 Reading time: 7 min.

Monte Sole is a hill in the Apennines near Bologna that until the Second World War had several small villagesalong its ridges: between 29 September and 5 October 1944, its inhabitants, mostly children, women and the elderly, were the victims of a terrible massacre by *SS* troops (Schutzstaffel, ‘protection squads’; a paramilitary organisation of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party created in Nazi Germany). 780 people died, many of them refugees in churches. Five priests lost their lives, including Father Giovanni Fornasini, proclaimed blessed and martyred in 2021 by Pope Francis.

This is one of the most heinous massacres carried out by the Nazi *SS* in Europe during the Second World War, taking place around Monte Sole in the Marzabotto, Grizzana Morandi and Monzuno (Bologna) areas and commonly known as the ‘Marzabotto massacre’. Among the victims were a number of priests and religious, including Salesian Father Elia Comini, who throughout his life and until the end strove to be a good shepherd and to spend himself unreservedly, generously, going our of himself with no return. This is the true essence of his pastoral charity, which presents him as a model of a shepherd who watches over the flock, ready to give his life for it, in defence of the weak and the innocent.

‘Receive me as an expiatory victim’

Elia Comini was born in Calvenzano di Vergato (Bologna) on 7 May 1910. His parents Claudio, a carpenter, and Emma Limoni, a seamstress, prepared him for life and educated him in the faith. He was baptised in Calvenzano. He made his First Communion and received Confirmation in Salvaro di Grizzana. From an early age he showed great interest in catechism, church services and singing in serene and cheerful friendship with his companions. The archpriest of Salvaro, Monsignor Fidenzio Mellini, as a young soldier in Turin, had attended the Valdocco oratory and had met Don Bosco who had prophesied the priesthood for him. Monsignor Mellini highly regarded Elias for his faith, kindness and unique intellectual abilities and urged him to become one of Don Bosco’s sons. For this reason he directed him to the small Salesian seminary in Finale Emilia (Modena) where Elia attended middle school and upper secondary. In 1925 he entered the Salesian novitiate at Castel De’ Britti (Bologna) and made his religious profession there on 3 October 1926. From 1926-1928 he attended the Salesian high school in Valsalice (Turin), where Don Bosco’s grave was then kept, as a student cleric of philosophy. It was in this place that Elias began a demanding spiritual journey, witnessed by a diary he kept until just over two months before his tragic death. These are pages revealing an inner

life as profound as it was not perceived on the outside. On the eve of the renewal of his vows, he would write: ‘I am more than ever happy on this day, on the eve of the holocaust that I hope will be pleasing to You. Receive me as an expiatory victim, even though I do not deserve it. If you believe, give me some reward: forgive me my sins of the past life; help me to become a saint.’

He completed his practical training as assistant educator in Finale Emilia, Sondrio and Chiari. He graduated in Literature at the State University of Milan. On 16 March 1935 he was ordained a priest in Brescia. He wrote: ‘I asked Jesus: death, rather than failing my priestly vocation; and heroic love for souls’. From 1936 to 1941 he taught Literature in the ‘San Bernardino’ aspirant school in Chiari (Brescia), giving excellent proof of his teaching talent and his attention to young people. In the years 1941-1944 religious obedience transferred him to the Salesian institute in Treviglio (Bergamo). He particularly embodied Don Bosco’s pastoral charity and the traits of Salesian loving-kindness, which he transmitted to the young through his affable character, goodness and smile.

Triduum of passion

The habitual gentleness of his demeanour and heroic dedication to the priestly ministry shone out clearly during the short annual summer stays with his mother, who was left alone in Salvaro, and at his adopted parish, where the Lord would later ask Father Elias for the total gift of his life. Some time earlier he had written in his diary: ‘The thought that I must die always persists in me. Who knows! Let us act as the faithful servant always prepared for the call, to give an account of stewardship’. We are in the period from June to September 1944, when during the terrible situation created in the area between Monte Salvaro and Monte Sole, with the advance of the Allied front line, the Stella Rossa partisan brigade settled on the heights, and the Nazis at risk of being bottling up brought the population to the brink of total destruction.

On 23 July, the Nazis, following the killing of one of their soldiers, began a series of reprisals: ten men were killed, houses set on fire. Father Comini did his utmost to welcome the relatives of those killed and to hide those still wanted. He also helped the elderly parish priest of San Michele di Salvaro, Monsignor Fidenzio Mellini: he taught catechism, led retreats, celebrated, preached, exhorted, played and sing and made people sing to calm down a situation that was heading for the worst. Then, together with Father Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, Father Elias continually rushed to help, console, administer the sacraments and bury the dead. In some cases he even managed to save groups of people by leading them to the rectory. His heroism was manifested with increasing clarity at the end of September

1944, when the *Wehrmacht* (German Armed Forces) largely gave way to the terrible *SS.*

The triduum of passion for Father Elia Comini and Father Martino Capelli began on Friday 29 September. The Nazis caused panic in the Monte Salvaro area and the population poured into the parish in search of protection. Father Comini, risking his life, hid about seventy men in a room adjoining the sacristy, covering the door with an old wardrobe. The ruse succeeded. In fact, the Nazis, searching the various rooms three times, did not notice. In the meantime, news arrived that the terrible *SS* had massacred several dozen people in 'Creda', among whom were wounded and dying people in need of comfort. Father Elias celebrated his last Mass early in the morning and then together with Father Martino, taking the holy oils and the Eucharist, they hurried off in the hope of still being able to help some of the wounded. He did this freely. In fact, everyone dissuaded him: from the parish priest to the women there. 'Don't go, father. It is dangerous!' They tried to hold Father Elias and Father Martino back by force, but they made this decision in full awareness of the danger of death. Father Elias said: 'Pray, pray for me, because I have a mission to fulfil'; 'Pray for me, don't leave me alone!'.

The two priests were captured Near Creda di Salvaro; they were forced to carry ammunition and, in the evening, were locked up in the stable at Pioppe di Salvaro. On Saturday 30 September, Father Elia and Father Martino spent all their energy comforting the many men locked up with them. The Prefect Commissioner of Vergato Emilio Veggetti, who did not know Father Martino, but knew Father Elia very well, tried in vain to obtain the release of the prisoners. The two priests continued to pray and console. In the evening, they heard each other's confession.

The following day, Sunday 1 October 1944, at dusk, the machine-gun inexorably mowed down the 46 victims of what was to go down in history as the 'Massacre of Pioppe di Salvaro': they were the men considered unfit for work; among them, the two priests, young and forced two days earlier to do heavy work. Witnesses who were at a short distance, as the crow flies, from the site of the massacre, could hear the voice of Father Comini leading the Litanies and then heard the sound of gunfire. Fathe Comini, before falling to his death, gave absolution to all and shouted: 'Mercy, mercy!', while Father Capelli got up from the bottom of the barrel and made wide signs of the cross, until he fell back with his arms outstretched on the cross. Nobody could be recovered. After twenty days, the grates were opened and the waters of the Reno swept away the mortal remains, completely losing track of them. In the Botte people died amid blessings and invocations, amid prayers, acts of repentance and forgiveness. Here, as in other places, people died as Christians, with faith, with their hearts turned to God in the

hope of eternal life.

History of the Montesole massacre

Between 29 September and 5 October 1944, 770 people were killed, but overall the victims of the Nazis and Fascists, from the spring of 1944 to the liberation, numbered 955, distributed acrpss 115 different locations within a vast territory that included the municipalities of Marzabotto, Grizzana and Monzuno (and some portions of neighbouring territories). Of these, 216 were children, 316 women, 142 the elderly, 138 the victims recognised partisans, and five were priests whose guilt in the eyes of the Nazis consisted in having been close, with prayer and material aid, to the entire population of Monte Sole during the tragic months of war and military occupation. Together with Father Elia Comini, a Salesian, and Father Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, three priests from the Archdiocese of Bologna were also killed in those tragic days: Father Ubaldo Marchioni, Father Ferdinando Casagrande and Father Giovanni Fornasini. The Cause of Beatification and Canonisation of all five is underway. Father Giovanni, the ‘Angel of Marzabotto’, fell on 13 October 1944. He was twenty-nine years old and his body remained unburied until 1945, when it was found heavily tortured. He was beatified on 26 September 2021. Father Ubaldo died on 29 September, killed by a machine gun on sanctuary of his church in Casaglia; he was 26 years old and had been ordained a priest two years earlier. Nazi soldiers found him and the community intent on praying the rosary. He was killed there, at the foot of the altar. The others – more than 70 – in the nearby cemetery. Father Ferdinando was shot in the back of the head on 9 October, with his sister Giulia; he was 26 years old.