

Habemus Papam: Leo XIV

On 8 May 2025, the feast day of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii, *Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost* (69) was elected as the **267th Pope**. He is the first Pope born in the United States and has chosen the name *Leo XIV*.

Here is a brief biography

Birth: 14 September 1955, Chicago (Illinois, USA)

Family: Louis Marius Prevost (of French and Italian origin) and Mildred Martínez (of Spanish origin); brothers Louis Martín and John Joseph

Languages: English, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and French; reads Latin and German

Nickname in Peru: '*Latin Yankee*' – a summary of his dual cultural identity

Citizenship: American and Peruvian

Education

- Augustinian minor seminary (1973)
- Bachelor's degree in Mathematical Sciences, Villanova University (1977)
- Master of Divinity, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago (1982)
- Licentiate in Canon Law, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas – Angelicum (1984)
- Doctorate in Canon Law, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas – Angelicum (1987), with a thesis entitled: 'The role of the local prior of the Order of St. Augustine'
- Religious profession: novitiate of Saint Louis of the Province of Our Lady of Good Counsel of the Order of Saint Augustine (1977)
- Solemn vows (29 August 1981)
- Priestly ordination: 19 June 1982, Rome (by Archbishop Jean

Jadot)

Ministry and main appointments

1985-1986: Missionary in Chulucanas, Piura (Peru)

1987: Director of vocations and director of missions of the Augustinian Province 'Mother of Good Counsel' in Olympia Fields, Illinois (USA)

1988: Sent to the mission in Trujillo (Peru) as director of the joint formation program for Augustinian aspirants from the Vicariates of Chulucanas, Iquitos, and Apurímac

1988-1992: Director of the community

1992-1998: Teacher of professed friars

1989-1998: Judicial Vicar in the Archdiocese of Trujillo, professor of Canon Law, Patristics, and Morals at the Major Seminary 'San Carlos y San Marcelo'

1999: Provincial Prior of the Province "Mother of Good Counsel" (Chicago)

2001-2013: Prior General of the Augustinians for two terms (approx. 2,700 religious in 50 countries)

2013: Teacher of professed religious and Provincial Vicar in his Province (Chicago)

2014: Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Chiclayo and Titular Bishop of Sufar, Peru (episcopal appointment on 3 November 2014)

2014: Episcopal consecration on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (12 December 2014)

2015: appointed bishop of Chiclayo (26 September 2015)

2018: 2nd vice-president of the Episcopal Conference of Peru (8 March 2018 – 30 January 2023)

2020: Apostolic Administrator of Callao, Peru (15 April 2020 – 17 April 2021)

2023: Archbishop ad personam (30 January 2023 – 30 September 2023)

2023: Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops (30 January 2023 [12 April 2023] – 9 May 2025)

2023: President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (30 January 2023 [12 April 2023] – 9 May 2025)

2023: Created Cardinal Deacon, titular of St. Monica of the Augustinians (30.09.2023 [28.01.2024] – 06.02.2025)

2025: Promoted to Cardinal Bishop of the Suburbicarian Diocese of Albano (06.02.2025 – 08.05.2025)

2025: Elected Supreme Pontiff (08.05.2025)

Service in the Roman Curia

He was a member of the Dicasteries for Evangelization, Section for First Evangelization and New Churches; for the Doctrine of the Faith; for the Eastern Churches; for the Clergy; for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life; for Culture and Education; for Legislative Texts, and of the Pontifical Commission for the Vatican City State

May the Holy Spirit enlighten his ministry, as he did with the great Saint Augustine.

Let us pray for a fruitful pontificate rich with hope!

St Dominic Savio. The places of his childhood

Saint Dominic Savio, the “little great saint,” lived his brief but intense childhood among the hills of Piedmont, in places now steeped in memory and spirituality. On the occasion of his beatification in 1950, this young disciple of Don Bosco was celebrated as a symbol of purity, faith, and devotion to the Gospel. We retrace the principal places of his childhood—Riva presso Chieri, Morialdo, and Mondonio—through historical testimonies and vivid accounts, revealing the family, scholastic, and spiritual environment that forged his path to sainthood.

The Holy Year 1950 was also the year Dominic Savio

was beatified, which took place on 5 March. The 15-year-old disciple of Don Bosco was the first lay saint 'confessor' to ascend the altars at such a young age.

On that day, St Peter's Basilica was packed with young people who bore witness, by their presence in Rome, to a Christian youth entirely open to the most sublime ideals of the Gospel. It was transformed, according to Vatican Radio, into an immense and noisy Salesian Oratory. When the veil covering the figure of the new Blessed fell from Bernini's rays, a frenzied applause rose from the whole basilica and the echo reached the square, where the tapestry depicting the Blessed was uncovered from the Loggia of Blessings.

Don Bosco's educational system received its highest recognition on that day. We wanted to revisit the places of Dominic's childhood after re-reading the detailed information of Fr Michele Molineris in his *Nuova Vita di Domenico Savio*, in which he describes with his well-known solid documentation what the biographies of St Dominic Savio do not say.

At Riva presso Chieri

Here we are, first of all, in [San Giovanni di Riva presso Chieri](#), the hamlet where our "little great Saint" was born on 2 April 1842 to Carlo Savio and Brigida Gaiato, as the second of ten children, inheriting his name and birthright from the first, who survived only 15 days after his birth.

His father, as we know, came from Ranello, a hamlet of Castelnuovo d'Asti, and as a young man had gone to live with his uncle Carlo, a blacksmith in Mondonio, in a house on today's Via Giunipero, at no. 1, still called 'ca dèlfré' or blacksmith's house. There, from 'Barba Carlòto' he had learned the trade. Some time after his marriage, contracted on 2 March 1840, he had become independent, moving to the Gastaldi house in San Giovanni di Riva. He rented accommodation with rooms on the ground floor suitable for a kitchen, storeroom and workshop, and bedrooms on the first floor, reached by an external staircase that has now

disappeared.

The Gastaldi heirs then sold the cottage and adjoining farmhouse to the Salesians in 1978. And today a modern youth centre, run by Salesian Past Pupils and Cooperators, gives memory and new life to the little house where Dominic was born.

In Morialdo

In November 1843, i.e. when Dominic had not yet reached the age of two, the Savio family, for work reasons, moved to [Morialdo](#), the hamlet of Castelnuovo linked to the name of St John Bosco, who was born at Cascina Biglione, a hamlet in the Becchi district.

In Morialdo, the Savios rented a few small rooms near the entrance porch of the farmstead owned by Viale Giovanna, who had married Stefano Persoglio. The whole farm was later sold by their son, Persoglio Alberto, to Pianta Giuseppe and family.

This farmstead is also now, for the most part, the property of the Salesians who, after restoring it, have used it for meetings for children and adolescents and for visits by pilgrims. Less than 2 km from Colle Don Bosco, it is situated in a country setting, amidst festoons of vines, fertile fields and undulating meadows, with an air of joy in spring and nostalgia in autumn when the yellowing leaves are gilded by the sun's rays, with an enchanting panorama on fine days, when the chain of the Alps stretches out on the horizon from the peak of Monte Rosa near Albugnano, to Gran Paradiso, to Rocciamelone, down as far as Monviso. It is truly a place to visit and to use for days of intense spiritual life, a Don Bosco-style school of holiness.

The Savio family stayed in Morialdo until February 1853, a good nine years and three months. Dominic, who lived only 14 years and eleven months, spent almost two thirds of his short existence there. He can therefore be considered not only Don Bosco's pupil and spiritual son, but also his countryman.

In Mondonio

Why the Savio family left Morialdo is suggested by Fr Molineris. His uncle the blacksmith had died and Dominic's father could inherit not only the tools of the trade but also the clientele in Mondonio. That was probably the reason for the move, which took place, however, not to the house in Via Giunipero, but to the lower part of the village, where they rented the first house to the left of the main village street, from the Bertello brothers. The small house consisted, and still consists today, of a ground floor with two rooms, adapted as a kitchen and workroom, and an upper floor, above the kitchen, with two bedrooms and enough space for a workshop with a door on the street ramp.

We know that Mr and Mrs Savio had ten children, three of whom died at a very young age and three others, including Dominic, did not reach the age of 15. The mother died in 1871 at the age of 51. The father, left alone at home with his son John, after having taken in the three surviving daughters, asked Don Bosco for hospitality in 1879 and died at Valdocco on 16 December 1891.

Dominic had entered Valdocco on 29 October 1854, remaining there, except for short holiday periods, until 1 March 1857. He died eight days later at [Mondonio](#), in the little room next to the kitchen, on 9 March of that year. His stay at Mondonio was therefore about 20 months in all, at Valdocco 2 years and 4 months.

Memories of Morialdo

From this brief review of the three Savio houses, it is clear that the one in Morialdo must be the richest in memories. San Giovanni di Riva recalls Dominic's birth, and Mondonio a year at school and his holy death, but Morialdo recalls his life in the family, in church and at school. '*Minòt*', as he was called there – how many things he must have heard, seen and learnt from his father and mother, how much faith and love he showed in the little church of San Pietro, how much intelligence and goodness at the school run by Fr

Giovanni Zucca, and how much fun and liveliness in the playground with his fellow villagers.

It was in Morialdo that Dominic Savio prepared for his First Communion, which he then made in the parish church of Castelnuovo on 8 April 1849. It was there, when he was only 7 years old, that he wrote his "Reminders", that is, the resolutions for his First Communion:

1. I will go to confession very often and take communion as often as the confessor gives me permission;
2. I want to keep feast days holy;
3. My friends will be Jesus and Mary;
4. Death but not sin.

Memories that were the guide for his actions until the end of his life.

A boy's demeanour, way of thinking and acting reflect the environment in which he lived, and especially the family in which he spent his childhood. So if one wants to understand something about Dominic, it is always good to reflect on his life in that farmstead in Morialdo.

The family

His was not a farming family. His father was a blacksmith and his mother a seamstress. His parents were not of robust constitution. The signs of fatigue could be seen on his father's face, his mother's face stood out for its delicate lines. Dominic's father was a man of initiative and courage. His mother came from the not too distant Cerreto d'Asti where she kept a dressmaker's shop "and with her skill she made it possible for the local inhabitants to get clothes there rather than go elsewhere." And she was still a seamstress in Morialdo too. Would Don Bosco have known this? His conversation with little Dominic who had gone to look for him at the Becchi was interesting:

"Well, what do you think?"

"It seems to me that there is good stuff (in piem.: Eh, m'a smia ch'a-j'sia bon-a stòfa!)."

"What can this fabric be used for?"

“To make a beautiful suit to give to the Lord.”

“So, I am the cloth: you be the tailor; take me with you (in piem.: ch’èmpija ansema a chiel) and you can make a beautiful suit for the Lord.” (OE XI, 185).

A priceless conversation between two countrymen who understood each other at first sight. And their language was just right for the dressmaker’s son.

When their mother died on 14 July 1871, the parish priest of Mondonio, Fr Giovanni Pastrone, said to his weeping daughters, to console them: “Don’t cry, because your mother was a holy woman; and now she is already in Paradise.”

Her son Dominic, who had preceded her into heaven by several years, had also said to her and to his father, before he passed away: “Do not weep, I already see the Lord and Our Lady with open arms waiting for me.” These last words of his, witnessed by his neighbour Anastasia Molino, who was present at the time of his death, were the seal of a joyful life, the manifest sign of that sanctity that the Church solemnly recognised on 5 March 1950, later giving it definitive confirmation on 12 June 1954 with his canonisation.

Frontispiece photo. The house where Dominic died in 1857. It is a rural dwelling, likely dating from the late 17th century. Rebuilt upon an even older house, it is one of the most cherished landmarks for the people of Mondonio.

Election of the 266th Successor of Saint Peter

Every death or resignation of a Pontiff opens one of the most delicate phases in the life of the Catholic Church: the election of the Successor of Saint Peter. Although the last

conclave dates back to March 2013, when Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis, understanding how a Pope is elected remains essential to grasp the functioning of a millennia-old institution that influences over 1.3 billion faithful and – indirectly – global geopolitics.

1. The Vacant See

Everything begins with the **vacant see**, that is, the period between the death (or resignation) of the reigning Pontiff and the election of the new one. The apostolic constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*, promulgated by John Paul II on February 22, 1996, and updated by Benedict XVI in 2007 and 2013, establishes detailed procedures.

Verification of the vacancy

In case of death: the Cardinal Camerlengo – currently Cardinal Kevin Farrell – officially confirms the death, closes and seals the papal apartment, and notifies the Dean of the College of Cardinals.

In case of resignation: the vacant see begins at the time indicated in the resignation act, as happened at 8:00 PM on February 28, 2013, for Benedict XVI.

Ordinary administration

During the vacant see, the Camerlengo manages the material assets of the Holy See but cannot perform acts reserved exclusively for the Pontiff (such as episcopal appointments, doctrinal decisions, etc.).

General and particular congregations

All cardinals – electors and non-electors – present in Rome gather in the Synod Hall to discuss urgent matters. The “particular” congregations include the Camerlengo and three cardinals drawn by lot in rotation; the “general” congregations summon the entire College of Cardinals and are used, among other things, to set the start date of the conclave.

2. Who can elect and who can be elected

The electors

Since Paul VI's motu proprio *Ingravescentem aetatem* (1970), **only cardinals who have not reached the age of 80 before the start of the vacant see have the right to vote**. The maximum number of electors is set at 120, but this can be temporarily exceeded due to closely spaced consistories.

Electors must:

- be present in Rome by the start of the conclave (except for serious reasons);
- take an oath of secrecy;
- stay at the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, the residence established by John Paul II to ensure dignity and discretion.

The enclosure is not a medieval whim: it aims to protect the cardinals' freedom of conscience and shield the Church from undue interference. Breaking the secrecy results in automatic excommunication.

Those eligible

In theory, **any baptized male** can be elected Pope, since the Petrine office is of divine right. However, from the Middle Ages to today, the Pope has always been chosen from among the cardinals. If a non-cardinal or even a layman were chosen, he would have to be immediately ordained a bishop.

3. The conclave: etymology, logistics, and symbolism

The term "conclave" comes from the Latin *cum clave*, "with key": the cardinals are "locked in" until the election to avoid external pressures. The enclosure is guaranteed by several rules:

- Allowed places: Sistine Chapel (voting), *Domus Sanctae Marthae* (lodging), a reserved path between the two buildings.
- Communication ban: electronic devices are collected, signal jammers used, *anti-spy controls* in place.
- Secrecy is also ensured by an oath that includes spiritual sanctions (*automatic* excommunication) and canonical penalties.

4. Typical agenda of the conclave

1. "*Pro eligendo Pontifice*" Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on the morning of the entry into the conclave.
2. Procession in the Sistine Chapel reciting the *Veni Creator Spiritus*.
3. Individual oath of the cardinals, pronounced before the Gospel book.
4. *Extra omnes!* ("Everyone out!"): the Master of Pontifical Liturgical Celebrations dismisses those not entitled to stay.
5. First (optional) vote on the afternoon of the entry day.
6. Two daily votes (morning and afternoon) followed by the scrutiny (counting).

5. Voting procedure

Each round follows four steps:

5.1. *Praescrutinium*. Distribution and filling out in Latin of the ballot "*Eligo in Summum Pontificem...*".

5.2. *Scrutinium*. Each cardinal, carrying the folded ballot, says: "*Testor Christum Dominum...*". He deposits the ballot in the urn.

5.3. *Post-scrutinium*. Three *scrutators* drawn by lot count the ballots, read aloud each name, record it, and perforate the ballot with needle and thread.

5.4. *Burning*. Ballots and notes are burned in a special stove; the colour of the smoke indicates the result.

To be elected, a qualified majority is required, that is, two-thirds of valid votes.

6. The smoke: black waiting, white joy

Since 2005, to make the signal unmistakable to the faithful in St. Peter's Square, a chemical reagent is added:

– Black smoke (*fumata nera*): no one elected.

– White smoke (*fumata bianca*): Pope elected; bells also ring.

After the white smoke, it takes another 30 minutes to an hour before the new Pope is announced by the Cardinal Deacon in St. Peter's Square. Shortly after (5 to 15 minutes), the new Pope appears to give the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing.

7. “*Acceptasne electionem?*” – Acceptance and pontifical name

When someone reaches the required threshold, the Dean of the College of Cardinals (or the oldest by order and legal seniority if the Dean is the elected) asks: “*Acceptasne electionem de te canonice factam in Summum Pontificem?*” (Do you accept the canonically made election as Supreme Pontiff?). If the elected consents – *Accepto!* – he is asked: “*Quo nomine vis vocari?*” (By what name do you wish to be called?). Taking the name is an act full of theological and pastoral meanings: it recalls models (Francis of Assisi) or reform intentions (John XXIII).

8. Immediately following rites

8.1 *Vesting*.

8.2 *Entry into the Chapel of Tears*, where the new Pope can recollect himself.

8.3 *Obedientia*: the electing cardinals file past for the first act of obedience.

8.4 *Announcement to the world*: the Protodeacon appears on the central balcony with the famous “*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum: habemus Papam!*”

8.5 *First “Urbi et Orbi” blessing* of the new Pontiff.

From that moment, he takes possession of the office and formally begins his pontificate, while the coronation with the pallium and the Fisherman’s ring takes place at the inauguration Mass (usually the following Sunday).

9. Some historical aspects and development of the norms

1st–3rd centuries: Acclamation by clergy and Roman people. In the absence of stable norms, imperial influence was strong.

1059 – *In nomine Domini*. College of Cardinals. Nicholas II limits lay intervention; official birth of the conclave.

1274 – *Ubi Periculum*. Mandatory enclosure. Gregory X reduces political manoeuvres, introduces seclusion.

1621–1622 – Gregory XV. Systematic secret ballot. Improvement of ballots; two-thirds requirement.

1970 – Paul VI. Age limit of 80 years. Reduces electorate, favouring quicker decisions.

1996 – John Paul II. *Universi Dominici Gregis*. Modern codification of the process, introduces *Domus Sanctae Marthae*.

10. Some concrete data of this Conclave

Living cardinals: 252 (average age: 78.0 years).

Voting cardinals: 134 (135). Cardinal Antonio Cañizares Llovera, Archbishop Emeritus of Valencia, Spain, and Cardinal John Njue, Archbishop Emeritus of Nairobi, Kenya, have announced that they will not be able to participate in the conclave.

Of the 135 voting cardinals, 108 (80%) were appointed by Pope Francis. 22 (16%) were appointed by Pope Benedict XVI. The remaining 5 (4%) were appointed by Pope Saint John Paul II.

Of the 135 voting cardinals, 25 participated as electors in the 2013 Conclave.

Average age of the 134 participating cardinal electors: 70.3 years.

Average years of service as cardinal of the 134 participating cardinal electors: 7.1 years.

Average length of a papacy: about 7.5 years.

Start of the Conclave: May 7, Sistine Chapel.

Voting cardinals in the Conclave: 134. Number of votes required for election is two-thirds, i.e., 89 votes.

Voting schedule: 4 votes per day (2 in the morning, 2 in the afternoon).

After 3 full days (to be defined), voting is suspended for a full day (“to allow a prayer pause, informal discussion among electors, and a brief spiritual exhortation”).

Then follow 7 more ballots and another pause up to a full day.

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Then 7 more ballots and then a pause to evaluate how to proceed.

11. Unwritten “internal” dynamics

Despite the strict legal framework, the choice of the Pope is a spiritual but also a human process influenced by:

- Profiles of candidates (“papabili”): geographic origin, pastoral experience, doctrinal competence.
- Ecclesial currents: curial or pastoral, reformist or conservative, liturgical sensitivities.
- Global agenda : ecumenical relations, inter-religious dialogue, social crises (migrants, climate change).
- Languages and personal networks: cardinals tend to gather by region (the “Latin American” group, “African” group, etc.) and meet informally during meals or “walks” in the Vatican gardens.

A spiritual and institutional event together

The election of a Pope is not a technical step comparable to a corporate assembly. Despite the human dimension, it is a **spiritual act essentially guided by the Holy Spirit.**

The care of minute rules – from sealing the Sistine doors to burning the ballots – shows how the Church has transformed its long historical experience into a system now perceived as stable and solemn.

Knowing how a Pope is chosen, therefore, is not just curiosity: it is understanding the dynamic between authority, collegiality, and tradition that supports the oldest religious institution still operating worldwide. And, in an age of dizzying changes, that “little smoke” rising from the roof of the Sistine Chapel continues to remind us that centuries-old decisions can still speak to the hearts of billions, inside and outside the Church.

May this knowledge of the data and procedures help us to pray more deeply, as one should pray before every important decision that affects our life.

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

When the Lord Knocks

A confrere told me, "Father, we only need your closeness, your listening, your prayer. This consoles us, encourages us, and gives us strength and hope so that we can continue to serve the young, the poor and wounded, the frightened and terrified!"

On March 25, 2025, the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary. One of the most significant solemnities for the Christian faith. On this solemnity, we remember the initiative of God who becomes part of that human history that he himself created. On that day in the Holy Eucharist, we recite the Creed, and when we profess that the Son of God became man, we believers kneel as a sign of amazement at this wonderful initiative of God before which we can only kneel.

In the experience of the Annunciation, Mary is afraid: "Do not be afraid, Mary," the Angel tells her. After she has expressed her questions, being assured that it is God's plan for her, Mary responds with a simple phrase that remains for us today a reminder and an invitation. Mary, the Blessed among women, simply says, "Let it be done to me according to your word."

Last March 25, the Lord knocked on the door of my heart through the call that my brothers at the 29th General Chapter addressed to me. They asked me to make myself available to take on the mission of being Rector Major of the Salesians of

Don Bosco, the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales. I confess that at that moment I felt the weight of the invitation, moments that disorient because what the Lord was asking of me was not a light thing. The point is that when the call comes, we as believers enter that sacred space where we strongly feel the fact that it is He who takes the initiative. The only path before us is to simply abandon ourselves into the hands of God, without ifs, ands, or buts. And all this is naturally not easy.

“You will see how the Lord works”

In these first weeks, I am still asking myself like Mary, what is the meaning of all this? Then little by little I begin to arrive at that consolation that one of my Provincials once told me: “When the Lord calls, it is He who takes the initiative, what is done depends on Him. You just keep yourself ready and available. You will see how the Lord works.”

In light of this personal but very broad experience, because it concerns the Salesian Congregation and the Salesian Family, I immediately turned to my dear Salesian brothers. From the first moment, I asked them to accompany me with their prayer, their closeness, their support.

I must confess that in these first weeks I already feel that this mission must be inspired by Mary. After the Annunciation by the Angel, she set out to help her cousin Elizabeth. And thus, I set out to serve my brothers, listening to them, sharing with them, and reassuring them of the support of the entire Congregation, especially for those who live in situations of war, conflict, and extreme poverty.

I was struck by the comment of a Provincial who is experiencing an extremely difficult situation with his confreres. After a very fraternal conversation, he said to me, “Father, we only need your closeness, your listening, your prayer. This consoles us, encourages us, and gives us strength and hope so that we can continue to serve the young, the poor and wounded, the frightened and terrified!” After this

comment, we remained silent, he and I, with some tears falling from his eyes and, I must say, also from mine.

After the meeting, I remained alone in my office. I asked myself if this mission that the Lord is asking me to accept is not perhaps that of making myself a brother alongside my brothers who suffer but hope? Who fight to do good for the poor and have no intention of stopping? I felt a voice inside me saying that it is worth saying 'yes' when the Lord knocks, whatever the cost!

The way to hell paved with feeble resolutions (1873)

San Giovanni Bosco recounts in a "good night" the result of a long plea to Mary Help of Christians: to understand the main cause of eternal damnation. The answer, received in repeated dreams, is shocking in its simplicity: the lack of a firm, concrete resolution at the end of Confession. Without a sincere decision to change one's life, even the sacrament becomes ineffective and sins are repeated.

A solemn warning: Why do so many go to destruction? Because they do not make good resolutions when they go to confession.

At the "Good Night" on May 31, 1873, Don Bosco gave his pupils a serious warning, which, he said, was "the result of his humble prayers" and came from the Lord:

Throughout the whole month of May-he said-particularly during the novena of Mary, Help of Christians, I constantly offered Masses and prayers to Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin imploring them to let me know what, most of all

drags souls into hell. I do not say now that the Lord did or did not enlighten me. I only say that almost every night I dreamed that this is due to the lack of firm resolves in confessions. I seemed to see boys leaving church after confession, their heads sprouting two horns.

What causes this? I asked myself. *Ah, this is due to feeble resolutions.* That's why so many go frequently to confession but never mend their ways and keep confessing the same sins over and over again. There are some (I am only conjecturing. not going on anything heard in confession, because of the seal) who at the start of the school year were doing rather poorly in studies and are still doing no better: there are others who griped and are still griping. I thought it best to let you know this, because it is the result of my humble prayers and because it does come from the Lord.

Publicly he gave no other details, but undoubtedly he took advantage of this dream to encourage and admonish. What little he did say and the way he said it constituted a grave warning, such as should frequently be given to our boys. *(BM X, 48-49)*

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’s 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.

The Legacy of Pope Francis

Amid the flood of articles and comments that have accompanied these days, we simply want to express our **thanks** to Pope Francis for the human and spiritual heritage he leaves us:

1. For Divine Mercy. Thank you for tirelessly reminding us that "God never tires of forgiving" and for the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.

2. For the joy of faith. Thank you for teaching us that faith in Jesus Christ allows us to live “on the wings of hope”: truly *Spes non confundit*.

3. For devotion to Mary. Thank you for the testimony of filial devotion to the Mother of God, the Most Holy Mary.

4. For disarming simplicity. Thank you for a sober lifestyle that has marked every gesture of his pontificate.

5. For prioritizing the least. Thank you for placing the poor, the homeless, refugees, migrants, and prisoners at the center.

6. For denouncing the “throwaway culture”. Thank you for condemning the exploitation and instrumentalization of people, unscrupulous profit, and rampant consumerism.

7. For the value of the family. Thank you for warning us that pets cannot replace children.

8. For attention to the elderly. Thank you for reminding us that fragile life is not to be discarded: the elderly are not to be euthanized for being useless or unproductive, but are witnesses of peace, love, and blessing.

9. For synodality. Thank you for showing that Christianity is not a “do-it-yourself” project, but communion with God and with brothers and sisters.

10. For ecumenical openness. Thank you for seeking unity among Christians with concrete and courageous gestures.

11. For the fight for peace. Thank you for raising your voice in a world torn apart by a “third world war in pieces.”

12. For the prophetic vision of the present time. Thank you for helping us understand that we are not simply living through an era of change, but the change of an era.

Thank you. May God reward all the good sown on earth.

Purity and ways it can be safeguarded (1884)

In this dream of Don Bosco, a heavenly garden appears: a green slope, festooned trees, and, in the center, an immense, snow-white carpet adorned with biblical inscriptions praising purity. On its edge sit two twelve-year-old girls, dressed in white with red sashes and floral crowns: they personify Innocence and Penance. With gentle voices, they discuss the value of baptismal innocence, the dangers that threaten it, and the sacrifices needed to preserve it: prayer, mortification, obedience, purity of the senses.

He seemed to see before him an enchanting and immense green slope, gently inclined and leveled. At the foot of it, a meadow formed that was equivalent to a low step from which one could jump off onto the little path where Don Bosco was standing. All around it looked like an earthly paradise, magnificently illuminated by a light that was brighter and purer even than that of the sun. It was covered all around by green vegetation, star-spangled by a thousand different kinds of flowers, and shaded by an infinite number of trees, whose branches intertwined, stretching out like immense festoons.

In the center of the garden and stretching to its further border was a carpet of magic candor, so dazzling that the eyes were blinded. It was several miles wide, as magnificent as royal pomp. Several inscriptions in golden letters ornamented the border encircling it. On one side it read: *Beati immaculati in via, qui ambulant in lege Domini*; on another side: *Non privabit bonis eos, qui ambulant in innocentia*; on the third side: *Non confundentur in tempore malo, in diebus famis saturabuntur*; on the fourth: *Novit Dominus dies immaculatorum et haereditas eorum in aeternum*

erit.

At the four corners of the area surrounding a magnificent rose bed were four more inscriptions: *Cum simplicibus sermocinatio eius; Proteget gradientes simpliciter; Qui ambulant simpliciter, ambulant confidenter; Voluntas eius in iis, qui simpliciter ambulant.*

In the middle of this area was the last inscription: *Qui ambulant simpliciter, salvus erit.*

In the middle of the slope and on the upper border of this carpet, there was a pure white streamer with gold letters that read: *Fili mi, tu semper mecum es et omnia mea tua sunt.*

Though Don Bosco was enchanted by the garden, his attention was drawn to two lovely, little maidens who were about twelve years old and who were sitting at the edge of the carpet where the slope formed a low step. Their whole gracious mien emanated a heavenly modesty. One did not only perceive the innocent simplicity of a dove in their eyes that gazed steadily upward, but also a most pure, fervent love and a joyful, heavenly happiness. Their broad, serene brows seemed to harbor candor and sincerity, while a sweet, enchanting smile hovered on their lips. Their features denoted tender, ardent hearts, and the graceful movements of their bodies conferred a dignity and nobility on them that contrasted oddly with their youth.

A pure, white garment fell to their feet, and no stain, wrinkle, or even speck of dust was apparent on it. Around their waists were fiery red sashes, bordered with gold and adorned by what looked like a ribbon embroidered with lilies, violets and roses. They wore a similar ribbon like a necklace that was made of the same flowers, though somewhat different in design. There were little wreaths of white daisies at their wrists, like bracelets, and all of these things and flowers were so beautiful in form and color that it would have been impossible to describe them. Even the most precious jewels of this world mounted with the most exquisite work-manship would have looked like mud in contrast.

Their pure, white shoes were edged with a white

ribbon interwoven with gold, handsomely tied into a center bow. They were laced with a narrow white cord, in which small golden threads glinted.

Their long hair, forming a shadow in its thickness and falling in curled ringlets over their shoulders, was covered by a crown.

They were talking with each other. They took turns to speak, asking each other questions and issuing exclamations. They would both sit, or one sat while the other stood or they would stroll together, but they never stepped off the candid carpet or touched either the grass or the flowers. Don Bosco stood there like a spectator in his dream, without speaking to the little maidens, and they did not seem to be aware of his presence. One of them addressed the other in a harmonious voice: "What is innocence? The happy condition of sanctifying grace preserved by constant, scrupulous observance of the Divine Commandments."

The other girl answered in a voice that was no less sweet: "The purity of innocence preserved is the source and origin of all knowledge and virtue."

The first maiden: "How splendid, how glorious, how magnificent is the virtue to live honestly among those who are evil, to retain the candor of innocence and purity of one's habits amid those who are evil."

The other maiden rose to her feet and standing beside her companion said, "Blessed is the boy who does not heed the council of the godless, who does not walk in the way of the sinner, but who delights in the Commandments of the Lord, contemplating them day and night. He shall be like a tree planted beside the river where the water of God's grace flows, and which shall, in its good time, yield the abundant fruit of good works. The leaves of his holy intentions and his merit shall not fall before the blowing of the wind, and all that he shall do shall be successful. In all circumstances of his life, he shall work to enhance his reward."

So saying, she pointed to the trees laden with beautiful, fragrant fruits in the garden around them, while

sparkling little brooks ran between two flowering banks or fell in tiny waterfalls, forming small lakes, bathing the trunks of the trees with a murmur that sounded like the mysterious strains of distant music.

The first maiden answered, "He is like a lily amid the thorns which God shall pluck in His garden to wear as an ornament over His heart. He may say to his Lord, 'My Beloved is mine, and I am His, who feeds among the lilies.'"

So saying, she pointed to a great cluster of beautiful lilies that lifted their candid heads amid the grass and other flowers, and also to a tall hedge in the distance that surrounded the gardens with greenery. This hedge was thick with thorns and beyond it one could perceive horrible monsters moving around like shadows, trying to get inside the garden, though the thorns on the hedge barred their way.

"It is true! How much truth there is in your words!" the other girl said. "Blessed is the boy who shall be found without sin! But who can he be? How are we to praise him? For he has done wondrous things in his life. He was found to be perfect and shall have glory in eternity. He could sin and did not; he could have done wrong, but did not. For this the Lord has prepared his reward, and his good deeds shall be celebrated by all the Congregations of Saints."

"And what great glory God has in store for them here on earth! He will summon them, giving them a place in His Sanctuary, He will make them ministers of His Mysteries, and shall confer on them an eternal name which shall never perish," the first said.

The second rose to her feet now and exclaimed, "Who could describe the beauty of the innocent? The soul is magnificently arrayed like one of us, adorned with the white stole of Holy Baptism. His neck and arms are ablaze with divine jewels, and on his finger gleams the ring of an alliance with God. His soul moves lightly along its journey toward eternity. Before him there is a path spangled with stars. The innocent is a living tabernacle of the Holy Spirit. The blood of Jesus runs through his veins, staining crimson

his cheeks and lips, and the Most Holy Trinity on his immaculate heart sheds torrents of light all around it, which clothes it in the brightness of the sun. From on high, clouds of celestial flowers fill the air in a downpour of rain. All around him, sweet melodies are heard and the angels echo the prayer of his soul. The Most Holy Mary is at his side, ready to defend him. Heaven stands open for him. The infinite legions of the saints and of the Blessed Spirits stand ranged before him, inviting him to advance by waving their palms. In the inaccessible radiance of His Throne of Glory, God lifts His Right Hand to indicate the place prepared for him, while in His Left, He holds the magnificent crown with which he shall be crowned forever. The innocent is the desire, the joy and the pride of Paradise. An ineffable joy is engraved on his countenance. He is the Son of God. God is his Father. Paradise is his heritage. He is constantly with God. He sees Him, loves Him, serves Him, possesses Him, enjoys Him, and possesses a range of heavenly delights. He is in possession of all treasures, all graces, all secrets, all gifts, all perfections, and the whole of God himself.

“That is why the innocence of saints, and especially of the martyrs in the old and New Testament, is depicted so gloriously. Oh, innocence! How beautiful you are! Tempted, you grow in perfection; humiliated, you soar even higher; embattled, you emerge triumphant; when slain, you soar toward your crown. You are free in slavery, serene and certain in peril, happy when in chains. The mighty bow before you, princes hail you, the great do seek you. The pious obey you, the evil envy you, your rivals emulate you, and your enemies succumb before you. Always shall you be victorious, even when men shall condemn you unjustly!”

The two little maidens were silent for a moment, as if to take a breath after this impassioned rhapsody. Then, they took each other by the hand, exchanged glances, and spoke in turn.

“Oh, if only the young knew how precious is the treasure of innocence, how jealously would they defend the

stole of Holy Baptism from the beginning of their days! But alas, they do not reflect, and do not know what it means to soil it. Innocence is a most precious nectar."

"But it is contained in a jar of fragile clay, and unless one carries it with great care, it is easily broken."

"Innocence is a most precious jewel."

"But if one is unaware of its value, it can be lost and will easily be transformed into base metal."

"Innocence is a golden mirror which reflects the likeness of God."

"Yet a breath of humid air is enough to make it rusty, and one must needs keep it wrapped in a veil."

"Innocence is a lily."

"Yet a mere touch from a rough hand will wither it."

"Innocence is a candid garment. *Omni tempore sint vestimenta tua candida* [May your garment be always white]."

"Yet a single blemish will defile it, so one must proceed with great caution."

"Innocence and integrity are violated if soiled by only one stain, and will lose the treasure of grace."

"Only one mortal sin is enough."

"And once lost, it is lost forever."

"What a tragedy it is that so many lose their innocence in one single day! When a boy falls victim to sin, Paradise closes its doors; the Blessed Virgin and his Guardian Angel disappear; music is silent; light fades away. God will no longer be in his heart; the star-spangled path he was following vanishes; he falls and will linger like an island in the midst of the sea, in one single place; a sea of fire will extend to the furthest horizon of eternity, falling down into the abyss of chaos. Over his head in the darkly menacing sky, flash the lightning flares of divine justice. Satan has hastened to join him, and loads him now with chains; he places a foot upon his neck, and raising his horrible countenance toward the sky, he shouts, 'I have won. Your son is now my

slave. He is no longer yours. Joy is over for him.' If in His Justice God then removes from beneath him that one little place where he is standing, he will be lost forever."

"Yet he may rise again! The Mercy of God is infinite! A good confession will restore grace to him and his title as the son of God."

"But not his innocence! And what consequences will linger on in him after that initial sin! He is now aware of the sin of which he had no knowledge previously; terrible will be the evil inclinations he will experience; he will feel the terrible debt he has contracted toward Divine Justice and will find that he is now weaker in his spiritual battles. He will feel that which he had never felt before: shame, sadness, remorse."

"To think that previously it was said of him, 'Let the little children come unto Me. They will be like God's Angels in Heaven. My Son, give me your heart.'"

"Ah, those wretches who are guilty for the loss of innocence in a child commit a hideous crime. Jesus said, 'Whoever shall give scandal to any of these little ones who believe in Me, it would have been better if he had put a millstone around his neck, and drown in the depths of the sea. Woe unto the world because of scandal. It is not possible that scandal be prevented, but woe unto him who is guilty of it. Beware, lest you despise any of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in Heaven see constantly the face of My Father Who is in Heaven and Who demands vengeance.'"

"Wretches, indeed, are they! But no less wretched are those who permit them to steal their innocence."

Then they both began to stroll up and down, talking about how innocence could be preserved.

One of them said, "Boys make a great mistake when they think that only those who have sinned should do penance. Penance is necessary so that innocence may be retained. Had St. Aloysius not done penance, he would, beyond any doubt, have committed mortal sins. This should be preached, driven home, and taught constantly to the young. How many more there

would be who would retain their innocence, whereas now there are so few."

"The Apostle says it. We should be carrying within our own body the mortification of Jesus Christ everywhere, so that the life of Jesus may manifest in our body."

"Jesus, who was holy, immaculate and innocent lived His Life in privation and suffering."

"So did the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints."

"They did this to give an example to youth. St. Paul says, 'If you live by the flesh, you shall die; but if you slay the action of the flesh with the spirit, you shall live.'"

"So innocence can only be retained through penance!"

"Yet, many wish to retain their innocence while living in freedom!"

"Fools! Is it not written that he was taken away, so that malice should not destroy his spirit, and temptation might not lead his soul into sin? For the lure of vanity obscures what is good, and the vortex of lust perverts the innocent soul. The innocent, therefore, has two enemies: the evil maxims and bad words of the wicked and concupiscence. Does not the Lord say that death at an early age is the reward of the innocent because it sets him free from battle? 'Because he was pleasing to God, He was loved, and because he lived among sinners, he snatched him away.' 'He lived but briefly, and had a great career.' 'For his soul was loved by God, and for this He hastened to pluck him forth out of iniquity.' 'He was taken away so that malice might not destroy his spirit, and temptation might not lead his soul into sin.'"

"Fortunate are the young who embrace the cross of penance and who repeat with Job (27:5) with a steadfast resolution '*Donec deficiam, non recedam ab innocentia mea* [I will maintain my innocence to my dying day].'"

"Hence, mortification is needed to overcome the boredom they experience in prayer."

"It is also written: *Psallam et intelligam in via immaculata* (Psalm 100:2). *Quando venies ad me? Petite et accipietis. Pater noster!* [All along the immaculate path I will sing and I will understand. When will you come to me and ask and you shall receive Our Father!]"

"Mortification of the mind by accepting humiliation, by obedience to one's superiors and to the rules."

"It is likewise written: *Si mei non fuerint dominati, tunc immaculatus ero et emendabor a delicto maximo* [Never let (pride) dominate me, then I shall be above reproach and free from grave sin] (Psalm 19:13). This is pride. God resists against the proud and gives grace to the humble. He who humbles himself shall be exalted, and he who exalts himself shall be humbled. Obey your superiors."

"Mortification always in telling the truth, in acknowledging one's faults and whatever dangers one may find himself in. Then, one will always be well advised, especially by his confessor."

"*Pro anima tua ne confundaris dicere verum*, for your soul be not ashamed to tell the truth (Ecclesiasticus 4:24). For there is a kind of blush that calls for sin, and another kind of blush which calls for glory and grace."

"Mortification of the heart by restraining its ill-advised impulses, by loving everyone for God's sake, and resolutely turning away from anyone who we realize is tempting our innocence."

"Jesus said it. If your hand or your foot give scandal, cut it off and cast it from thee; it is better that you go through life without a foot or without a hand than to be cast into eternal fire with both your hands and your feet. If your eye offends you, pluck it out and cast it away from you; it is better that you should enter eternity with but one eye only than to be cast with both your eyes into the flames of Hell."

“Mortification in courageously and frankly enduring the scorn of human respect. *Exacuerunt, ut gladium, linguas suas: intenderunt arcum, rem amaram, ut sagittent in occultis immaculatum* [They sharpened their tongues like swords shooting bitter words like arrows shooting them at the innocent from cover](Psalm 64:3).”

“They will overcome the evil person who scoffs, fearing that his superiors may find him out, at the thought of the terrible words of Jesus: ‘The son of man shall be ashamed of the one who will be ashamed of him and his words, when He shall come in all His majesty, and the majesty of His Father and of the Holy Angels.’”

“Mortification of the eyes, in looking at things, and people, in reading, and by avoiding all bad or unsuitable books.”

“One essential thing. I have made a pact with my eyes never to even think of a virgin. And in the psalms: Turn away your eyes, so that they may not look on vanity.”

“Mortification of the ears: never listen to evil conversations or mawkish or godless speech.”

“In Ecclesiasticus 28:28, we read: *Sepi aures tuas spinis, linguam nequam noli audire* [Fence your ears with a quick thorn hedge never heed a wicked tongue].”

“Mortification is speech: do not let curiosity overcome you.”

“It is likewise written: Put a door and a lock upon you lips. Take heed, lest you slip with your tongue and fall in the sight of you enemies who lie in wait for you, and your fall will be incurable unto death (Ecclesiasticus, ib).”

“Mortification of the palate: Do not eat or drink too much.”

“Too much eating and drinking brought the flood upon the world, and fire rained down over Sodom and Gomorrah, and a thousand other punishments came over the Jewish people.”

“In short, mortification by bearing all that happens to us during the course of the day, the cold and heat, without seeking our own comforts. Mortify your members that

are on earth (Colossians 3:5)."

"Remember that Jesus told us: *Si quis vult post me venire, abneget semetipsum et tollat crucem suam quotidie et sequatur me* [If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself, carry his cross daily and follow Me] (Luke 9:23)."

"With his provident hand, God surrounds the innocent with crosses and thorns, even as He did with Job, Joseph, Tobias and other saints. *Quia acceptus eras Deo, necesse fuit, ut tentatio probaret te* [Because you were acceptable to God, it was necessary that you be tested]."

"The path of the innocent has its trials and sacrifices, but it finds strength in Holy Communion, for he who goes often to Communion will have life everlasting: he lives in Jesus and Jesus lives in him. He lives of the very life of Jesus, and will he be raised by Him on the Last Day. This is the wheat of the elect, the vine that buds with virgins. *Parasti in conspectu meo mensam adversus eos, qui tribulant me. Cadent a latere tuo mille et decem millia a dextris tuis, ad te autem non appropinquabunt* [You set up a dining table right in front of those who give me trouble, but they will fall thousands and ten thousands by your sides and they shall not get close to you]."

"And the most sweet Virgin by Him beloved is His Mother. *Ego mater pulchrae. dilectionis et timoris et agnitionis et sanctae spei. In me gratia omnis (to know) viae et veritatis; in me omnis spes vitae et virtutis. Ego diligentes me diligo. Qui elucidant me, vitam aeternam habebunt Terribilis, ut castrorum acies ordinata.* [I am the mother of beautiful love and fear and knowledge. In me you will come to know the right way and the ways to truth; all hope to live and be virtuous is found in me. I love those who love me. Those who make me known will have eternal life. I am terrible just like an army set for war]."

The two little maidens then turned and slowly climbed the slope. One of them exclaimed, "The salvation of the just stems from the Lord. He is their protector in times of tribulation. The Lord shall help them and shall set them

free. He seizes them from the hands of sinners and shall save them because they put their hopes in Him (Psalm 57)."

The other went on: "God girdled me with strength and made the road I was to follow immaculate."

When the two of them came to the center of the magnificent carpet, they turned around.

"Yes!" one of them cried out. "Innocence, when crowned by penance, is the queen of all virtue."

The other also exclaimed, "How beautiful and splendid is a chaste generation! Its memory is immortal in the eyes of God and man. Men imitate it when it is present, and long for it when it is gone to Heaven, crowned triumphantly in eternity, having wrested their reward for their chaste battles. What a triumph! What rejoicing! How glorious a thing to present God with the immaculate stole of one's Holy Baptism after so many battles waged, amid the applause, the canticles, the splendor of the heavenly hosts!"

As they were thus speaking of the rewards awaiting innocence retained through penance, Don Bosco saw hosts of angels appear, who descended on that candid carpet. They joined the two young maidens, who took their place in the middle of them all. There was a vast multitude of them, and they sang, "*Benedictus Deus et Pater Domini Nostri Iesu Christi, qui benedixit nos in ipso in omni benedictione spirituali in coelestibus in Christo; qui elegit nos in ipso ante mundi constitutionem, ut essemus sancti et immaculati in conspectu eius in charitate et praedestinavit nos in adoptionem per Iesum Christum* (Eph. 1:4) [Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of Heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, He chose us, chose us in Christ to be holy and spotless and live through love in His presence, determining that we should become his adopted sons, through Jesus Christ]."

The two maidens then intoned a magnificent hymn, with such words and notes that only the angels nearer to the center were able to follow. The others sang too, but Don Bosco

could not hear their voices, although they made gestures and moved their lips as if singing.

The two maidens sang, "*Me propter innocentiam suscepisti et confirmasti me in conspectu tuo in aeternum. Benedictus Dominus Deus a saeculo et usque in saeculum. Fiat! Fiat!* [You have made me welcome because I was innocent, you have made me steadfast in Your presence forever. May the Lord God be ever praised, forever and ever. So be it! So be it!"]

Now, other hosts of angels came to join the first ones, and the others after them. They were arrayed in many colors, with ornaments differing one from the other, and very different from those worn by the two little maidens. Yet, the richness and splendor of it was magnificent. They were each so handsome that the human mind could never in any way conceive even a remote idea of what they were like. Nothing could describe this scene, though if one adds words to words, one may perhaps render some confused idea of it.

When the two girls had completed their canticle, they could all be heard singing together in one immense, harmonious canticle, the likes of which has never before been heard nor will ever be heard here on earth.

They sang, "*Ei, qui potens est vos conservare sine peccato et constituere ante conspectum gloriae suae immaculatos in exultatione, in adventu Domini nostri Iesu Christi; Soli Deo Salvatori nostro, per Iesum Christum Dominum nostrum, gloria et magnificentia, imperium et potestas ante omne saeculum, et nunc et in omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen* [To him, who is able to keep you without sin and has allowed you to stand immaculate right in front of His glory, when our Lord Jesus will appear, to him alone, who is our Savior Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory and splendor, power and rule before all ages for now and for all ages. Amen]."

As they were singing, ever more angels came to join them, and when the canticle was over, they all soared slowly aloft, one after the other, and disappeared together with the entire vision.

Then, Don Bosco woke up.

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).