayed with them. Martyrdom found him there, as he was doing the work of a priest.

Eighty-two years after those days, while other wars continue to strike civilians, the four messages come together as one. To young people, priests, those who build peace and those who educate in the name of Don Bosco, Blessed Elia Comini repeats what he wrote as a boy and affirmed at the Botte in Pioppe: charity comes first. The Salesian Family can entrust its service, wherever it is hardest to remain today, to his intercession and that of Blessed Martino Capelli and Ubaldo Marchioni.

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