

# Message from Father Fabio Attard on the Feast of the Rector Major

*Dear Confreres, dear Collaborators in our Educative Pastoral Communities, dear young people,*

Allow me to share with you this message that comes from the depths of my heart. I communicate it with all the affection, appreciation and esteem I have for each and every one of you as you are engaged in the mission of being educators, pastors and animators of young people on all continents.

We are all aware that the education of young people increasingly requires significant adult figures, people with a solid moral backbone, capable of transmitting hope and vision for their future.

While we are all committed to walking with young people, welcoming them into our homes, offering them educational opportunities of every kind and type, in the variety of environments in which we work, we are also aware of the cultural, social and economic challenges we face.

Alongside these challenges, which are part of every pastoral educational process, since it is always a continuous dialogue with earthly realities, we recognise that, as a consequence of situations of wars and armed conflicts in various parts of the world, the call we are living is becoming more complex and difficult. All this has an effect on the commitment we are carrying out. Yet, it is encouraging to see that despite the difficulties we face, we are determined to continue living our mission with conviction.

In recent months, the message of Pope Francis and now the words of Pope Leo XIV have continually invited the world to face this painful situation, which seems like a

spiral that is growing at an alarming rate. We know that wars never bring peace. We are aware, and some of us are experiencing it first-hand, that every armed conflict and every war brings suffering, pain and increases all kinds of poverty. We all know that those who ultimately pay the price for such situations are the displaced, the elderly, children and young people who find themselves without a present and without a future.

For this reason, dear confreres, dear collaborators and young people throughout the world, I would kindly ask you that on the feast of the Rector Major, which is a tradition dating back to the time of Don Bosco, every community around the feast day of the Rector Major celebrate the Holy Eucharist for peace.

It is an invitation to prayer that finds its source in the sacrifice of Christ, crucified and risen. A prayer as a testimony so that no one remains indifferent in a world situation shaken by a growing number of conflicts.

This is our gesture of solidarity with all those, especially Salesians, lay people and young people, who at this particular moment, with great courage and determination, continue to live the Salesian mission in situations marked by war. They are Salesians, lay people and young people who ask for and appreciate the solidarity of the whole Congregation, human solidarity, spiritual solidarity, charismatic solidarity.

While I and the entire General Council are doing everything possible to be very close to everyone in a concrete way, I believe that at this particular moment, such a sign of closeness and encouragement should be given by the whole Congregation.

To you, our dear brothers and sisters in Myanmar, Ukraine, the Middle East, Ethiopia, East of Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Haiti and Central America, we want to say loudly that we are with you. We thank you for your witness. We assure you of our human and spiritual closeness.

We continue to pray for the gift of peace. We

continue to pray for our confreres, lay people and young people who in very challenging situations continue to hope and pray for peace to emerge. Their example, their self-giving and their belonging to the charism of Don Bosco are a powerful witness for us. They, together with many consecrated persons, priests and committed lay people, are modern martyrs, living witnesses engaged in education and evangelisation who, despite everything, as true shepherds and ministers of evangelical charity, continue to love, believe and hope for a better future.

All of us accept this call to solidarity with all our hearts. Thank you.

*Prot. 25/0243 Rome, 24 June 2025*

*don Fabio ATTARD,*

*Rector Major*

*Foto: shutterstock.com*

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## **Don Bosco's devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus**

*Don Bosco's devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus originated from the revelations to Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque in the monastery of Paray-le-Monial: Christ, showing his pierced Heart crowned with thorns, asked for a feast of reparation on the Friday after the Octave of Corpus Christi. Despite opposition, the cult spread because that Heart, the seat of divine love, recalls the charity manifested on the cross and in the Eucharist. Don Bosco invites young people to honour it constantly, especially in the month of June, by reciting the Crown and performing acts of reparation that obtain copious*

*indulgences and the twelve promises of peace, mercy, and holiness.*

Devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, which is growing every day, listen dear young people, to how it originated. There lived in France, in the monastery of the Visitation in Paray-le-Monial, a humble virgin named Margaret Alacoque, dear to God for her great purity. One day, while she was standing before the Blessed Sacrament to adore the blessed Jesus, she saw her Heavenly Spouse in the act of uncovering his breast and showing her his Most Sacred Heart, radiant with flames, surrounded by thorns, pierced by a wound, and surmounted by a cross. At the same time, she heard Him complain of the monstrous ingratitude of men and ordered her to work to ensure that on the Friday after the Octave of *Corpus Christi*, special worship would be given to His Divine Heart in reparation for the offences He receives in the Most Holy Eucharist. The pious virgin, filled with confusion, explained to Jesus how unfit she was for such a great undertaking, but she was comforted by the Lord to continue her work, and the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was established despite the fierce opposition of her adversaries.

There are many reasons for this devotion: 1) Because Jesus Christ offered us His Sacred Heart as the seat of His affections; 2) Because it is a symbol of the immense charity He showed especially by allowing His Most Sacred Heart to be wounded by a lance; 3) Because from this Heart the faithful are moved to meditate on the sufferings of Jesus Christ and to profess their gratitude to Him.

Let us therefore constantly honour this Divine Heart, which, for the many and great benefits it has already bestowed upon us and will bestow upon us, well deserves all our most humble and loving veneration.

## **Month of June**

Those who consecrate the entire month of June to the honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with some daily

prayer or devout act will gain seven years of indulgence for each day and a Plenary indulgence at the end of the month.

### **Chaplet to the Sacred Heart of Jesus**

Intend to recite this Crown to the Divine Heart of Jesus Christ to make reparation for the outrages He receives in the Most Holy Eucharist from infidels, heretics, and bad Christians. Say it alone or with other people gathered together, if possible before an image of the Divine Heart or before the Blessed Sacrament:

*V. Deus, in adiutorium meum intende* (O God, come to my aid).

*R. Domine ad adjuvandum me festina* (Lord, make haste to help me).

*Glory be to the Father, etc.*

1. O most lovable Heart of my Jesus, I humbly adore your sweet kindness, which you show in a special way in the Divine Sacrament to souls who are still sinners. I am sorry to see you so ungratefully repaid, and I intend to make up for the many offences you receive in the Most Holy Eucharist from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

*Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.*

2. O most humble Heart of my Sacramental Jesus, I adore your profound humility in the Divine Eucharist, hiding yourself for our love under the species of bread and wine. I beg you, my Jesus, to instil this beautiful virtue in my heart; meanwhile, I will endeavour to make reparation for the many offences you receive in the Most Holy Sacrament from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

*Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.*

3. O Heart of my Jesus, so eager to suffer, I adore those desires so ardent to encounter your most painful Passion and to subject yourself to those wrongs foreseen by you in the Blessed Sacrament. Ah, my Jesus! I truly intend to make reparation with my very life; I would like to prevent

those offences which you unfortunately receive in the Most Holy Eucharist from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

*Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.*

4. O most patient Heart of my Jesus, I humbly venerate your invincible patience in enduring so many pains on the Cross and so many abuses in the Divine Eucharist for love of me. O my dear Jesus! Since I cannot wash with my blood those places where you were so mistreated in both Mysteries, I promise you, O my Supreme Good, to use every means to make reparation to your Divine Heart for the many outrages you receive in the Most Holy Eucharist from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

*Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.*

5. O Heart of my Jesus, most loving of our souls in the admirable institution of the Most Holy Eucharist, I humbly adore that immense love which you bear us in giving us your Divine Body and Divine Blood as our nourishment. What heart is there that should not be consumed at the sight of such immense charity? O my good Jesus, give me abundant tears to weep and make reparation for the many offences you receive in the Most Holy Sacrament from heretics, infidels, and bad Christians.

*Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.*

6. O Heart of my Jesus, thirsting for our salvation, I humbly venerate that most ardent love which prompted you to perform the ineffable Sacrifice of the Cross, renewing it every day on the Altars in the Holy Mass. Is it possible that the human heart, filled with gratitude, should not burn with such love? Yes, alas, my God; but for the future I promise to do all I can to make reparation for the many outrages you receive in this Mystery of love from heretics, infidels and bad Christians.

*Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be.*

Whoever recites even the above 6 *Our Fathers*, *Hail Marys*, and *Glory's* before the Blessed Sacrament, the last *Our Father*, *Hail Mary*, and *Glory be*, being said according to the intention of the Supreme Pontiff, will gain 300 days of Indulgence each time.

**Promises made by Jesus Christ  
to Blessed Margaret Alacoque for the devotees of his Divine  
Heart**

I will give them all the graces necessary in their state of life.

I will make peace reign in their families.

I will console them in all their afflictions.

I will be their safe refuge in life, but especially at the hour of death.

I will fill every undertaking with blessings.

Sinners will find in my Heart the source and infinite ocean of mercy.

Lukewarm souls will become fervent.

Fervent souls will quickly rise to great perfection.

I will bless the house where the image of my Sacred Heart is exposed and honoured.

I will give priests the gift of moving the most hardened hearts.

The names of those who propagate this devotion will be written in my Heart and will never be erased.

**Act of reparation against blasphemies.**

God be blessed.

Blessed be His Holy Name.

Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true Man.

Blessed be the Name of Jesus.

Blessed be Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.

Blessed be His Most Loving Heart.

Blessed be the great Mother of God, Mary Most Holy.

Blessed be the Name of Mary, Virgin and Mother.

Blessed be her Holy and Immaculate Conception.

Blessed be God in His Angels and in His Saints.

An indulgence of *one year* is granted for each time: and *Plenary* to those who recite it for a month, on the day they make Holy Confession and Communion.

### **Offered to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus before His Holy Image**

I, NN., to be grateful to You and to make reparation for my infidelities, I give You my heart and consecrate myself entirely to You, my beloved Jesus, and with your help I resolve never to sin again.

Pope Pius VII granted one hundred days of indulgence once a day, reciting it with a contrite heart, and a plenary indulgence once a month to those who recite it every day.

### **Prayer to the Most Sacred Heart of Mary**

God save you, Most August Queen of Peace, Mother of God; through the Most Sacred Heart of your Son Jesus, Prince of Peace, may His wrath be appeased and may He reign over us in peace. Remember, O Most Pious Virgin Mary, that it has never been heard in the world that anyone who implores your favours has been rejected or abandoned by you. Encouraged by this confidence, I present myself to you: do not despise my prayers, O Mother of the Eternal Word, but hear them favourably and grant them, O Clement, O Pious, O Sweet Virgin Mary.

Pius IX granted an indulgence of 300 days each time this prayer is recited devoutly, and a plenary indulgence once a month to those who recite it every day.



O Jesus, burning with love,  
I never wanted to offend You;  
O my sweet and good Jesus,  
I never want to offend You again.

Sacred Heart of Mary,  
Save my soul.  
Sacred Heart of my Jesus,  
Make me love you more and more.

To you I give my heart,  
Mother of my Jesus – Mother of love.

*(Source: 'Il Giovane Provveduto' (The Young Provided for') the practice of his duties in the exercises of Christian piety for the recitation of the Office of the b. Virgin of vespers all year round and the office of the dead with the addition of a choice of sacred lauds, per Priest John Bosco, 101a edition, Turin, 1885, Salesian Printing and Bookstore, S. Benigno Canavese – S. Per d'Arena – Lucca – Nizza Marittima – Marsiglia – Montevideo – Buenos-Aires', pp. 119-124 [Published Works, pp. 247-253])*

*Photo: Gilded bronze statue of the Sacred Heart on the bell tower of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, a gift from former Salesian students of Argentina. Erected in 1931, it was crafted in Milan by Riccardo Politi based on a design by sculptor Enrico Cattaneo of Turin.*

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# **Educating the Human Heart**

# with Saint Francis de Sales

*St. Francis de Sales places the heart at the centre of human formation, as the seat of will, love, and freedom. Drawing from the biblical tradition and engaging with the philosophy and science of his time, the Bishop of Geneva identifies the will as the “master faculty” capable of governing passions and senses, while affections—especially love—fuel its inner dynamism. Salesian education therefore aims to transform desires, choices, and resolutions into a path of self-mastery, where gentleness and firmness come together to guide the whole person toward the good.*

At the centre and pinnacle of the human person, Saint Francis de Sales places the heart, to the point that he says: “Whoever conquers the heart of a man conquers the whole man.” In Salesian anthropology, one cannot help but notice the abundant use of the term and concept of the *heart*. This is even more surprising because among the humanists of the time, steeped in languages and thoughts drawn from antiquity, there does not seem to be a particular emphasis on this symbol.

On one hand, this phenomenon can be explained by the common, universal use of the noun “*heart*” to designate the inner self of a person, especially in reference to their sensitivity. On the other hand, Francis de Sales owes much to the biblical tradition, which considers the heart as the seat of the highest faculties of man, such as love, will, and intelligence.

To these considerations, one might perhaps add contemporary anatomical research concerning the *heart* and blood circulation. What is important for us is to clarify the meaning that Francis de Sales attributed to the heart, starting from his vision of the human person whose centre and apex are will, love, and freedom.

## **The Will, the Master Faculty**

Alongside the faculties of the spirit, such as

intellect and memory, we remain within the realm of knowing. Now it is time to delve into that of acting. As Saint Augustine and certain philosophers like Duns Scotus had already done, Francis de Sales assigns the first place to the will, probably under the influence of his Jesuit teachers. It is the will that must govern all the "powers" of the soul.

It is significant that the *Teotimo* begins with the chapter titled: "How, because of the beauty of human nature, God gave the will the governance of all the faculties of the soul." Quoting Saint Thomas, Francis de Sales affirms that man has "full power over every kind of accident and event" and that "the wise man, that is, the man who follows reason, will become the absolute master of the stars." Along with intellect and memory, the will is "the third soldier of our spirit and the strongest of all, because nothing can overpower the free will of man; even God who created it does not want to force or violate it in any way."

However, the will exercises its authority in very different ways, and the obedience due to it is considerably variable. Thus, some of our limbs, not hindered from moving, obey the will without problem. We open and close our mouths, move our tongues, hands, feet, eyes at our pleasure and as much as we want. The will exerts power over the functioning of the five senses, but it is an indirect power: to not see with the eyes, I must turn them away or close them; to practice abstinence, I must command the hands not to bring food to the mouth.

The will can and must dominate the sensitive appetite with its twelve passions. Although it tends to behave like "a rebellious, seditious, restless subject," the will can and must sometimes dominate it, even at the cost of a long struggle. The will also has power over the higher faculties of the spirit, memory, intellect, and imagination, because it is the will that decides to apply the spirit to this or that object and to divert it from this or that thought; but it cannot regulate and make them obey without difficulty, since the imagination is extremely "changeable and fickle."

But how does the will function? The answer is relatively easy if one refers to the Salesian model of meditation or mental prayer, with its three parts: "considerations," "affections," and "resolutions." The first consist of reflecting and meditating on a good, a truth, a value. Such reflection normally produces affections, that is, strong desires to acquire and possess that good or value, and these affections are capable of "moving the will." Finally, the will, once "moved," produces the "resolutions."

### **The "affections" that move the will**

The will, being considered by Francis de Sales as an "appetite," is an "affective faculty." But it is a rational appetite, not a sensitive or sensual one. The appetite produces motions, and while those of the sensitive appetite are ordinarily called "passions," those of the will are called "affections," as they "*press*" or "*move*" the will. The author of the *Teotimo* also calls the former "passions of the body" and the latter "affections of the heart." Moving from the sensitive realm to the rational one, the twelve passions of the soul transform into reasonable affections.

In the different meditation models proposed in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the author invites Filotea, through a series of vivid and meaningful expressions, to cultivate all forms of voluntary affections: love of the good ("turn one's heart toward," "become attached," "embrace," "cling," "join," "unite"); *hatred* of evil ("detest," "break every bond," "trample"); *desire* ("aspire," "implore," "invoke," "beg"); *flight* ("despise," "separate," "distance," "remove," "abjure"); *hope* ("come on then! Oh my heart!"); *despair* ("oh! my unworthiness is great!"); *joy* ("rejoice," "take pleasure"); *sadness* ("grieve," "be confused," "lower oneself," "humble oneself"); *anger* ("reproach," "push away," "root out"); *fear* ("tremble," "frighten the soul"); *courage* ("encourage," "strengthen"); and

finally *triumph* ("exalt," "glorify").

The Stoics, deniers of the passions—but wrongly—admitted the existence of these reasonable affections, which they called "*eupathies*" or good passions. They affirmed "that the wise man did not lust, but willed; that he did not feel joy, but gladness; that he was not subject to fear, but was prudent and cautious; therefore, he was driven only by reason and according to reason."

Recognizing the role of affections in the decision-making process seems indispensable. It is significant that the meditation intended to culminate in resolutions reserves a central role for them. In certain cases, explains the author of the *Filotea*, one can almost omit or shorten the considerations, but the affections must never be missing because they are what motivate the resolutions. When a good affection arises, he wrote, "one must let it run free and not insist on following the method I have indicated," because considerations are made only to excite the affection.

### **Love, the First and Principal "Affection"**

For Saint Francis de Sales, love always appears first both in the list of passions and in that of affections. What is love? Jean-Pierre Camus asked his friend, the bishop of Geneva, who replied: "Love is the first passion of our sensitive appetite and the first affection of the rational one, which is the will; since our will is nothing other than the love of good, and love is willing the good."

Love governs the other affections and enters the heart first: "Sadness, fear, hope, hatred, and the other affections of the soul do not enter the heart unless love drags them along." Following Saint Augustine, for whom "to live is to love," the author of the *Teotimo* explains that the other eleven affections that populate the human heart depend on love: "Love is the life of our heart [...]. All our affections follow our love, and according to it we *desire, delight, hope and despair, fear, encourage ourselves, hate, flee, grieve, get angry, feel triumphant.*"

Curiously, the will has primarily a passive dimension, while love is the active power that moves and stirs. The will does not decide unless it is moved by a predominant stimulus: love. Taking the example of iron attracted by a magnet, one must say that the will is the iron and love the magnet.

To illustrate the dynamism of love, the author of the *Teotimo* also uses the image of a tree. With botanical precision, he analyses the "five main parts" of love, which is "like a beautiful tree, whose root is the suitability of the will with the good, the stump is pleasure, the trunk is tension, the branches are the searches, attempts, and other efforts, but only the fruit is union and enjoyment."

Love imposes itself even on the will. Such is the power of love that, for the one who loves, nothing is difficult, "for love nothing is impossible." Love is as strong as death, repeats Francis de Sales with the *Song of Songs*; or rather, love is stronger than death. Upon reflection, man is worth only for love, and all human powers and faculties, especially the will, tend toward it: "God wants man only for the soul, and the soul only for the will, and the will only for love."

To explain his thought, the author of the *Teotimo* resorts to the image of the relationship between man and woman, as it was codified and lived in his time. The young woman, from among the suitors can choose the one she likes best. But after marriage, she loses her freedom and, from mistress, becomes subject to the authority of her husband, remaining bound to the one she herself chose. Thus, the will, which has the choice of love, after embracing one, remains subject to it.

### **The struggle of the will for inner freedom**

To will is to choose. As long as one is a child, one is still entirely dependent and incapable of choosing, but as one grows up, things soon change and choices become unavoidable. Children are neither good nor bad because they are not able to choose between good and evil. During

childhood, they walk like those leaving a city and for a while go straight ahead; but after a while, they discover that the road splits in two directions; it is up to them to choose the right or left path at will, to go where they want.

Usually, choices are difficult because they require giving up one good for another. Typically, the choice must be made between what one feels and what one wants, because there is a great difference between feeling and consenting. The young man tempted by a "loose woman," as Saint Jerome speaks of, had his imagination "exceedingly occupied by such a voluptuous presence," but he overcame the trial with a pure act of superior will. The will, besieged on all sides and pushed to give its consent, resisted sensual passion.

Choice also arises in the face of other passions and affections: "Trample underfoot your sensations, distrusts, fears, aversions," advises Francis de Sales to someone he guided, asking them to side with "inspiration and reason against instinct and aversion." Love uses the strength of the will to govern all faculties and all passions. It will be an "armed love," and such armed love will subdue our passions. This free will "resides in the highest and most spiritual part of the soul" and "depends on nothing but God and oneself; and when all other faculties of the soul are lost and subjected to the enemy, only it remains master of itself so as not to consent in any way."

However, choice is not only about the goal to be reached but also about the intention that governs the action. This is an aspect to which Francis de Sales is particularly sensitive because it touches on the quality of acting. Indeed, the pursued end gives meaning to the action. One can decide to perform an act for many reasons. Unlike animals, "man is so master of his human and reasonable actions as to perform them all for an end"; he can even change the natural end of an action by adding a secondary end, "as when, besides the intention to help the poor to whom alms are given, he adds the intention to oblige the indigent to do the same." Among pagans, intentions were rarely disinterested, and in us,

intentions can be tainted “by pride, vanity, temporal interest, or some other bad motive.” Sometimes “we pretend to want to be last and sit at the end of the table, but to pass with more honour to the head of the table.”

“Let us then purify, Teotimo, while we can, all our intentions,” asks the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Good intention “animates” the smallest actions and simple daily gestures. Indeed, “we reach perfection not by doing many things, but by doing them with a pure and perfect intention.” One must not lose heart because “one can always correct one’s intention, purify it, and improve it.”

### **The fruit of the will is “resolutions”**

After highlighting the passive character of the will, whose first property consists in being drawn toward the good presented by reason, it is appropriate to show its active aspect. Saint Francis de Sales attaches great importance to the distinction between affective will and effective will, as well as between affective love and effective love. Affective love resembles a father’s love for the younger son, “a little charming child still a baby, very gentle,” while the love shown to the elder son, “a grown man now, a good and noble soldier,” is of another kind. “The latter is loved with effective love, while the little one is loved with affective love.”

Similarly, speaking of the “steadfastness of the will,” the bishop of Geneva states that one cannot be content with “sensible steadfastness”; an “effective steadfastness” located in the higher part of the spirit is necessary. The time comes when one must no longer “speculate with reasoning,” but “harden the will.” “Whether our soul is sad or joyful, overwhelmed by sweetness or bitterness, at peace or disturbed, bright or dark, tempted or calm, full of pleasure or disgust, immersed in dryness or tenderness, burned by the sun or refreshed by dew,” it does not matter; a strong will is not easily diverted from its purposes. “Let us remain firm in our purposes, inflexible in our resolutions,” asks the author



of *Filotea*. It is the master faculty on which the value of the person depends: "The whole world is worth less than one soul, and a soul is worth nothing without our good purposes."

The noun "resolution" indicates a decision reached at the end of a process involving reasoning with its capacity to discern and the heart, understood as an affectivity moved by an attractive good. In the "authentic declaration" that the author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* invites *Filotea* to pronounce, it reads: "This is my will, my intention, and my decision, inviolable and irrevocable, a will that I confess and confirm without reservations or exceptions." A meditation that does not lead to concrete acts would be useless.

In the ten *Meditations* proposed as a model in the first part of *Filotea*, we find frequent expressions such as: "I want," "I no longer want," "yes, I will follow inspirations and advice," "I will do everything possible," "I want to do this or that," "I will make this or that effort," "I will do this or that thing," "I choose," "I want to take part," or "I want to take the required care."

The will of Francis de Sales often assumes a passive aspect; here, however, it reveals all its extremely active dynamism. It is therefore not without reason that one has spoken of Salesian voluntarism.

### **Francis de Sales, educator of the human heart**

Francis de Sales has been considered an "admirable educator of the will." To say he was an admirable educator of the human heart means roughly the same thing but with the addition of an affective nuance, characteristic of the Salesian conception of the heart. As we have seen, he neglected no component of the human being: the body with its senses, the soul with its passions, the spirit with its faculties, particularly intellectual. But what matters most to him is the human heart, about which he wrote to a correspondent: "It is therefore necessary to cultivate with great care this beloved heart and spare nothing that can be useful to its happiness."

Now, the human heart is “restless,” according to Saint Augustine’s saying, because it is full of unfulfilled desires. It seems never to have “rest or tranquillity.” Francis de Sales then proposes an education of desires as well. A. Ravier also spoke of a “discernment or a politics of desire.” Indeed, the main enemy of the will “is the quantity of desires we have for this or that thing. In short, our will is so full of demands and projects that very often it does nothing but waste time considering them one after another or even all together, instead of getting to work to realize the most useful one.”

A good teacher knows that to lead his pupil toward the proposed goal, whether knowledge or virtue, it is essential to present a project that mobilizes his energies. Francis de Sales proves to be a master in the art of motivation, as he teaches his “daughter,” Jeanne de Chantal, one of his favourite maxims: “One must do everything for love and nothing by force.” In the *Teotimo*, he states that “joy opens the heart as sadness closes it.” Love is indeed the life of the heart.

However, strength must not be lacking. To the young man about to “set sail on the vast sea of the world,” the bishop of Geneva advised “a vigorous heart” and “a noble heart,” capable of governing desires. Francis de Sales wants a sweet and peaceful heart, pure, indifferent, a “heart stripped of affections” incompatible with the vocation, a “right” heart, “relaxed and without any constraint.” He does not like the “tenderness of heart” that amounts to self-seeking and instead requires “firmness of heart” in action. “To a strong heart, nothing is impossible,” he writes to a lady, encouraging her not to abandon “the course of holy resolutions.” He wants a “manly heart” and at the same time a heart “docile, malleable, and submissive, yielding to all that is permitted and ready to take on every commitment out of obedience and charity”; a “sweet heart toward others and humble before God,” “nobly proud” and “perpetually humble,” “sweet and peaceful.”

Ultimately, the education of the will aims at full self-mastery, which Francis de Sales expresses through an image: to take the heart in hand, to possess the heart or soul. “The

great joy of man, *Filotea*, is to possess his own soul; and the more patience becomes perfect, the more perfectly we possess our soul." This does not mean insensitivity, absence of passions or affections, but rather a striving for self-mastery. It is a path directed toward self-autonomy, guaranteed by the supremacy of the will, free and reasonable, but an autonomy governed by sovereign love.

*Photo: Portrait of Saint Francis de Sales in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome. Oil painting by Roman artist Attilio Palombi, donated by Cardinal Lucido Maria Parocchi.*

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## **The Venerable Father Carlo Crespi “witness and pilgrim of hope”**

*ather Carlo Crespi, a Salesian missionary in Ecuador, lived his life dedicated to faith and hope. In recent years, in the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians, he consoled the faithful, instilling optimism even in times of crisis. His exemplary practice of the theological virtues, highlighted by the testimony of those who knew him, was also expressed in his commitment to education. By founding schools and institutes, he offered young people new perspectives. His example of resilience and dedication continues to illuminate the spiritual and human path of the community. His legacy endures and inspires generations of believers.*

In the last years of his life, Father Carlo Crespi (Legnano, May 29, 1891 – Cuenca, April 30, 1982), a Salesian missionary in Ecuador, having gradually put aside the academic

aspirations of his youth, surrounded himself with essentiality, and his spiritual growth appeared unstoppable. He was seen in the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians spreading devotion to the Virgin, confessing and advising endless lines of faithful, for whom schedules, meals, and even sleep no longer matter. Just as he had done in an exemplary manner throughout his life, he kept his gaze fixed on eternal goods, which now appeared closer than ever.

He had that eschatological hope that is linked to the expectations of man in life and beyond death, significantly influencing his worldview and daily behaviour. According to Saint Paul, hope is an indispensable ingredient for a life that is given, that grows by collaborating with others and developing one's freedom. The future thus becomes a collective task that makes us grow as people. His presence invites us to look to the future with a sense of confidence, resourcefulness, and connection with others.

This was the hope of the Venerable Father Crespi! A great virtue that, like the arms of a yoke, supports faith and charity: like the transverse arm of the Cross. It is a throne of salvation. It is the support of the healing serpent raised by Moses in the desert; a bridge of the soul to take flight in the light.

The uncommon level reached by Father Crespi in the practice of all the virtues was highlighted, in a concordant manner, by the witnesses heard during the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification, but it also emerges from the careful analysis of the documents and the biographical events regarding Father Carlo Crespi. The exercise of Christian virtues on his part was, according to those who knew him, not only extraordinary, but also constant throughout his long life. People followed him faithfully because in his daily life the exercise of the theological virtues shone through almost naturally, among which hope stood out in a particular way in the many moments of difficulty. He sowed hope in the hearts of people and lived this virtue to the highest degree.

When the "Cornelio Merchan" school was destroyed

in a fire, to the people who rushed in tears before the smoking ruins, he, also weeping, manifested a constant and uncommon hope, encouraging everyone: *"Pachilla is no more, but we will build a better one and the children will be happier and more content."* From his lips never came a word of bitterness or sorrow for what had been lost.

At the school of Don Bosco and Mamma Margherita, he lived and witnessed hope in fullness because, trusting in the Lord and hoping in Divine Providence, he carried out great works and services without a budget, even if he never lacked money. He had no time to agitate or despair, his positive attitude gave confidence and hope to others.

Fr. Carlo was often described as a man with a heart rich in optimism and hope in the face of the great sufferings of life, because he was inclined to relativise human events, even the most difficult ones. In the midst of his people, he was a witness and pilgrim of hope in the journey of life!

In order to understand how and in what areas of the Venerable's life the virtue of hope found concrete expression, the account that Father Carlo Crespi himself makes in a letter sent from Cuenca in 1925 to the Rector Major Fr. Filippo Rinaldi is also quite edifying. In it, accepting his insistent request, he relates an episode he experienced firsthand, when, in consoling a Kivaro woman for the premature loss of her son, he announces the good news of life without end. *"Moved to tears, I approached the venerable daughter of the forest with her hair loose in the wind: I assured her that her son had died well, that before dying he had only the name of his distant mother on his lips, and that he had been buried in a specially made coffin, his soul certainly having been gathered by the great God in Paradise [...]. I was therefore able to exchange some words calmly, casting into that broken heart the sweet balm of faith and Christian hope."*

Practicing the virtue of hope grew parallel to the practice of the other Christian virtues, encouraging them: he was a man rich in faith, hope, and charity.

When the socio-economic situation in Cuenca in the 20th century worsened considerably, creating significant repercussions on the lives of the population, he had the intuition to understand that by forming young people from a human, cultural, and spiritual point of view, he would sow in them the hope for a better life and future, helping to change the fate of the entire society.

Father Crespi, therefore, undertook numerous initiatives in favour of the youth of Cuenca, starting first of all with school education. The Salesian Popular School "Cornelio Merchán"; the Normal Orientalist College for Salesian teachers; the founding of schools of arts and crafts – which later became the "*Técnico Salesiano*" and the Higher Technological Institute, culminating in the Salesian Polytechnic University – confirm the desire of the Servant of God to offer the Cuenca population better and more numerous prospects for spiritual, human, and professional growth. The young and the poor, considered first of all as children of God destined for eternal beatitude, were therefore reached by Father Crespi through a human and social promotion capable of flowing into a broader dynamic, that of salvation.

All this was carried out by him with few economic means, but abundant hope in the future of young people. He worked actively without losing sight of the ultimate goal of his mission: to attain eternal life. It is precisely in this sense that Father Carlo Crespi understood the theological virtue of hope, and it is through this perspective that his entire priesthood was based.

The reaffirmation of eternal life was undoubtedly one of the central themes addressed in the writings of Father Carlo Crespi. This fact allows us to grasp the evident importance he assigned to the virtue of hope. This fact clearly shows how the practice of this virtue constantly permeated the earthly path of the Servant of God.

Not even illness could extinguish the inexhaustible hope that always animated Father Crespi.

Shortly before ending his earthly existence, Fr.

Carlo asked that a Crucifix be placed in his hands. His death occurred on April 30, 1982, at 5:30 p.m. in the Santa Inés Clinic in Cuenca due to bronchopneumonia and a heart attack.

The personal physician of the Venerable Servant of God, who for 25 years and until his death, was a direct witness to the serenity and awareness with which Father Crespi, who had always lived with his gaze turned to Heaven, lived the long-awaited encounter with Jesus.

In the process he testified: *“For me, a special sign is precisely that attitude of having communicated with us in a simply human act, laughing and joking and, when – I say – he saw that the doors of eternity were open and perhaps the Virgin was waiting for him, he silenced us and made us all pray.”*

Carlo Riganti

President of the Carlo Crespi Association

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## **The Evangelical Radicality of Blessed Stefano Sándor**

*Stefano Sándor (Szolnok 1914 – Budapest 1953) was a Salesian coadjutor martyr. A cheerful and devout young man, he studied metallurgy before joining the Salesians, becoming a master printer and mentor to boys. He enlivened youth centres, founded Catholic Workers' Youth, and transformed trenches and construction sites into “festive oratories”. When the communist regime confiscated Church institutions, he continued educating and saving young people and machinery in secret. Arrested, he was hanged on 8 June 1953. Rooted in the Eucharist and devotion to Mary, he embodied the Gospel radicalism of Don Bosco through educational dedication,*

*courage, and unshakable faith. Beatified by Pope Francis in 2013, he remains a model of Salesian lay holiness.*

## **1. Biographical Notes**

Sándor Stefano was born in Szolnok, Hungary, on 26 October 1914, to Stefano and Maria Fekete, the first of three brothers. His father was an employee of the State Railways, while his mother was a housewife. Both instilled a deep religiosity in their children. Stefano studied in his hometown, obtaining a diploma as a metallurgical technician. From a young age, he was respected by his peers; he was cheerful, serious, and kind. He helped his younger siblings study and pray, setting an example himself. He fervently received Confirmation, committing to imitate his patron saint and Saint Peter. He served daily Mass with the Franciscan Fathers, receiving the Eucharist.

While reading the *Salesian Bulletin*, he learned about Don Bosco. He felt immediately drawn to the Salesian charism. He discussed it with his spiritual director, expressing his desire to enter the Salesian Congregation. He also spoke to his parents about it. They denied him consent and tried in every way to dissuade him. But Stefano managed to convince them, and in 1936 he was accepted at the *Clarisseum*, the Salesians' headquarters in Budapest, where he spent two years in the Aspirantate. He attended printing courses at "Don Bosco" printing house. He began the novitiate but had to interrupt it due to being called to arms.

In 1939, he obtained his final discharge and, after a year of novitiate, made his first Profession on 8 September 1940, as a Salesian Coadjutor. Assigned to the Clarisseum, he actively engaged in teaching in vocational courses. He was also responsible for assisting at the oratory, which he led with enthusiasm and competence. He was the promoter of the Catholic Youth Workers. His group was recognized as the best in the movement. Following Don Bosco's example, he proved to be a model educator. In 1942, he was



called back to the front and earned a silver medal for military valor. The trench was for him a festive oratory that he animated in a Salesian manner, encouraging his fellow soldiers. At the end of World War II, he committed himself to the material and moral reconstruction of society, dedicating himself particularly to the poorest youth, gathering them to teach them a trade. On July 24, 1946, he made his perpetual profession. In 1948, he obtained the title of master-printer. At the end of his studies, Stefano's students were hired in the best printing houses in Budapest and Hungary.

When the State, under Mátyás Rákosi, confiscated ecclesiastical property in 1949 and began persecuting Catholic schools, which had to close their doors, Sándor tried to save what could be saved, at least some printing machines and some of the furnishings that had cost so many sacrifices. Suddenly, the religious found themselves with nothing; everything had become State property. Rákosi's Stalinism continued to rage; the religious were dispersed. Without a home, work, or community, many became clandestine. They adapted to do anything: street cleaners, farmers, laborers, porters, servants... Even Stefano had to "disappear," leaving his printing house, which had become famous. Instead of seeking refuge abroad, he remained in his homeland to save Hungarian youth. Caught in the act (he was trying to save some printing machines), he had to flee quickly and remain hidden for several months. Then, under another name, he managed to get hired in a detergent factory in the capital, but he continued his apostolate fearlessly and clandestinely, knowing it was strictly prohibited. In July 1952, he was captured at his workplace and was never seen again by his confreres. An official document certifies his trial and death sentence, carried out by hanging on June 8, 1953.

The diocesan phase of the Cause of Martyrdom began in Budapest on May 24, 2006, and concluded on December 8, 2007. On March 27, 2013, Pope Francis authorized the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to promulgate the Decree

of Martyrdom and to celebrate the Beatification rite, which took place on Saturday, October 19, 2013, in Budapest.

## **2. Original Testimony of Salesian Holiness**

The brief notes on Sándor's biography have introduced us to the heart of his spiritual journey. Contemplating the features that the Salesian vocation has taken in him, marked by the action of the Spirit and now proposed by the Church, we discover some traits of that holiness: the deep sense of God and the full and serene availability to His will; the attraction to Don Bosco and the cordial belonging to the Salesian community; the encouraging and animating presence among the youth; the family spirit; the spiritual and prayer life cultivated personally and shared with the community; the total dedication to the Salesian mission lived in service to apprentices and young workers, to the boys of the oratory, and to the animation of youth groups. It is an active presence in the educative and social world, all animated by the charity of Christ that drives him from within!

There were also gestures that were heroic and unusual, culminating in the supreme act of giving his life for the salvation of Hungarian youth. "A young man wanted to jump onto the tram that was passing in front of the Salesian house. Misjudging his move, he fell under the vehicle. The carriage stopped too late; a wheel deeply injured his thigh. A large crowd gathered to watch the scene without intervening, while the poor unfortunate was about to bleed to death. At that moment, the gate of the school opened, and Pista (the familiar name of Stefano) ran out with a folding stretcher under his arm. He threw his jacket on the ground, crawled under the tram, and carefully pulled the young man out, tightening his belt around the bleeding thigh, and placed the boy on the stretcher. At this point, the ambulance arrived. The crowd cheered Pista enthusiastically. He blushed but could not hide the joy of having saved someone's life."

One of his boys recalls, "One day I fell seriously ill with typhus. At the hospital in Újpest, while my parents were worried about my life at my bedside, Stefano Sándor offered to give me blood if necessary. This act of generosity deeply moved my mother and all the people around me."

Even though more than sixty years have passed since his martyrdom and there has been a profound evolution in Consecrated Life, in the Salesian experience, in the vocation and formation of the Salesian Coadjutor, the Salesian path to holiness traced by Stefano Sándor is a sign and a message that opens perspectives for today. This fulfills the affirmation of the Salesian Constitutions: "The confreres who have lived or live fully the evangelical project of the Constitutions are for us a stimulus and help in the journey of sanctification." His beatification concretely indicates that "high measure of ordinary Christian life" indicated by John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*.

## **2.1. Under the Banner of Don Bosco**

It is always interesting to try to identify in the mysterious plan that the Lord weaves for each of us the guiding thread of all existence. In a synthetic formula, the secret that inspired and guided all the steps of Stefano Sándor's life can be summarized in these words: following Jesus, with Don Bosco and like Don Bosco, everywhere and always. In Stefano's vocational history, Don Bosco erupts in an original way with the typical traits of a well-identified vocation, as the Franciscan parish priest wrote, presenting the young Stefano. "Here in Szolnok, in our parish, we have a very good young man: Stefano Sándor, of whom I am the spiritual father, and who, after finishing technical school, learned the trade in a metallurgical school; he receives Communion daily and would like to enter a religious order. We would have no difficulty, but he would like to enter the Salesians as a lay brother."

The flattering judgment of the parish priest and

spiritual director highlights: the traits of work and prayer typical of Salesian life; a persevering and constant spiritual journey with a spiritual guide; the apprenticeship of the typographic art that he will perfect and specialize over time.

He had come to know Don Bosco through the Salesian Bulletin and the Salesian publications of Rákospalota. From this contact through the Salesian press, perhaps his passion for typography and books was born. In a letter to the Provincial of the Salesians of Hungary, Fr. János Antal, where he asks to be accepted among the sons of Don Bosco, he declared: "I feel the vocation to enter the Salesian Congregation. There is a need for work everywhere; without work, one cannot reach eternal life. I like to work."

From the beginning, the strong and determined will to persevere in the received vocation emerges, as will indeed happen. When on May 28, 1936, he applied for admission to the Salesian novitiate, he declared that he "had known the Salesian Congregation and had been increasingly confirmed in his religious vocation, so much so that he trusted he could persevere under the banner of Don Bosco." In a few words, Sándor expresses a high-profile vocational awareness: experiential knowledge of the life and spirit of the Congregation; confirmation of a right and irreversible choice; assurance for the future of being faithful on the battlefield that awaits him.

The record of admission to the novitiate, in Italian (June 2, 1936), unanimously qualifies the experience of the Aspirantate: "With excellent results, diligent, of good piety, and offered himself for the festive oratory, was practical, of good example, received the certificate of printer, but does not yet have perfect practice." Those traits that, subsequently consolidated in the novitiate, will define his identity as a lay Salesian religious are already present: the exemplarity of life, the generous availability to the Salesian mission, the competence in the profession of printer.

On September 8, 1940, he made his religious profession as a Salesian Coadjutor. On this day of grace, we

report a letter written by Pista, as he was familiarly called, to his parents. "Dear parents, I have to report an important event for me that will leave indelible marks in my heart. On September 8, by the grace of good God and with the protection of the Holy Virgin, I committed myself with my profession to love and serve God. On the feast of the Virgin Mother, I made my wedding with Jesus and promised Him with the triple vow to be His, never to separate from Him, and to persevere in fidelity to Him until death. I therefore pray all of you not to forget me in your prayers and Communions, making vows that I may remain faithful to my promise made to God. You can imagine that it was a joyful day for me, never before experienced in my life. I think I could not have given the Madonna a more pleasing birthday gift than the gift of myself. I imagine that our good Jesus looked at you with affectionate eyes, you having been the ones who gave me to God... Affectionate greetings to all. PISTA."

## **2.2. Absolute Dedication to the Mission**

"The mission gives all our existence its concrete tone...", say the Salesian Constitutions. Stefano Sándor lived the Salesian mission in the field entrusted to him, embodying pastoral educative charity as a Salesian Coadjutor, in the style of Don Bosco. His faith led him to see Jesus in the young apprentices and workers, in the boys of the oratory, in those of the street.

In the printing industry, the competent direction of the administration is considered an essential task. Stefano Sándor was responsible for the direction, practical and specific training of apprentices, and the setting of prices for printing products. "Don Bosco" printing house enjoyed great prestige throughout the Country. The Salesian editions included the *Salesian Bulletin*, *Missionary Youth*, magazines for youth, the *Don Bosco Calendar*, devotional books, and the Hungarian translation of the official writings of the General Directorate of the Salesians. It was in this environment that Stefano Sándor began to love the Catholic books that were not

only prepared for printing by him but also studied.

In the service of youth, he was also responsible for the collegiate education of young people. This was also an important task, in addition to their technical training. It was essential to discipline the young, in a phase of vigorous development, with affectionate firmness. At every moment of the apprenticeship period, he stood by them as an older brother. Stefano Sándor distinguished himself for a strong personality; he possessed excellent specific education, accompanied by discipline, competence, and a community spirit.

He was not content with just one specific job but made himself available for every need. He took on the role of sacristan of the small church of the Clarisseum and took care of the direction of the "Little Clergy." A testament to his capacity for endurance was also the spontaneous commitment to voluntary work in the flourishing oratory, regularly attended by the youth from the two suburbs of Újpest and Rákospalota. He enjoyed playing with the boys; in soccer matches, he refereed with great competence.

### **2.3. Religious Educator**

Stefano Sándor was an educator of faith for every person, brother, and boy, especially in times of trial and at the hour of martyrdom. Indeed, Sándor had made the mission for young people his educational space, where he daily lived the criteria of Don Bosco's Preventive System – reason, religion, loving-kindness – in the closeness and loving assistance to young workers, in the help provided to understand and accept situations of suffering, in the living testimony of the presence of the Lord and His unfailing love.

In Rákospalota, Stefano Sándor zealously dedicated himself to training young printers and educating the youth of the oratory and the "Pages of the Sacred Heart." On these fronts, he showed a strong sense of duty, living his religious vocation with great responsibility and characterized by a maturity that inspired admiration and esteem. "During his

printing activity, he conscientiously lived his religious life, without any desire to appear. He practiced the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, without any forcing. In this field, his mere presence was a testimony, without saying a word. Even the students recognized his authority, thanks to his fraternal ways. He put into practice everything he said or asked of the students, and no one thought of contradicting him in any way."

György Érseki had known the Salesians since 1945 and after World War II moved to Rákospalota, in the Clarisseum. His acquaintance with Stefano Sándor lasted until 1947. For this period, he not only offers us a glimpse of the multiple activities of the young Coadjutor, printer, catechist, and youth educator, but also a deep reading, from which emerges the spiritual richness and educational capacity of Stefano. "Stefano Sándor was a very gifted person by nature. As a pedagogue, I can affirm and confirm his observational skills and his multifaceted personality. He was a good educator and managed to handle the young people, one by one, in an optimal manner, choosing the appropriate tone with everyone. There is still a detail belonging to his personality: he considered every work a holy duty, dedicating, without effort and with great naturalness, all his energy to the realization of this sacred purpose. Thanks to an innate intuition, he was able to grasp the atmosphere and influence it positively. [...] He had a strong character as an educator; he took care of everyone individually. He was interested in our personal problems, always reacting in the most suitable way for us. In this way, he realized the three principles of Don Bosco: reason, religion, and loving-kindness... The Salesian Coadjutors did not wear the habit outside the liturgical context, but Stefano Sándor's appearance stood out from the crowd. Regarding his activity as an educator, he never resorted to physical punishment, which was prohibited according to the principles of Don Bosco, unlike other more impulsive Salesian teachers, who were unable to control themselves and sometimes slapped students. The apprentice

students entrusted to him formed a small community within the school, despite being different from each other in terms of age and culture. They ate in the dining hall together with the other students, where the Bible was usually read during meals. Naturally, Stefano Sándor was also present. Thanks to his presence, the group of industrial apprentices was always the most disciplined... Stefano Sándor remained youthful, showing great understanding towards young people. By grasping their problems, he transmitted positive messages and was able to advise them both personally and religiously. His personality revealed great tenacity and resilience in work; even in the most difficult situations, he remained faithful to his ideals and to himself.

The Salesian school of Rákospalota hosted a large community, requiring work with young people at multiple levels. In the school, alongside the printing house, there lived young Salesians in formation, who were in close contact with the Coadjutors. I remember the following names: József Krammer, Imre Strifler, Vilmos Klinger, and László Merész. These young men had different tasks from those of Stefano Sándor and also differed in character. However, thanks to their common life, they knew each other's problems, virtues, and flaws. Stefano Sándor always found the right measure in his relationship with these clerics. Stefano Sándor managed to find the fraternal tone to admonish them when they showed some shortcomings, without falling into paternalism. In fact, it was the young clerics who sought his opinion. In my view, he realized the ideals of Don Bosco. From the very first moment of our acquaintance, Stefano Sándor represented the spirit that characterized the members of the Salesian Society: a sense of duty, purity, religiosity, practicality, and fidelity to Christian principles."

A boy from that time recalls the spirit that animated Stefano Sándor: "My first memory of him is linked to the sacristy of the *Clarisseum*, where he, as the main



sacristan, demanded order, imposing the seriousness due to the situation, yet always remaining himself, with his behavior, to set a good example for us. One of his characteristics was to give us directives in a moderate tone, without raising his voice, rather politely asking us to do our duties. This spontaneous and friendly behavior won us over. We truly cared for him. We were enchanted by the naturalness with which Stefano Sándor took care of us. He taught us, prayed, and lived with us, witnessing the spirituality of the Salesian Coadjutors of that time. We young people, often did not realize how special these people were, but he stood out for his seriousness, which he manifested in church, in the printing house, and even on the playing field.”

### **3. Reflection of God with Evangelical Radicality**

What gave depth to all this – the dedication to the mission and the professional and educative capacity – and what immediately struck those who met him was the inner figure of Stefano Sándor, that of a disciple of the Lord, who lived at every moment his consecration, in constant union with God and in evangelical fraternity. From the testimonies in the process, a complete figure emerges, also for that Salesian balance whereby the different dimensions converge in a harmonious, unified, and serene personality, open to the mystery of God lived in the everyday.

One striking aspect of such radicality is the fact that from the very novitiate, all his companions, even those aspiring to the priesthood and much younger than him, esteemed him and saw him as a model to imitate. The exemplary nature of his consecrated life and the radicality with which he lived and testified to the evangelical counsels always distinguished him everywhere, so that on many occasions, even during his imprisonment, many thought he was a priest. Such testimony speaks volumes about the uniqueness with which Stefano Sándor always lived with clear identity his vocation as a Salesian Coadjutor, highlighting precisely the specificity of Salesian

consecrated life as such. Among the novitiate companions, Gyula Zsédely speaks of Stefano Sándor: "We entered together the Salesian novitiate of Saint Stephen in Mezőnyárád. Our master was Béla Bali. Here I spent a year and a half with Stefano Sándor and was an eyewitness to his life, a model of a young religious. Although Stefano Sándor was at least nine or ten years older than me, he lived with his novitiate companions in an exemplary manner; he participated in the practices of piety with us. We did not feel the age difference at all; he stood by us with fraternal affection. He edified us not only through his good example but also by giving us practical advice regarding the education of youth. It was already evident then how he was predestined for this vocation according to the educational principles of Don Bosco... His talent as an educator stood out even to us novices, especially during community activities. With his personal charm, he inspired us to such an extent that we took for granted that we could easily tackle even the most difficult tasks. The engine of his deep Salesian spirituality was prayer and the Eucharist, as well as devotion to Our Lady Help of Christians. During the novitiate, which lasted a year, we saw in him a good friend. He became our model also in obedience, as being the oldest, he was tested with small humiliations, but he endured them with composure and without showing signs of suffering or resentment. At that time, unfortunately, there was someone among our superiors who enjoyed humiliating the novices, but Stefano Sándor knew how to resist well. His greatness of spirit, rooted in prayer, was perceptible to all."

Regarding the intensity with which Stefano Sándor lived his faith, with a *continuous union with God*, an exemplary evangelical testimony emerges, which we can well define as a "reflection of God". "It seems to me that his inner attitude stemmed from devotion to the Eucharist and to the Madonna, which had also transformed the life of Don Bosco. When he took care of us, 'Little Clergy,' he did not give the

impression of exercising a profession; his actions manifested the spirituality of a person capable of praying with great fervor. For me and my peers, 'Mr. Sándor' was an ideal, and we never dreamed that everything we saw and heard was a superficial act. I believe that only his intimate life of prayer could

have nourished such behavior when, still a very young confrere, he had understood and taken seriously Don Bosco's educational method."

The evangelical radicality expressed itself in various forms throughout the religious life of Stefano Sándor:

- In waiting patiently for the consent of his parents to enter the Salesians.

- In every step of religious life, he had to wait: before being admitted to the novitiate, he had to do the Aspirantate; admitted to the novitiate, he had to interrupt it to serve in the military; the request for perpetual profession, initially accepted, would be postponed after a further period of temporary vows.

- In the harsh experiences of military service and at the front. The confrontation with an environment that posed many traps to his dignity as a man and a Christian strengthened in this young novice the decision to follow the Lord, to be faithful to his choice of God, no matter the cost. Indeed, there is no more difficult and demanding discernment than that of a novitiate tested and scrutinized in the trench of military life.

- In the years of suppression and then imprisonment, up to the supreme moment of martyrdom.

All this reveals that gaze of faith that will always accompany the story of Stefano: the awareness that God is present and works for the good of His children.

## **Conclusion**

Stefano Sándor, from birth until death, was a deeply religious man, who in all circumstances of life

responded with dignity and coherence to the demands of his Salesian vocation. This is how he lived during the period of the Aspirantate and initial formation, in his work as a printer, as an animator of the oratory and liturgy, in the time of clandestinity and imprisonment, up to the moments preceding his death. Eager, from his early youth, to dedicate himself to the service of God and his brothers in the generous task of educating young people according to the spirit of Don Bosco, he was able to cultivate a spirit of strength and fidelity to God and to his brothers that enabled him, in the moment of trial, to resist, first to situations of conflict and then to the supreme test of the gift of life.

I would like to highlight *the testimony of evangelical radicality* offered by this confrere. From the reconstruction of the biographical profile of Stefano Sándor emerges a real and profound journey of faith, begun from his childhood and youth, strengthened by his Salesian religious profession and consolidated in the exemplary life of a Salesian Coadjutor. A genuine consecrated vocation is particularly noticeable, animated according to the spirit of Don Bosco, by an intense and fervent zeal for the salvation of souls, especially young ones. Even the most difficult periods, such as military service and the experience of war, did not tarnish the upright moral and religious behavior of the young Coadjutor. It is on this basis that Stefano Sándor will suffer martyrdom without second thoughts or hesitations.

The beatification of Stefano Sándor engages the entire Congregation in *promoting the vocation of the Salesian Coadjutor*, welcoming his exemplary testimony and invoking in a communal form his intercession for this intention. As a lay Salesian, he managed to set a good example even for priests, with his activity among young people and with his exemplary religious life. He is a model for young consecrated persons, for the way in which he faced trials and persecutions without accepting compromises. The causes to which he dedicated himself, the sanctification of Christian work, love for the house of God, and the education of youth, are still

fundamental missions of the Church and our Congregation.

As an exemplary educator of young people, particularly apprentices and young workers, and as an animator of the oratory and youth groups, he serves as an example and encouragement in our commitment to proclaim to young people *the Gospel of joy through the pedagogy of goodness*.

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## Father Crespi and the Jubilee of 1925

*In 1925, in anticipation of the Holy Year, Father Carlo Crespi promoted an international missionary exhibition. Recalled by the Collegio Manfredini of Este, he was given the task of documenting the missionary endeavours in Ecuador, collecting scientific, ethnographic, and audio visual materials. Through travels and screenings, his work connected Rome and Turin, highlighting the Salesian commitment and strengthening ties between ecclesiastical and civil institutions. His courage and vision transformed the missionary challenge into an exhibition success, leaving an indelible mark on the history of Propaganda Fide and the Salesian missionary work.*

When Pius XI, in view of the Holy Year of 1925, wanted to plan a documented Vatican International Missionary Exhibition in Rome, the Salesians embraced the initiative with a Missionary Exhibition, to be held in Turin in 1926, also in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Salesian Missions. For this purpose, the Superiors immediately thought of Fr. Carlo Crespi and called him from the *Collegio Manfredini* of Este, where he had been assigned to teach Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Music.

In Turin, Fr. Carlo conferred with the Rector

Major, Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, with the superior responsible for the missions, Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, and, in particular, with Msgr. Domenico Comin, Apostolic Vicar of Méndez and Gualaquiza (Ecuador), who was to support his work. At that moment, travels, explorations, research, studies, and everything else that would arise from Carlo Crespi's work, received the approval and official start from the Superiors. Although the planned Exhibition was four years away, they asked Fr. Carlo to take care of it directly, so that he could carry out a complete scientifically serious and credible work.

This involved:

1. Creating a climate of interest in favour of the Salesians operating in the Ecuadorian mission of Méndez, enhancing their endeavours through written and oral documentation, and providing an appropriate collection of funds.

2. Collecting material for the preparation of the International Missionary Exhibition in Rome and, subsequently transferring it to Turin, to solemnly commemorate the first fifty years of the Salesian missions.

3. Conducting a scientific study of the aforementioned territory in order to channel the results, not only into the exhibitions in Rome and Turin, but especially into a permanent Museum and a precise "historical-geo-ethnographic" work.

From 1921 onwards, the Superiors commissioned Fr. Carlo to conduct propaganda activities in various Italian cities in favour of the missions. To raise public awareness in this regard, Fr. Carlo organised the projection of documentaries on Patagonia, *Tierra del Fuego*, and the Indians of Mato Grosso. He combined the films shot by the missionaries with musical comments personally performed on the piano.

The propaganda with conferences yielded about 15 thousand Lire [re-evaluated this corresponds to € 14,684] later spent for travel, transport, and for the following materials: a camera, a movie camera, a typewriter, some compasses, theodolites, levels, rain gauges, a box of

medicines, agricultural tools and field tents.

Several industrialists from the Milan area offered several quintals of fabrics for the value of 80 thousand Lire [€ 78,318], fabrics that were later distributed among the Indians.

On March 22, 1923, Fr. Crespi embarked, therefore, on the steamship "Venezuela," bound for Guayaquil, the most important river and maritime port of Ecuador. In fact, it was the commercial and economic capital of the country, nicknamed for its beauty: "The Pearl of the Pacific."

In a later writing, with great emotion he would recall his departure for the Missions: *"I remember my departure from Genoa on March 22 of the year 1923 [...]. When, once the decks that still held us bound to our native land had been removed, the ship began to move, my soul was pervaded by a joy so overwhelming, so superhuman, so ineffable, that I had never experienced it at any moment of my life, not even on the day of my First Communion, not even on the day of my first Mass. In that instant I began to understand who a missionary was and what God reserved for him [...]. Pray fervently, so that God may preserve our holy vocation and make us worthy of our holy mission; so that none of the souls may perish, which in His eternal decrees God wanted to be saved through us, so that He may make us bold champions of the faith, even unto death, even unto martyrdom"* (Carlo Crespi, New detachment. The hymn of gratitude, in *Bollettino Salesiano*, L, n.12, December 1926).

Fr. Carlo fulfilled the task he received by putting into practice his university knowledge, in particular through the sampling of minerals, flora, and fauna from Ecuador. Soon, however, he went beyond the mission entrusted to him, becoming enthusiastic about topics of an ethnographic and archaeological nature that, later, would occupy much of his intense life.

From the first itineraries, Carlo Crespi did not limit himself to admiring, rather he collected, classified, noted, photographed, filmed, and documented anything that

attracted his attention as a scholar. With enthusiasm, he ventured into the Ecuadorian East for films, documentaries, and to collect valuable botanical, zoological, ethnic, and archaeological collections.

This is that magnetic world that already vibrated in his heart even before arriving there, of which he reports as follows inside his notebooks: *"In these days a new, insistent voice sounds in my soul, a sacred nostalgia for the mission countries; sometimes also for the desire to know scientific things in particular. Oh Lord! I am willing to do anything, to abandon family, relatives, fellow students; all to save some soul, if this is your desire, your will"* (place and date unknown). – *Personal notes and reflections of the Servant of God on themes of a spiritual nature taken from 4 notebooks*).

A first itinerary, lasting three months, began in Cuenca, touched Gualaceo, Indanza, and ended at the Santiago River. Then he reached the valley of the San Francisco River, the Patococha Lagoon, Tres Palmas, Culebrillas, Potrerillos (the highest locality, at 3,800 m a.s.l.), Rio Ishpingo, the hill of Puerco Grande, Tinajillas, Zapote, Loma de Puerco Chico, Plan de Milagro, and Pianoro. In each of these places, he collected samples to dry and integrate into the various collections. Field notebooks and numerous photographs document everything with precision.

Carlo Crespi organised a second journey through the valleys of Yanganza, Limón, Peña Blanca, Tzaranbiza, as well as along the Indanza path. As is easy to suppose, travel at the time was difficult: there were only mule tracks, as well as precipices, inhospitable climatic conditions, dangerous beasts, lethal snakes, and tropical diseases.

In addition to this there was the danger of attacks by the indomitable inhabitants of the East that Fr. Carlo, however, managed to approach, laying the foundations for the feature film *"Los invencibles Shuaras del Alto Amazonas,"* which he would shoot in 1926 and screen on February 26, 1927, in Guayaquil. Overcoming all these pitfalls, he



managed to gather six hundred varieties of beetles, sixty embalmed birds with wonderful plumage, mosses, lichens, ferns. He studied about two hundred local species and, using the sub-classification of the places visited by naturalists on Allionii, he came across 21 varieties of ferns, belonging to the tropical zone below 800 m a.s.l.; 72 to the subtropical one that goes from 800 to 1,500 m a.s.l.; 102 to the Subandean one, between 1,500 and 3,400 m a.s.l., and 19 to the Andean one, higher than 3,600 m a.s.l. (A very interesting comment was made by Prof. Roberto Bosco, a prestigious botanist and member of the Italian Botanical Society who, fourteen years later, in 1938, decided to study and systematically order "the showy collection of ferns" prepared in a few months by "Prof. Carlo Crespi, botanizing in Ecuador).

The most noteworthy species, studied by Roberto Bosco, were named "Crespiane."

To summarise: already in October 1923, to prepare the Vatican Exhibition, Fr. Carlo had organised the first missionary excursions throughout the Vicariate, up to Méndez, Gualaquiza, and Indanza, collecting ethnographic materials and lots of photographic documentation. The expenses were covered through the fabrics and funds collected in Italy. With the material collected, which he would later transfer to Italy, he organised a trade fair Exhibition, between the months of June and July 1924, in the city of Guayaquil. The work aroused enthusiastic judgments, recognitions, and aid. He would report on this Exhibition, ten years later, in a letter of December 31, 1935, to the Superiors of Turin, to inform them about the funds collected from November 1922 to November 1935.

Father Crespi spent the first semester of 1925 in the forests of the Sucúa-Macas area, studying the Shuar language and collecting further material for the missionary Exhibition of Turin. In August of the same year, he began a negotiation with the Government to obtain a significant funding, which concluded on September 12 with a contract for 110,000 Sucres (equal to 500,000 Lire of the time and which today would be € 489,493.46), which would allow the Pan-Méndez

mule track to be completed). Furthermore, he also obtained permission to withdraw from customs 200 quintals of iron and material confiscated from some traders.

In 1926, having returned to Italy, Fr. Carlo brought cages with live animals from the eastern area of Ecuador (a difficult collection of birds and rare animals) and boxes with ethnographic material, for the Missionary Exhibition of Turin, which he personally organised, also giving the official closing speech on October 10.

In the same year, he was busy organising the Exhibition and then giving several conferences and participating in the American Congress of Rome with two scientific conferences. This enthusiasm and his competence and scientific research responded perfectly to the directives of the Superiors, and, therefore, through the International Missionary Exhibition of 1925 in Rome and that of 1926 in Turin, Ecuador became more widely known. Furthermore, at the ecclesial level, he contacted the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, the Holy Childhood, and the Association for the Indigenous Clergy. At the civil level, he established relationships with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Italian Government.

From these contacts and from the interviews with the Superiors of the Salesian Congregation, some results were obtained. In the first place, the Superiors gave him the gift of granting him 4 priests, 4 seminarians, 9 coadjutor brothers, and 4 sisters for the Vicariate. Furthermore, he obtained a series of economic funds from the Vatican Organisations and collaboration with sanitary material for the hospitals, for the value of about 100,000 Lire (€ 97,898.69). As a gift from the Major Superiors for the help given for the Missionary Exhibition, they took charge of the construction of the Church of Macas, with two instalments of 50,000 lire (€ 48,949.35), sent directly to Msgr. Domenico Comin.

Having exhausted the task of collector, supplier, and animator of the great international exhibitions, in 1927 Fr. Crespi returned to Ecuador, which became his second

homeland. He settled in the Vicariate, under the jurisdiction of the bishop, Msgr. Comin, always dedicated, in a spirit of obedience, to propaganda excursions, to ensure subsidies and special funds, necessary for the works of the missions, such as the Pan Méndez road, the Guayaquil Hospital, the Guayaquil school in Macas, the Quito Hospital in Méndez, the Agricultural School of Cuenca, the city where, since 1927, he began to develop his priestly and Salesian apostolate.

For some years, he then continued to deal with science, but always with the spirit of the apostle.

*Carlo Riganti*

*President of the Carlo Crespi Association*

*Image: March 24, 1923 – Fr. Carlo Crespi Departing for Ecuador on the Steamship Venezuela*

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## **Salesians in Ukraine (video)**

*The Salesian Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) has reshaped its educational-pastoral mission since the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022. Amidst air raid sirens, makeshift shelters, and schools in basements, the Salesians have become a tangible presence: they host displaced people, distribute aid, provide spiritual accompaniment to soldiers and civilians, transformed a house into a reception centre, and run the “Mariapolis” modular campus, where they serve a thousand meals daily and organize oratory and sports activities, even founding the first Ukrainian Amputee Football team. The personal testimony of a confrere reveals the wounds, hopes, and prayers of those who have lost everything but continue to believe that, after this long national Way of the Cross, the Easter of peace will dawn*

*for Ukraine.*

### **The Pastoral Work of the Vice-Province of Mary Help of Christians of the Byzantine Rite (UKR) During the War**

Our pastoral work had to change when the war began. Our educational-pastoral activities had to adapt to a completely different reality, often marked by the incessant sound of sirens announcing the danger of missile attacks and bombings. Every time the alarm sounds, we are forced to interrupt activities and go down with the young people into underground shelters or bunkers. In some schools, lessons are held directly in the basements to ensure greater safety for the students.

From the very beginning, we immediately set about helping and assisting the suffering population. We opened our houses to welcome displaced people, organized the collection and distribution of humanitarian aid: with our boys and young people, we prepare thousands of packages with food, clothing, and everything necessary to send to needy people in territories near the fighting or in the combat zones themselves. Furthermore, some of our Salesian confreres serve as chaplains in the combat zones. There, they provide spiritual support to young soldiers, but also bring humanitarian aid to people who have remained in villages under constant bombardment, helping some of them move to a safer place. One deacon confrere who was in the trenches suffered damage to his health and lost his ankle. When, some years ago, I read an article in the Italian Salesian Bulletin about Salesians in the trenches during the First or Second World War, I never thought this would happen in this modern era in my own country. I was once struck by the words of a very young Ukrainian soldier who, quoting a historian and eminent officer, defender, and fighter for our people's independence, said: *"We fight defending our independence not because we hate those before us, but because we love those behind us."*

During this period, we also transformed one of our Salesian Houses into a reception centre for displaced people.

To support the physical, mental, psychological, and social rehabilitation of young people who lost limbs in the war, we created an Amputee Football team, the first team of its kind in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the invasion in 2022, we made available to the Lviv City Council a plot of our land, intended for the construction of a Salesian school, to build a modular campus for internally displaced persons: "Mariapolis," where we Salesians operate in collaboration with the Centre of the City Council's Social Department. We provide welfare support and spiritual accompaniment, making the environment more welcoming. Supported by aid from our Congregation, various organizations including VIS and Don Bosco Missions, various mission offices and other charitable foundations, and even state agencies from other countries, we were able to set up the campus kitchen with its respective staff, allowing us to offer lunch every day for about 1,000 people. Furthermore, thanks to their help, we can organize various Salesian-style activities for the 240 children and young people present on the campus.

### **A Small Experience and a Humble Personal Testimony**

I would like to share my small experience and testimony here... I truly thank the Lord who, through my Provincial, called me to this particular service. For three years, I have been working in the campus that hosts about 1,000 internally displaced persons. From the beginning, I have been alongside people who lost everything in an instant, except their dignity. Their homes are destroyed and looted; the savings and possessions painstakingly accumulated over years of life have vanished. Many have lost much more, and more precious things: their loved ones, killed before their eyes by missiles or mines. Some of the people on campus had to live for months in the basements of collapsed buildings, feeding on whatever

little they could find, even if expired. They drank water from radiators and boiled potato peels to feed themselves. Then, at the first opportunity, they fled or were evacuated without knowing where to go, with no certainty about what awaited them. Moreover, some saw their cities, like Mariupol, razed to the ground. In fact, in honour of this beautiful city of Mary, we Salesians named the campus for the displaced "Mariapolis," entrusting this place and its inhabitants to the Virgin Mary. And She, like a mother, stands by everyone in these times of trial. In the campus, I set up a chapel dedicated to Her, where there is an icon painted by a lady from the campus, originally from the tormented city of Kharkiv. The chapel has become a place of encounter with God and with oneself for all residents, regardless of their Christian faith denomination.

Being with them, loving them, welcoming them, listening to them, consoling them, encouraging them, praying for them and with them, and supporting them in whatever way I can – these are the moments that make up my service, which has now become my life during this period. It is a true school of life, of spirituality, where I learn so much by being close to their suffering. Almost all of them hope that the war will end soon and peace will come, so they can return home. But for many, that dream is now unattainable: their homes no longer exist. So, as best I can, I try to offer them some anchor of hope, helping them to encounter the One who abandons no one, who is close in the sufferings and difficulties of life.

Sometimes they ask me to prepare them for Reconciliation: with God, with themselves, with the harsh reality they are forced to live. Other times, I help them with more concrete needs: medicine, clothes, diapers, hospital visits. I also do administrative work alongside my three lay colleagues. Every day, at 5:00 PM, we pray for peace, and a small group has learned to recite the Rosary, praying it daily.

As a Salesian, I try to be attentive to the needs of the young people. From the beginning, with the help of animators, we

created an oratory within the campus. We also have activities, trips, and mountain camps during the summer. Furthermore, one of the commitments I carry forward is overseeing the canteen, to ensure that none of the residents on campus go without a hot meal.

Among the campus inhabitants is little Maksym, who wakes up in the middle of the night, terrified by any loud noise. Maria, a mother who lost everything, including her husband, smiles at her children every day so as not to burden them with her suffering. Then there is Petro, 25 years old, who was at home with his girlfriend when a Russian drone dropped a bomb. The explosion amputated both his legs, while his girlfriend died shortly after. Petro lay dying all night until soldiers found him in the morning and brought him to safety. The ambulance couldn't get close due to the fighting.

Amidst so much suffering, I continue my apostolate with the Lord's help and the support of my confreres.

We Byzantine Rite Salesians, together with our 13 Latin Rite confreres present in Ukraine – largely of Polish origin and belonging to the Salesian Province of Krakow (PLS) – deeply share the pain and suffering of the Ukrainian people. As sons of Don Bosco, we continue our educative-pastoral mission with faith and hope, adapting daily to the difficult conditions imposed by the war.

We stand alongside the young, the families, and all those who suffer and need help. We wish to be visible signs of God's love, so that the life, hope, and joy of the young may never be stifled by violence and pain.

In this common witness, we reaffirm the vitality of our Salesian charism, which knows how to respond even to the most dramatic challenges of history. Our two particularities, that of the Byzantine rite and that of the Latin rite, make visible the indivisible unity of the Salesian Charism as affirmed by the Salesian Constitutions in Art. 100: *"The Founder's charism*

*is the principle of unity of the Congregation and, through its fruitfulness, is the origin of the different ways of living the one Salesian vocation."*

We believe that pain and suffering do not have the last word, and that in faith, every Cross already contains the seed of the Resurrection. After this long Holy Week, the Resurrection will inevitably come for Ukraine: true and just PEACE will arrive.

### **Some Information**

Some chapter confreres asked for information about the war in Ukraine. Allow me to say something in the form of a Snapshot. A clarification: the war in Ukraine cannot be interpreted as an ethnic conflict or a territorial dispute between two peoples with opposing claims or rights over a specific territory. It is not a quarrel between two parties fighting over a piece of land. And therefore, it is not a battle between equals. What is happening in Ukraine is an invasion, a unilateral aggression. Here, it is about one people improperly attacking another. A nation, which fabricated baseless motives, inventing a supposed right, violating international order and laws, decided to attack another State, violating its sovereignty and territorial integrity, its right to decide its own fate and direction of development, occupying and annexing territories. Destroying cities and towns, many razed to the ground, taking the lives of thousands of civilians. Here there is an aggressor and an attacked party: this is precisely the peculiarity and horror of this war.

And it is starting from this premise that the peace we await should also be conceived. A peace that has the flavour of justice and is based on truth, not temporary, not opportunistic, not a peace founded on hidden commercial conveniences, avoiding the creation of precedents for autocratic regimes in the world that might one day decide to invade other countries, occupy or annex part of a neighbouring or distant country, simply because they wish to or because



they feel like it, or because they are more powerful.

Another absurdity of this unprovoked and undeclared war is that the aggressor forbids the victim the right to defend itself, tries to intimidate and threaten all those – in this case, other countries – who side with the defenceless and set out to help the unjustly attacked victim defend itself and resist.

### **Some Sad Statistics**

From the beginning of the 2022 invasion until today (08.04.2025), the UN has recorded and confirmed data relating to 12,654 deaths and 29,392 injuries among CIVILIANS in Ukraine.

According to the latest available verified UNICEF news, at least 2,406 CHILDREN have been killed or injured by the escalation of the war in Ukraine since 2022. Child victims include 659 CHILDREN KILLED and 1,747 INJURED – meaning at least 16 children killed or injured every week. Millions of children continue to have their lives disrupted due to ongoing attacks or having to flee and evacuate to other places and countries. The children of Donbas have been already suffering from the war for 11 years.

Alongside the plan for an invasion of Ukraine, Russia also initiated a program of forced deportations of Ukrainian children. Latest data indicate 20,000 children taken from their homes, detained for months, and subjected to forced Russification through intense propaganda before forced adoption.

Fr. Andrii Platosh, sdb

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# Don Bosco promoter of “divine mercy”

*As a very young priest, Don Bosco published a booklet, in tiny format, entitled “Exercise of Devotion to God’s Mercy”.*

## **It all began with the Marchioness Barolo**

The Marchioness Giulia Colbert di Barolo (1785-1864), declared Venerable by Pope Francis on 12 May 2015, personally cultivated a special devotion to divine mercy, so she had the custom of a week of meditations and prayers on the subject introduced to the religious and educational communities she founded near Valdocco. But she was not satisfied. She wanted this practice to spread elsewhere, especially in parishes, among the people. She sought the consent of the Holy See, which not only granted it, but also granted various indulgences for this devotional practice. At this point, it was a question of making a publication suitable for the purpose.

We are now in the summer of 1846, when Don Bosco, having overcome the serious crisis of exhaustion that had brought him to the brink of the grave, had withdrawn to spend time with Mamma Margaret at the Becchi to convalesce and had by then “resigned” from his much appreciated service as chaplain to one of the Barolo works, to the great displeasure of the Marchioness herself. But “his young people” called him to the newly rented Pinardi house.

At this point the famous patriot Silvio Pellico, secretary-librarian to the Marchioness and an admirer and friend of Don Bosco, who had set some of his poems to music, intervened. The Salesian memoirs tell us that Pellico, with a certain boldness, proposed to the Marchioness that she commission Don Bosco to do the publication she was interested

in. What did the Marchioness do? She accepted, albeit not too enthusiastically. Who knows? Perhaps she wanted to put him to the test. And Don Bosco, too, accepted.

### **A theme close to his heart**

The theme of God's mercy was among his spiritual interests, those on which he had been formed in the seminary in Chieri and especially at the Turin *Convitto*. Only two years earlier he had finished attending the lessons of his fellow countryman Saint Joseph Cafasso, just four years older than him, but his spiritual director, whose sermons he followed at retreats for priests, but also the formator for half a dozen other founders, some even saints. Well then, Cafasso, although a child of the religious culture of his time – made up of prescriptions and “doing good to escape divine punishment and deserve Paradise” – did not miss an opportunity in both his teaching and preaching to speak of God's mercy. And how could he not do so when he was constantly devoted to the Sacrament of Penance and to assisting those condemned to death? All the more so since such indulgent devotion at the time was a pastoral reaction against the rigours of Jansenism that supported the predestination of those who were saved.

So, Don Bosco, as soon as he returned from the country at the beginning of November, set to work, following the pious practices approved by Rome and spread throughout Piedmont. With the help of a few texts that he could easily find in the *Convitto* library which he knew well, at the end of the year he published at his own expense a small booklet of 111 pages, tiny format, entitled “[Exercise of devotion to God's Mercy](#)”. He immediately gave it to the girls, women and Sisters at the Barolo foundations. It is not documented, but logic and gratitude would have it that he also made a gift of it to the Marchioness Barolo, the promoter of the project: but the same logic and gratitude would have it that the Marchioness did not let herself be outdone in generosity, sending him, perhaps anonymously as on other occasions, a contribution of her own to the expenses.

There is no space here to present the “classic” contents of Don Bosco’s booklet of meditations and prayers; we would just like to point out that its basic principle is: “everyone must invoke God’s Mercy for himself and for all people, because ‘we are all sinners’ [...] all in need of forgiveness and grace [...] all called to eternal salvation.”

Significant, then, is the fact that at the conclusion of each day of the week Don Bosco, by way of “devotional exercises”, assigns a practice of piety: invite others to intervene, forgive those who have offended us, make an immediate mortification to obtain mercy from God for all sinners, give some alms or replace them with the recitation of prayers etc. On the last day, the practice is replaced by a nice invitation, perhaps even alluding the Marchioness Barolo, to say “at least one *Hail Mary* for the person who has promoted this devotion!”

## **Educational practice**

But beyond the writings with edifying and formative purposes, one can ask how Don Bosco in fact educated his youngsters to trust in divine mercy. The answer is not difficult and could be documented in many ways. We will limit ourselves to three vital experiences lived at Valdocco: the sacraments of Confession and Communion and his figure of a “father full of goodness and love”.

## **Confession**

Don Bosco initiated hundreds of young people from Valdocco into adult Christian life. But by what means? Two in particular: Confession and Communion.

Don Bosco, as we know, is one of the great apostles of Confession, and this is first of all because he exercised this ministry to the full, as did, for that matter, his teacher and spiritual director Cafasso mentioned above, and the much admired figure of his almost contemporary the saintly Curé d’Ars (1876-1859). If the latter’s life, as has been written, “was spent in the confessional” and if Cafasso

was able to offer many hours of the day ("the necessary time") to listen in confession to "bishops, priests, religious, eminent laymen and simple people who flocked to him", Don Bosco could not do the same because of the many occupations in which he was immersed. Nevertheless, he made himself available in the confessional for the young people (and the Salesians) every day that religious services were celebrated at Valdocco or in Salesian houses, or on special occasions.

He had begun to do this as soon as he had finished "learning to be a priest" at the Convitto (1841-1844), when on Sundays he would gather the young men in the wandering oratory over two years, when he went to hear confessions at the Consolata or in the Piedmontese parishes to which he was invited, or when he took advantage of carriage or train journeys to hear confessions from coachmen or passengers. He never stopped doing this until the very end, and when asked not to tire himself out with confessions, he replied that by now it was the only thing he could do for his young people. And what was his sorrow when, due to bureaucratic reasons and misunderstandings, his confession licence was not renewed by the archbishop! The testimonies about Don Bosco as a confessor are innumerable and, in fact, the famous photograph depicting him in the act of confessing a young boy surrounded by so many others waiting to do so, must have pleased the saint himself, who was maybe behind the idea. It still remains a significant and indelible icon of his figure in the collective imagination.

But beyond his experience as a confessor, Don Bosco was a tireless promoter of the sacrament of Reconciliation. He spoke of its necessity, its importance, the usefulness of receiving it frequently. He pointed out the dangers of a celebration lacking the necessary conditions, and illustrated the classic ways of approaching it fruitfully. He did this through lectures, good nights, witty mottos and little words in the ear, circular letters to the young people at the colleges, personal letters, and by recounting numerous dreams focusing on confession, either well or badly done. In

accordance with his intelligent catechetical practice, he told them episodes of conversions of great sinners, and also his own personal experiences in this regard.

Don Bosco, who knew the youthful soul in depth, used love and gratitude to God, whom he presented in his infinite goodness, generosity and mercy in order to lead all young people to sincere repentance. Instead, to shake the coldest and most hardened hearts, he described the likely punishments of sin and impressed them with vivid descriptions of divine judgement and Hell. Even in these cases, however, not satisfied with urging the boys to be sorry for their sins, he tried to bring them to the need for divine mercy, an important provision to anticipate their forgiveness even before sacramental confession. Don Bosco, as usual, did not enter into doctrinal matters. He was only interested in a sincere confession, which therapeutically heals the wound of the past, recomposes the spiritual fabric of the present for a future of a "life of grace".

Don Bosco believed in sin, believed in serious sin, believed in hell and spoke of their existence to readers and listeners. But he was also convinced that God is mercy in person, which is why he has given us the sacrament of Reconciliation. And so he insisted on the conditions for receiving it well, and above all on the confessor as "father" and "doctor" and not so much as "doctor and judge": "The confessor knows how much greater than your faults is the mercy of God who grants you forgiveness through his intervention" ([Life of Michael Magone](#), pp. 24-25).

According to Salesian memoirs, he often suggested to his youngsters to invoke divine mercy, not to be discouraged after sin, but to return to confession without fear, trusting in the goodness of the Lord and then making firm resolutions for good.

As an "educator in the youth field" Don Bosco felt the need to insist less on *ex opere operato* and more on *ex opere operantis*, that is, on the dispositions of the penitent. At Valdocco everyone felt invited to make a good confession,

all felt the risk of bad confessions and the importance of making a good confession; many of them then felt they were living in a land blessed by the Lord. It was not for nothing that divine mercy had caused a deceased young man to wake up after the funeral shroud had been pulled away so that he could confess his sins (to Don Bosco).

In short, the sacrament of confession, well explained in its specific features and frequently celebrated, was perhaps the most effective means by which the Piedmontese saint led his young people to trust in God's immense mercy.

## **Communion**

But Communion, the second pillar of Don Bosco's religious pedagogy, also served its purpose.

Don Bosco is certainly one of the greatest promoters of the sacramental practice of frequent Communion. His doctrine, modelled on the Counter-Reformation way of thinking, gave importance to Communion rather than to the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, even if there was an evolution in its frequency. In the first twenty years of his priestly life, in the wake of St. Alphonsus, but also of the Council of Trent and before that of Tertullian and St Augustine, he suggested weekly Communion, or several times a week or even daily depending on the perfection of the dispositions corresponding to the graces of the sacrament. Dominic Savio, who at Valdocco had begun to go to confession and communion every fortnight, then went on to receive it every week, then three times a week, finally, after a year of intense spiritual growth, every day, obviously always following the advice of his confessor, Don Bosco himself.

Later, in the second half of the 1860s, on the basis of his pedagogical experiences and a strong theological current in favour of frequent Communion, which saw the French Bishop de Ségur and the prior of Genoa Fr Giuseppe Frassinetti as leaders, Don Bosco moved on to inviting his young men to receive Communion more often, convinced that it allowed decisive steps in the spiritual life and favoured their growth

in the love of God. And in the case of the impossibility of daily Sacramental Communion, he suggested spiritual Communion, perhaps during a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, so much appreciated by St Alphonsus. However, the important thing was to keep the conscience in a state to be able to receive Communion every day: the decision was in a way up to the confessor.

For Don Bosco, every Communion worthily received – the prescribed fasting, state of grace, willingness to detach oneself from sin, a beautiful thanksgiving afterwards – cancels daily faults, strengthens the soul to avoid them in the future, increases confidence in God and in his infinite goodness and mercy; moreover, it is a source of grace to succeed in school and in life, it is help in bearing sufferings and overcoming temptations.

Don Bosco believes that Communion is a necessity for the “good” to keep themselves as such and for the “bad” to become “good”. It is for those who want to become saints, not for the saints, like medicine is given to the sick. Obviously, he knows that its reception alone is not a sure indication of goodness, as there are those who receive it very lukewarmly and out of habit, especially since the very superficiality of young people often does not allow them to understand the full importance of what they are doing.

With Communion then, one can implore from the Lord particular graces for oneself and for others. Don Bosco’s letters are full of requests to his young men to pray and receive Communion according to his intention, so that the Lord may grant him good success in the “affairs” of every order in which he finds himself immersed. And he did the same with all his correspondents, who were invited to approach this sacrament to obtain the graces requested, while he would do the same in the celebration of Holy Mass.

Don Bosco cared so much that his boys grew up nourished by the sacraments, but he also wanted the utmost respect for their freedom. And he left precise instructions to his educators in his treatise on the Preventive System: “Never



force young people to attend the holy sacraments but only encourage them, and give them the comfort of taking advantage of them.”

At the same time, however, he remained adamant in his conviction that the sacraments are of paramount importance. He wrote peremptorily: “Say what you will about the various systems of education, but I find no sure basis except in the frequency of Confession and Communion” ([The Young Shepherd Boy from the Alps, the Life of Francis Besucco from Argentera](#), 1864. p. 100).

### **Fatherliness and mercy**

God’ mercy, at work particularly at the time of the sacraments of Confession and Communion, then found its external expression not only in a Don Bosco “father confessor”, but also “father, brother, friend” of the young men in ordinary everyday life. With some exaggeration it could be said that their confidence in Don Bosco was such that many of them hardly made a distinction between Don Bosco “confessor” and Don Bosco “friend” and “brother”; others could sometimes exchange the sacramental accusation with the sincere effusions of a son towards his father; on the other hand Don Bosco’s knowledge of the young was such that with sober questions he inspired them with extreme confidence and not infrequently knew how to make the accusation in their place.

The figure of God the father, merciful and provident, who throughout history has shown his goodness from Adam onwards towards men, righteous or sinners, but all in need of help and the object of paternal care, and in any case all called to salvation in Jesus Christ, is thus modulated and reflected in the goodness of Don Bosco “Father of his young people”, who only wants their good, who does not abandon them, always ready to understand them, pity them, forgive them. For many of them, orphans, poor and abandoned, accustomed from an early age to hard daily work, the object of very modest manifestations of tenderness, children of an era in which what prevailed was decisive submission and absolute obedience to

any constituted authority, Don Bosco was perhaps the caress never experienced by a father, the “tenderness” of which Pope Francis speaks.

His letter to the young men of the Mirabello house at the end of 1864 is still moving: “Those voices, those cheers, that kissing and shaking hands, that cordial smile, that talking to each other about the soul, that encouraging each other to do good are things that embalm my heart, and for that reason I cannot think about them without feeling moved to tears. I will tell you [...] that you are the apple of my eye” (*Epistolario* II edited by F. Motto II, letter no. 792).

Even more moving is his letter to the young men of Lanzo on 3 January 1876: “Let me tell you and let no-one take offence, you are all thieves; I say it and I repeat it – you have stolen everything from me. When I was at Lanzo, you enchanted me with your benevolence and loving kindness, you bound the faculties of my mind with your pity; I was still left with this poor heart, whose affections you had already stolen from me entirely. Now your letter signed by 200 friendly and dearest hands have taken possession of this whole heart of mine, and nothing remains except a lively desire to love you in the Lord, to do you good and save the souls of all of you” (*Epistolario* III, letter no. 1389).

The loving kindness with which he treated and wanted the Salesians to treat the boys had a divine foundation. He affirmed this by quoting an expression from St. Paul: ‘Charity is benign and patient; it suffers all things, but hopes all things, and sustains all troubles’.

Loving kindness was therefore a sign of mercy and divine love that escaped sentimentalism and forms of sensuality because of the theological charity that was its source. Don Bosco communicated this love to individual boys and also to groups of them: “That I bear you much affection, I don’t need to tell you, I have given you clear proof of it. That you love me, I do not need to tell you, because you have constantly shown it to me. But on what is this mutual affection of ours founded? [...] So the good of our souls is the

foundation of our affection" (Epistolary II, no. 1148). Love of God, the theological *primum*, is thus the foundation of the pedagogical *primum*.

Loving-kindness was also the translation of divine love into truly human love, made up of right sensitivity, amiable cordiality, benevolent and patient affection tending to deep communion of the heart. In short, the effective and affective love that is experienced in a privileged form in the relationship between the educand and the educator, when gestures of friendship and forgiveness on the part of the educator induce the young person, by virtue of the love that guides the educator, to open up to confidence, to feel supported in his effort to surpass himself and to commit himself, to give consent and to adhere in depth to the values that the educator lives personally and proposes to him. The young person understands that this relationship reconstructs and restructures him as a man. The most arduous undertaking of the Preventive System is precisely that of winning the young person's heart, of enjoying his esteem, his trust, of making him a friend. If a young person does not love the educator, he can do very little of the young person and for the young person.

### **Works of mercy**

We could now continue with the works of mercy, which the Catechism distinguishes between corporal and spiritual works, setting out two groups of seven. It would not be difficult to document both how Don Bosco lived, practised and encouraged the practice of these works of mercy and how by his "being and working" he in fact constituted a sign and visible witness, in deeds and words, of God's love for mankind. Due to space limitations, we limit ourselves to indicating the possibility of research. It remains, however, that today they seem to be abandoned also because of the false opposition between mercy and justice, as if mercy were not a typical way of expressing that love which, as such, can never contradict justice.

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# Venerable Francesco (Francis) Convertini, pastor according to the Heart of Jesus

*The venerable Father Francesco Convertini, a Salesian missionary in India, emerges as a shepherd after the Heart of Jesus, forged by the Spirit and totally faithful to the divine plan for his life. Through the testimonies of those who met him, his profound humility, unconditional dedication to the proclamation of the Gospel, and fervent love for God and neighbor are revealed. He lived with joyful evangelical simplicity, facing hardships and sacrifices with courage and generosity, always attentive to everyone he met along his path. The text highlights his extraordinary humanity and spiritual richness, a precious gift for the Church.*

## 1. Farmer in the vineyard of the Lord

Presenting the virtuous profile of Father Francesco Convertini, Salesian missionary in India, a man who let himself be moulded by the Spirit and knew how to realise his spiritual physiognomy according to God's plan for him, is something both beautiful and serious because it recalls the true meaning of life, as a response to a call, a promise, a project of grace.

There is a quite original summary sketched about him by a priest from his town, Fr Quirico Vasta, who got to know Father Francis (as he was known in India) on rare visits to his beloved Apulia. This witness offers us a summary of the virtuous profile of the great missionary, introducing us in an authoritative and compelling way to discover something of the human and religious stature of this man of God.

"The way to measure the spiritual stature of this holy man,

Father Francis Convertini, is not an analytical approach, comparing his life to the many religious 'parameters of behaviour' (Father Francis, as a Salesian, also accepted the commitments proper to a religious: poverty, obedience, chastity, and remained faithful to them throughout his life). On the contrary, Father Francis Convertini appears, in summary, as he really was from the beginning: a young peasant farmer who, after – and perhaps because of – the ugliness of the war, opened himself up to the light of the Spirit and leaving everything behind, set out to follow the Lord. On the one hand, he knew what he was leaving behind; and he left it not only with the vigour typical of the southern peasant who was poor but tenacious; but also joyfully and with the very personal strength of spirit that the war had invigorated: the strength of someone who intends to pursue headlong, albeit silently and in the depths of his soul, what he has focused his attention on. On the other hand, again like a peasant who has grasped the 'certainties' of the future and the groundedness of his hopes in something or someone and knows 'who to trust' he allowed the light of the one who has spoken to him put him in a position of clarity in what to do. And he immediately adopted the strategies to achieve the goal: prayer and availability without measure, whatever the cost. It is no coincidence that the key virtues of this holy man are silent activity without show (cf. St Paul: 'It is when I am weak that I am strong') and a very respectful sense of others (cf. Acts: 'There is more joy in giving than in receiving').

Seen in this way, Father Francis Convertini was truly a man: shy, inclined to conceal his gifts and merits, averse to boasting, gentle with others and strong with himself, measured, balanced, prudent and faithful; a man of faith, hope and in habitual communion with God; an exemplary religious, in obedience, poverty and chastity."

## **2. Distinguishing traits: "charm emanated from him, which healed you".**

Retracing the stages of his childhood and youth,

his preparation for the priesthood and missionary life, God's special love for his servant and his correspondence with this good Father are evident. In particular, they stand out as distinctive features of his spiritual character:

– *Unbounded faith and trust in God, embodied in filial abandonment to the divine will.*

He had great faith in the infinite goodness and mercy of God and in the great merits of the passion and death of Jesus Christ, in whom he confided everything and from whom he expected everything. On the firm rock of this faith he undertook all his apostolic labours. Cold or heat, tropical rain or scorching sun, difficulty or fatigue, nothing prevented him from always proceeding with confidence when it was a matter of God's glory and the salvation of souls.

– *Unconditional love for Jesus Christ the Saviour, to whom he offered everything as a sacrifice, beginning with his own life, consigned to the cause of the Kingdom.*

Father Convertini rejoiced in the promise of the Saviour and rejoiced in the coming of Jesus, as universal Saviour and sole mediator between God and man: "Jesus gave us all of Himself by dying on the cross, and shall we not be able to give ourselves completely to Him?"

– *Integral salvation of our neighbour, pursued with passionate evangelisation.*

The abundant fruits of his missionary work were due to his unceasing prayer and unsparing sacrifices made for his neighbour. It is people and missionaries of such temperament who leave an indelible mark on the history of the Salesian missions, charism and priestly ministry.

Even in contact with Hindus and Muslims, while on the one hand he was urged by a genuine desire to proclaim the Gospel, which often led to the Christian faith, on the other hand he felt compelled to emphasise the basic truths easily perceived even by non-Christians, such as the infinite goodness of God, love of neighbour as the way to salvation,

and prayer as the means to obtain graces.

*– Unceasing union with God through prayer, the sacraments, entrustment to Mary Mother of God and ours, love for the Church and the Pope, devotion to the saints.*

He felt himself to be a son of the Church and served her with the heart of an authentic disciple of Jesus and missionary of the Gospel, entrusted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and in the company of the saints felt as intercessors and friends.

*– Simple and humble evangelical asceticism in the following of the cross, incarnated in an extraordinarily ordinary life.*

His profound humility, evangelical poverty (he carried with him only what was necessary) and angelic countenance transpired from his whole person. Voluntary penance, self-control: little or no rest, irregular meals. He deprived himself of everything to give to the poor, even his clothes, shoes, bed and food. He always slept on the floor. He fasted for a long time. As the years went by, he contracted several illnesses that undermined his health: he suffered from asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, heart ailments... many times they attacked him in such a way that he was bedridden. It was a marvel how he could bear it all without complaining. It was precisely this that attracted the veneration of the Hindus, for whom he was the “sanyasi”, the one who knew how to renounce everything for the love of God and for their sake.

His life seemed to be a straight ascent to the heights of holiness in the faithful fulfilment of God’s will and in the gift of himself to his brothers and sisters through the priestly ministry lived faithfully. Lay, religious and clergy alike speak of his extraordinary way of living daily life.

**3. Missionary of the Gospel of joy: “I proclaimed Jesus to them. Jesus the Saviour. Merciful Jesus.”**

There was not a day when he did not go to some

family to talk about Jesus and the Gospel. Father Francis had such enthusiasm and zeal that he even hoped for things that seemed humanly impossible. Father Francis became famous as a peacemaker between families, or between villages in discord. "It is not through arguments that we come to understand. God and Jesus are beyond dispute. We must above all pray and God will give us the gift of faith. Through faith one will find the Lord. Is it not written in the Bible that God is love? By the way of love one comes to God."

He was an inwardly peaceful man and brought peace. He wanted this to exist among people, in homes or villages, where there should be no quarrels, or fights, or divisions. "In our village we were Catholics, Protestants, Hindus and Muslims. So that peace would reign among us, from time to time father would gather us all together and tell us how we could and should live in peace among ourselves." Then he would listen to those who wanted to say something and at the end, after praying, he would give the blessing: a wonderful way to keep the peace among us. He had a truly astonishing peace of mind; it was the strength that came from the certainty he had of doing God's will, sought with effort, but then embraced with love once found.

He was a man who lived with evangelical simplicity, the transparency of a child, a willingness to make every sacrifice, knowing how to get in tune with every person he met on his path, travelling on horseback, or on a bicycle, or more often walking whole days with his rucksack on his shoulders. He belonged to everyone without distinction of religion, caste or social status. He was loved by all, because to all he brought "the water of Jesus that saves".

#### **4. A man of contagious faith: lips in prayer, rosary in hands, eyes to heaven**

"We know from him that he never neglected prayer, both when he was with others and when he was alone, even as a soldier. This helped him to do everything for God, especially



when he did first evangelisation among us. For him, there was no fixed time: morning or evening, sun or rain; heat or cold were no impediment when it came to talking about Jesus or doing good. When he went to the villages he would walk even at night and without taking food in order to get to some house or village to preach the Gospel. Even when he was placed as a confessor in Krishnagar, he would come to us for confessions during the sweltering heat of after lunch. I once said to him, "Why do you come at this hour?" And he replied, "In the passion, Jesus did not choose his convenient time when he was being led by Annas or Caiaphas or Pilate. He had to do it even against his own will, to do the Father's will."

He evangelised not by proselytism, but by attraction. It was his behaviour that attracted people. His dedication and love made people say that Father Francis was the true image of the Jesus he preached. His love of God led him to seek intimate union with him, to collect himself in prayer, to avoid anything that might displease God. He knew that one only knows God through charity. He used to say, "Love God, do not displease Him."

"If there was one sacrament in which Father Francis excelled heroically, it was the administration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For any person in our diocese of Krishnagar to say Father Francis is to say the man of God who showed the Father's fatherhood in forgiveness especially in the confessional. He spent the last 40 years of his life more in the confessional than in any other ministry: hours and hours, especially in preparation for feasts and solemnities. Thus the whole night of Christmas and Easter or patronal feasts. He was always punctually present in the confessional every day, but especially on Sundays before Masses or on the evening eve of feasts and Saturdays. Then he would go to other places where he was a regular confessor. This was a task very dear to him and much expected by all the religious of the diocese, for who he was available weekly. His confessional was always the most crowded and most desired. Priests, religious,

ordinary people: it seemed as if Father Francis knew everyone personally, so pertinent was he in his advice and admonitions. I myself marvelled at the wisdom of his admonitions when I went to confession to him. In fact, the Servant of God was my confessor throughout his life, from the time he was a missionary in the villages until the end of his days. I used to say to myself: "That is just what I wanted to hear from him...". Bishop Morrow, who went to him regularly for confession, considered him his spiritual guide, saying that Father Francis was guided by the Holy Spirit in his counsels and that his personal holiness made up for his lack of natural gifts.

Trust in God's mercy was an almost nagging theme in his conversations, and he used it well as a confessor. His confessional ministry was a ministry of hope for himself and for those who confessed to him. His words inspired hope in all who came to him. "In the confessional the Servant of God was the model priest, famous for administering this sacrament. The Servant of God was always teaching, trying to lead everyone to eternal salvation... The servant of God liked to direct his prayers to the Father who is in heaven, and he also taught people to see the good Father in God. Especially to those in difficulties, including spiritual ones, and to repentant sinners, he reminded them that God is merciful and that one must always trust in him. The Servant of God increased his prayers and mortifications to discount his infidelities, as he said, and for the sins of the world."

Father Rosario Stroschio, religious superior, who concluded the announcement of Father Francis' death, spoke eloquently as follows: "Those who knew Father Francis will always remember with love the little warnings and exhortations he used to give in confession. With his weak little voice, yet so full of ardour: 'Let us love souls, let us work only for souls... Let us approach the people... Let us deal with them in such a way that the people understand that we love them...' His

entire life was a magnificent testimony to the most fruitful technique of priestly ministry and missionary work. We can sum it up in the simple expression: 'To win souls to Christ there is no more powerful means than goodness and love!'"

## **5. He loved God and loved his neighbour for God's sake: Put love! Put love!**

His mother Catherine used to say "Put love! Put love!" to Ciccilluzzo, his nickname at home as he helped in the fields watching turkeys and doing other work appropriate to his young age,

"Father Francisco gave everything to God, because he was convinced that having consecrated everything to him as a religious and missionary priest, God had full rights over him. When we asked him why he did not go home (to Italy), he replied that he had now given himself entirely to God and to us." His being a priest was all for others: "I am a priest for the good of my neighbour. This is my first duty." He felt indebted to God in everything, indeed, everything belonged to God and to his neighbour, while he had given himself totally, reserving nothing for himself: Father Francesco continually thanked the Lord for choosing him to be a missionary priest. He showed this sense of gratitude towards anyone who had done anything for him, even the poorest.

He gave extraordinary examples of fortitude by adapting to the living conditions of the missionary work assigned to him: a new and difficult language, which he tried to learn quite well, because this was the way to communicate with his people; a very harsh climate, that of Bengal, the grave of so many missionaries, which he learned to endure for the love of God and souls; apostolic journeys on foot through unknown areas, with the risk of encountering wild animals.

He was a tireless missionary and evangeliser in a very difficult area such as Krishnagar – which he wanted to transform into Christ-nagar, the city of Christ – where conversions were difficult, not to mention the opposition of

Protestants and members of other religions. For the administration of the sacraments he faced all possible dangers: rain, hunger, disease, wild beasts, malicious people. "I have often heard the episode about Father Francesco, who one night, while taking the Blessed Sacrament to a sick person, came across a tiger crouching on the path where he and his companions had to pass... As the companions tried to flee, the Servant of God commanded the tiger: "Let your Lord pass!", and the tiger moved away. But I have heard other similar examples about the Servant of God, who many times travelled on foot at night. Once a band of brigands attacked him, believing they could steal something from him. But when they saw him thus deprived of everything except what he was carrying, they excused themselves and accompanied him to the next village."

His life as a missionary was constant travelling: by bicycle, on horseback and most of the time on foot. This walking on foot is perhaps the attitude that best portrays the tireless missionary and the sign of the authentic evangeliser: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger of glad tidings who proclaims peace, the messenger of good things who proclaims salvation" (Is 52:7).

## **6. Clear eyes turned to heaven**

"Observing the smiling face of the Servant of God and looking at his eyes clear and turned to heaven, one thought that he did not belong here, but in heaven. On seeing him for the very first time, many reported an unforgettable impression of him: his shining eyes that showed a face full of simplicity and innocence and his long, venerable beard recalled the image of a person full of goodness and compassion. One witness stated: "Father Francis was a saint. I do not know how to make a judgement, but I think that such people are not easily found. We were small, but he talked to us, he never despised anyone. He did not differentiate between Muslims and Christians. Father went to everyone in the same way and when we were together he treated us all the same. He would give us children advice: 'Obey your parents, do your

homework well, love each other as brothers'. He would then give us little sweets: in his pockets there was always something for us."

Father Francis displayed his love for God above all through prayer, which seemed to be uninterrupted. He could always be seen moving his lips in prayer. Even when he spoke to people, he always kept his eyes raised as if he were seeing someone he was talking to. What most often struck people was Father Convertini's ability to be totally focused on God and, at the same time, on the person in front of him, looking with sincere eyes at the brother he met on his path: "Without a doubt he had his eyes fixed on the face of God. This was an indelible trait of his soul, a spiritual concentration of an impressive level. He followed you attentively and answered you with great precision when you spoke to him. Yet, you sensed that he was 'elsewhere', in another dimension, in dialogue with the Other."

He encouraged others to holiness, as in the case of his cousin Lino Palmisano, who was preparing for the priesthood: "I am very happy knowing you are already in practical training; this too will soon pass, if you know how to take advantage of the graces of the Lord that he will give you every day, to transform yourself into a Christian saint of good sense. The most satisfying studies of theology await you, which will nourish your soul with the Spirit of God, who has called you to help Jesus in His apostolate. Think not of others, but of yourself alone, of how to become a holy priest like Don Bosco. Don Bosco also said in his time: times are difficult, but we will *puf, puf*, we will go ahead even against the current. It was the heavenly mother telling him: *infirmum mundi elegit Deus*. Don't worry, I will help you. Dear brother, the heart, the soul of a holy priest in the eyes of the Lord is worth more than anything else. The day of your sacrifice together with that of Jesus on the altar is near, prepare yourself. You will never regret being generous to Jesus and to your Superiors. Trust in them, they will help you overcome the

little difficulties of the day that your beautiful soul may encounter. I will remember you at Holy Mass every day, so that you too may one day offer yourself wholly to the Good Lord.”.

## **Conclusion**

As at the beginning, so also at the end of this brief excursus on the virtuous profile of Father Convertini, here is a testimony that summarises what has been presented.

“One of the pioneer figures that struck me deeply was that of the Venerable Father Francis Convertini, a zealous apostle of Christian love who managed to bring the news of the Redemption to churches, parish areas, to the alleyways and huts of refugees and to anyone he met, consoling, advising, helping with his exquisite charity: a true witness to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, on which we shall be judged: always ready and zealous in the ministry of the sacrament of forgiveness. Christians of all denominations, Muslims and Hindus, accepted with joy and readiness the one they called the man of God. He knew how to bring to each one the true message of love, which Jesus preached and brought to this land: with evangelical direct and personal contact, for young and old, boys and girls, poor and rich, authorities and pariahs (outcasts), that is, the last and most despised rung of (sub)human refuse. For me and for many others, it was deeply emotional experience that helped me to understand and live the message of Jesus: ‘Love one another as I have loved you’.”

The last word goes to Father Francis, as a legacy he leaves to each of us. On 24 September 1973, writing to his relatives from Krishnagar, the missionary wanted to involve them in the work for non-Christians that he had been doing with difficulty since his recent illness, but always with zeal: “After six months in hospital my health is a little weak, I feel like a broken and patched piñata. However, the merciful Jesus miraculously helps me in his work for souls. I let Him take me to the city and then return on foot, after

making Jesus and our holy religion known. Having finished hearing confessions at home, I go among the pagans who are much better than some Christians. Affectionately yours in the Heart of Jesus, Father Francis.”.

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## **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 gates 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).