

The Evangelical Radicality of Blessed Stefano Sándor

Stefano Sándor (Szolnok 1914 – Budapest 1953) was a Salesian coadjutor martyr. A cheerful and devout young man, he studied metallurgy before joining the Salesians, becoming a master printer and mentor to boys. He enlivened youth centres, founded Catholic Workers' Youth, and transformed trenches and construction sites into "festive oratories". When the communist regime confiscated Church institutions, he continued educating and saving young people and machinery in secret. Arrested, he was hanged on 8 June 1953. Rooted in the Eucharist and devotion to Mary, he embodied the Gospel radicalism of Don Bosco through educational dedication, courage, and unshakable faith. Beatified by Pope Francis in 2013, he remains a model of Salesian lay holiness.

1. Biographical Notes

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

While reading the *Salesian Bulletin*, he learned about Don Bosco. He felt immediately drawn to the Salesian charism. He discussed it with his spiritual director, expressing his desire to enter the Salesian Congregation. He

also spoke to his parents about it. They denied him consent and tried in every way to dissuade him. But Stefano managed to convince them, and in 1936 he was accepted at the *Clarisseum*, the Salesians' headquarters in Budapest, where he spent two years in the Aspirantate. He attended printing courses at "Don Bosco" printing house. He began the novitiate but had to interrupt it due to being called to arms.

In 1939, he obtained his final discharge and, after a year of novitiate, made his first Profession on 8 September 1940, as a Salesian Coadjutor. Assigned to the *Clarisseum*, he actively engaged in teaching in vocational courses. He was also responsible for assisting at the oratory, which he led with enthusiasm and competence. He was the promoter of the Catholic Youth Workers. His group was recognized as the best in the movement. Following Don Bosco's example, he proved to be a model educator. In 1942, he was called back to the front and earned a silver medal for military valor. The trench was for him a festive oratory that he animated in a Salesian manner, encouraging his fellow soldiers. At the end of World War II, he committed himself to the material and moral reconstruction of society, dedicating himself particularly to the poorest youth, gathering them to teach them a trade. On July 24, 1946, he made his perpetual profession. In 1948, he obtained the title of master-printer. At the end of his studies, Stefano's students were hired in the best printing houses in Budapest and Hungary.

When the State, under Mátyás Rákosi, confiscated ecclesiastical property in 1949 and began persecuting Catholic schools, which had to close their doors, Sándor tried to save what could be saved, at least some printing machines and some of the furnishings that had cost so many sacrifices. Suddenly, the religious found themselves with nothing; everything had become State property. Rákosi's Stalinism continued to rage; the religious were dispersed. Without a home, work, or community, many became clandestine. They adapted to do anything: street cleaners, farmers, laborers, porters,

servants... Even Stefano had to “disappear,” leaving his printing house, which had become famous. Instead of seeking refuge abroad, he remained in his homeland to save Hungarian youth. Caught in the act (he was trying to save some printing machines), he had to flee quickly and remain hidden for several months. Then, under another name, he managed to get hired in a detergent factory in the capital, but he continued his apostolate fearlessly and clandestinely, knowing it was strictly prohibited. In July 1952, he was captured at his workplace and was never seen again by his confreres. An official document certifies his trial and death sentence, carried out by hanging on June 8, 1953.

The diocesan phase of the Cause of Martyrdom began in Budapest on May 24, 2006, and concluded on December 8, 2007. On March 27, 2013, Pope Francis authorized the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to promulgate the Decree of Martyrdom and to celebrate the Beatification rite, which took place on Saturday, October 19, 2013, in Budapest.

2. Original Testimony of Salesian Holiness

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

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

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

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

2.1. Under the Banner of Don Bosco

It is always interesting to try to identify in the

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

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

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

From the beginning, the strong and determined will to persevere in the received vocation emerges, as will indeed happen. When on May 28, 1936, he applied for admission to the Salesian novitiate, he declared that he "had known the Salesian Congregation and had been increasingly confirmed in his religious vocation, so much so that he trusted he could persevere under the banner of Don Bosco." In a few words, Sándor expresses a high-profile vocational awareness:

experiential knowledge of the life and spirit of the Congregation; confirmation of a right and irreversible choice; assurance for the future of being faithful on the battlefield that awaits him.

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

On September 8, 1940, he made his religious profession as a Salesian Coadjutor. On this day of grace, we report a letter written by Pista, as he was familiarly called, to his parents. "Dear parents, I have to report an important event for me that will leave indelible marks in my heart. On September 8, by the grace of good God and with the protection of the Holy Virgin, I committed myself with my profession to love and serve God. On the feast of the Virgin Mother, I made my wedding with Jesus and promised Him with the triple vow to be His, never to separate from Him, and to persevere in fidelity to Him until death. I therefore pray all of you not to forget me in your prayers and Communions, making vows that I may remain faithful to my promise made to God. You can imagine that it was a joyful day for me, never before experienced in my life. I think I could not have given the Madonna a more pleasing birthday gift than the gift of myself. I imagine that our good Jesus looked at you with affectionate eyes, you having been the ones who gave me to God... Affectionate greetings to all. PISTA."

2.2. Absolute Dedication to the Mission

"The mission gives all our existence its concrete tone...", say the Salesian Constitutions. Stefano Sándor lived

the Salesian mission in the field entrusted to him, embodying pastoral educative charity as a Salesian Coadjutor, in the style of Don Bosco. His faith led him to see Jesus in the young apprentices and workers, in the boys of the oratory, in those of the street.

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

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

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

2.3. Religious Educator

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

In Rákospalota, Stefano Sándor zealously dedicated himself to training young printers and educating the youth of the oratory and the "Pages of the Sacred Heart." On these fronts, he showed a strong sense of duty, living his religious vocation with great responsibility and characterized by a maturity that inspired admiration and esteem. "During his printing activity, he conscientiously lived his religious life, without any desire to appear. He practiced the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, without any forcing. In this field, his mere presence was a testimony, without saying a word. Even the students recognized his authority, thanks to his fraternal ways. He put into practice everything he said or asked of the students, and no one thought of contradicting him in any way."

György Érseki had known the Salesians since 1945 and after World War II moved to Rákospalota, in the Clarisseum. His acquaintance with Stefano Sándor lasted until 1947. For this period, he not only offers us a glimpse of the multiple activities of the young Coadjutor, printer, catechist, and youth educator, but also a deep reading, from which emerges the spiritual richness and educational capacity of Stefano. "Stefano Sándor was a very gifted person by nature. As a pedagogue, I can affirm and confirm his observational skills and his multifaceted personality. He was a good educator and managed to handle the young people, one by one, in an optimal manner, choosing the appropriate tone with everyone. There is still a detail belonging to his

personality: he considered every work a holy duty, dedicating, without effort and with great naturalness, all his energy to the realization of this sacred purpose. Thanks to an innate intuition, he was able to grasp the atmosphere and influence it positively. [...] He had a strong character as an educator; he took care of everyone individually. He was interested in our personal problems, always reacting in the most suitable way for us. In this way, he realized the three principles of Don Bosco: reason, religion, and loving-kindness... The Salesian Coadjutors did not wear the habit outside the liturgical context, but Stefano Sándor's appearance stood out from the crowd. Regarding his activity as an educator, he never resorted to physical punishment, which was prohibited according to the principles of Don Bosco, unlike other more impulsive Salesian teachers, who were unable to control themselves and sometimes slapped students. The apprentice students entrusted to him formed a small community within the school, despite being different from each other in terms of age and culture. They ate in the dining hall together with the other students, where the Bible was usually read during meals. Naturally, Stefano Sándor was also present. Thanks to his presence, the group of industrial apprentices was always the most disciplined... Stefano Sándor remained youthful, showing great understanding towards young people. By grasping their problems, he transmitted positive messages and was able to advise them both personally and religiously. His personality revealed great tenacity and resilience in work; even in the most difficult situations, he remained faithful to his ideals and to himself.

The Salesian school of Rákospalota hosted a large community, requiring work with young people at multiple levels. In the school, alongside the printing house, there lived young Salesians in formation, who were in close contact with the Coadjutors. I remember the following names: József Krammer, Imre Strifler, Vilmos Klinger, and László Merész. These young men had different tasks from those of Stefano Sándor and also

differed in character. However, thanks to their common life, they knew each other's problems, virtues, and flaws. Stefano Sándor always found the right measure in his relationship with these clerics. Stefano Sándor managed to find the fraternal tone to admonish them when they showed some shortcomings, without falling into paternalism. In fact, it was the young clerics who sought his opinion. In my view, he realized the ideals of Don Bosco. From the very first moment of our acquaintance, Stefano Sándor represented the spirit that characterized the members of the Salesian Society: a sense of duty, purity, religiosity, practicality, and fidelity to Christian principles."

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

3. Reflection of God with Evangelical Radicality

What gave depth to all this – the dedication to the mission and the professional and educative capacity – and what immediately struck those who met him was the inner figure of Stefano Sándor, that of a disciple of the Lord, who lived at every moment his consecration, in constant union with God

and in evangelical fraternity. From the testimonies in the process, a complete figure emerges, also for that Salesian balance whereby the different dimensions converge in a harmonious, unified, and serene personality, open to the mystery of God lived in the everyday.

One striking aspect of such radicality is the fact that from the very novitiate, all his companions, even those aspiring to the priesthood and much younger than him, esteemed him and saw him as a model to imitate. The exemplary nature of his consecrated life and the radicality with which he lived and testified to the evangelical counsels always distinguished him everywhere, so that on many occasions, even during his imprisonment, many thought he was a priest. Such testimony speaks volumes about the uniqueness with which Stefano Sándor always lived with clear identity his vocation as a Salesian Coadjutor, highlighting precisely the specificity of Salesian consecrated life as such. Among the novitiate companions, Gyula Zsédely speaks of Stefano Sándor: "We entered together the Salesian novitiate of Saint Stephen in Mezőnyárád. Our master was Béla Bali. Here I spent a year and a half with Stefano Sándor and was an eyewitness to his life, a model of a young religious. Although Stefano Sándor was at least nine or ten years older than me, he lived with his novitiate companions in an exemplary manner; he participated in the practices of piety with us. We did not feel the age difference at all; he stood by us with fraternal affection. He edified us not only through his good example but also by giving us practical advice regarding the education of youth. It was already evident then how he was predestined for this vocation according to the educational principles of Don Bosco... His talent as an educator stood out even to us novices, especially during community activities. With his personal charm, he inspired us to such an extent that we took for granted that we could easily tackle even the most difficult tasks. The engine of his deep Salesian spirituality was prayer and the Eucharist, as well as devotion to Our Lady Help of Christians. During the novitiate, which lasted a year, we saw in him a

good friend. He became our model also in obedience, as being the oldest, he was tested with small humiliations, but he endured them with composure and without showing signs of suffering or resentment. At that time, unfortunately, there was someone among our superiors who enjoyed humiliating the novices, but Stefano Sándor knew how to resist well. His greatness of spirit, rooted in prayer, was perceptible to all."

Regarding the intensity with which Stefano Sándor lived his faith, with a *continuous union with God*, an exemplary evangelical testimony emerges, which we can well define as a "reflection of God". "It seems to me that his inner attitude stemmed from devotion to the Eucharist and to the Madonna, which had also transformed the life of Don Bosco. When he took care of us, 'Little Clergy,' he did not give the impression of exercising a profession; his actions manifested the spirituality of a person capable of praying with great fervor. For me and my peers, 'Mr. Sándor' was an ideal, and we never dreamed that everything we saw and heard was a superficial act. I believe that only his intimate life of prayer could

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

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

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

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

- In the harsh experiences of military service and

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

I would like to highlight *the testimony of evangelical radicality* offered by this confrere. From the reconstruction of the biographical profile of Stefano Sándor emerges a real and profound journey of faith, begun from his childhood and youth, strengthened by his Salesian religious profession and consolidated in the exemplary life of a Salesian Coadjutor. A genuine consecrated vocation is particularly noticeable, animated according to the spirit of

Don Bosco, by an intense and fervent zeal for the salvation of souls, especially young ones. Even the most difficult periods, such as military service and the experience of war, did not tarnish the upright moral and religious behavior of the young Coadjutor. It is on this basis that Stefano Sándor will suffer martyrdom without second thoughts or hesitations.

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

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

With Nino Baglieri, Pilgrim of Hope, on the Journey of the Jubilee

The path of the 2025 Jubilee, dedicated to Hope, finds a shining witness in the story of the Servant of God Nino Baglieri. From the dramatic fall that left him tetraplegic at

seventeen to his inner rebirth in 1978, Baglieri moved from the shadow of despair to the light of active faith, transforming his bed of suffering into a throne of joy. His story intertwines the five Jubilee signs – pilgrimage, door, profession of faith, charity, and reconciliation – showing that Christian hope is not escapism but a strength that opens the future and supports every journey.

1. Hoping as Waiting

Hope, according to the online Treccani dictionary, is a feeling of “trustful expectation in the present or future fulfillment of what is desired.” The etymology of the noun “hope” comes from the Latin *spes*, which in turn derives from the Sanskrit root *spa-* meaning to stretch toward a goal. In Spanish, “to hope” and “to wait” are both translated with the verb *esperar*, which combines both meanings in one word: as if one could only wait for what one hopes for. This state of mind allows us to face life and its challenges with courage and a heart always burning with light. Hope is expressed – positively or negatively – in some popular proverbs: “Hope is the last to die,” “While there is life, there is hope,” “He who lives by hope dies in despair.”

Almost gathering this “shared feeling” about hope, but aware of the need to help rediscover hope in its fullest and truest dimension, Pope Francis dedicated the Ordinary Jubilee of 2025 to Hope (*Spes non confundit* [Hope does not disappoint] is the bull of convocation) and already in 2014 said: “The resurrection of Jesus is not the happy ending of a beautiful fairy tale; it is not the happy end of a movie; it is the intervention of God the Father where human hope breaks down. At the moment when everything seems lost, in the moment of pain, when many people feel the need to get down from the cross, that is the moment closest to the resurrection. The night becomes darkest just before the morning begins, before the light begins. In the darkest moment God intervenes and raises up” (cf. Audience of 16 April 2014).

In this context, the story of the **Servant of God Nino Baglieri** (Modica, May 1, 1951 – March 2, 2007) fits perfectly. As a seventeen-year-old bricklayer, he fell from a seventeen-meter-high scaffold due to the sudden collapse of a plank, crashing to the ground and becoming tetraplegic: from that fall on May 6, 1968, he could only move his head and neck, depending on others for life in everything, even the simplest and humblest things. Nino could not even shake a friend's hand or caress his mother... and saw his dreams vanish. What hope for life did this young man have now? What feelings could he face? What future awaited him? Nino's first response was despair, total darkness before a search for meaning that found no answer. First a long wandering through hospitals in different Italian regions, then the pity of friends and acquaintances led Nino to rebel and lock himself away in ten long years of loneliness and anger, while the tunnel of life grew ever deeper.

In Greek mythology, Zeus entrusts Pandora with a jar containing all the evils of the world; when opened, men lose immortality and begin a life of suffering. To save them, Pandora reopens the jar and releases *elpis*, hope, which remained at the bottom. It was the only antidote to life's troubles. Looking instead to the Giver of all good, we know that "hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5). Pope Francis writes in *Spes non confundit*: "In the sign of this hope, the apostle Paul encourages the Christian community in Rome [...] Everyone hopes. In the heart of every person is enclosed hope as desire and expectation of good, even without knowing what tomorrow will bring. The unpredictability of the future, however, gives rise to sometimes opposing feelings: from trust to fear, from serenity to discouragement, from certainty to doubt. We often meet discouraged people who look to the future with skepticism and pessimism, as if nothing could offer them happiness. May the Jubilee be an opportunity for all to revive hope" (ibid., 1).

2. From Witness of "Despair" to "Ambassador" of Hope

Let us return to the story of our Servant of God, Nino Baglieri.

Ten long years had to pass before Nino emerged from the tunnel of despair, the thick darkness cleared, and Light entered. It was the afternoon of March 24, Good Friday 1978, when Father Aldo Modica, with a group of young people, went to Nino's home, urged by his mother Peppina and some people involved in the Renewal in the Spirit movement, then in its early days in the nearby Salesian parish. Nino writes, "While they invoked the Holy Spirit, I felt a very strange sensation, a great warmth invaded my body, a strong tingling in all my limbs, as if a new strength entered me and something old left. At that moment I said my 'yes' to the Lord, accepted my cross, and was reborn to a new life, becoming a new man. Ten years of despair erased in a few moments, because an unknown joy entered my heart. I desired the healing of my body, but the Lord granted me an even greater grace: spiritual healing."

A new path began for Nino: from "witness of despair" he became a "pilgrim of hope." No longer isolated in his little room but an "ambassador" of this hope, he shared his experience through a broadcast on a local radio station and – an even greater grace – God gave him the joy of being able to write with his mouth. Nino confides: "In March 1979 the Lord performed a great miracle for me: I learned to write with my mouth. I started like this; I was with my friends doing homework, I asked for a pencil and a notebook, I began making marks and drawing something, but then I discovered I could write, and so I began to write." He then began to write his memoirs and correspond with people of all kinds around the world, thousands of letters still preserved today. The regained hope made him creative; now Nino rediscovered the joy of relationships and wanted to become – as much as he could – independent. With a stick he used with his mouth and an elastic band attached to the phone, he dialed numbers to communicate with many sick people, offering them words of comfort. He discovered a new way to face his suffering, which

brought him out of isolation and set him on the path to becoming a witness to the Gospel of joy and hope. "Now there is so much joy in my heart, there is no more pain in me, in my heart there is Your love. Thank you, my Lord Jesus, from my bed of pain I want to praise you and with all my heart thank you because you called me to know life, to know true life."

Nino changed perspective, made a 360° turn – the Lord gave him **conversion** – and placed his trust in that merciful God who, through "misfortune," called him to work in His vineyard, to be a sign and instrument of salvation and hope. Thus, many who came to console him left comforted, with tears in their eyes. They did not find on that little bed a sad and gloomy man, but a smiling face that radiated – despite many sufferings, including bedsores and respiratory problems – the joy of living; the smile was constant on his face, and Nino felt "useful from the bed of the cross." Nino Baglieri is the opposite of many people today, constantly searching for the meaning of life, aiming for easy success and the happiness of fleeting and worthless things, living online, consuming life with a click, wanting everything immediately but with sad, dull eyes. Nino apparently had nothing, yet he had peace and joy in his heart. He did not live isolated but supported by God's love expressed through the embrace and presence of his entire family and more and more people who knew him and connected with him.

3. Rekindling Hope

Building hope means that every time I am not satisfied with my life and I commit to changing it. Every time I do not let negative experiences harden me or make me distrustful. Every time I fall and try to get up, not allowing fears to have the last word. Every time, in a world marked by conflicts, I choose trust and always try again, with everyone. Every time I do not flee from God's dream that tells me, "I want you to be happy," "I want you to have a full life... full even of holiness." The pinnacle of the virtue of hope is

indeed a gaze toward Heaven to live well on earth or, as Don Bosco would say, **walking with feet on the ground and heart in Heaven.**

In this furrow of hope, the Jubilee finds fulfillment, which, with its signs, asks us to set out, to cross some frontiers.

First sign, the pilgrimage: when moving from one place to another, one is open to the new, to change. Jesus' whole life was "a setting out," a journey of evangelization fulfilled in the gift of life and beyond, with the Resurrection and Ascension.

Second sign, the door: in John 10:9 Jesus says, "I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved; he will come in and go out and find pasture." Passing through the door means being welcomed, being community. The Gospel also speaks of the "narrow door": the Jubilee becomes a path of conversion.

Third sign, the profession of faith: expressing belonging to Christ and the Church and declaring it publicly.

Fourth sign, charity: charity is the password to heaven; in 1 Peter 4:8 the apostle Peter admonishes, "Keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."

Fifth sign, therefore, reconciliation and Jubilee indulgence: it is a "favorable time" (cf. 2 Cor 6:2) to experience God's great mercy and walk paths of rapprochement and forgiveness toward others; to live the prayer of the Our Father where we ask, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It is becoming new creatures.

Even in Nino's life, there are episodes that connect him – along the "thread" of hope – to these Jubilee dimensions. For example, his repentance for some childhood mischiefs, like when three of them (he recounts), "stole the offerings from the sacristy during Masses, we used them to play foosball. When you meet bad companions, they lead you astray. Then one took the Oratory keys and hid them in my

schoolbag in the study; they found the keys, called the parents, gave us two slaps, and kicked us out of school. Shame!" But above all, in Nino's life there is charity, helping the poor person in physical and moral trial, reaching out to those with psychological struggles, and writing to brothers in prison to testify to them God's goodness and love. Nino, who before the fall had been a bricklayer, writes, "[I] liked to build with my hands something that would last over time: even now I feel like a bricklayer working in God's Kingdom, to leave something that lasts, to see the Wonderful Works of God that He accomplishes in our Life." He confides, "My body seems dead, but my heart keeps beating in my chest. My legs do not move, yet I walk the paths of the world."

4. Pilgrim Toward Heaven

Nino, a consecrated Salesian cooperator of the great Salesian Family, ended his earthly "pilgrimage" on Friday, March 2, 2007, at 8:00 a.m., at only 55 years old, having spent 39 years tetraplegic between bed and wheelchair, after asking forgiveness from his family for the hardships his condition caused. He left this world dressed in tracksuit and sneakers, as he expressly requested, to run in the green flowering meadows and leap like a deer along the streams. We read in his spiritual Testament, "I will never stop thanking you, O Lord, for having called me to You through the Cross on May 6, 1968. A heavy cross for my young strength..." On March 2, life – a continuous gift that begins with parents and is slowly nurtured with wonder and beauty – placed the most important piece for Nino Baglieri: the embrace with his Lord and God, accompanied by the Madonna.

At the news of his passing, a unanimous chorus rose from many quarters: "a saint has died," a man who made his bed of the cross the banner of a full life, a gift for all. Thus, a great witness of hope.

Five years after his death, as provided by the *Normae Servandae in Inquisitionibus ab Episcopis faciendis in Causis Sanctorum* of 1983, the bishop of the Diocese of Noto,

at the request of the Postulator General of the Salesian Congregation, after consulting the Sicilian Episcopal Conference and obtaining the Nihil obstat from the Holy See, opened the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Nino Baglieri.

The diocesan process, lasting 12 years, followed two main lines: the work of the Historical Commission, which researched, collected, studied, and presented many sources, especially writings “by” and “about” the Servant of God; and the Ecclesiastical Tribunal, responsible for the Inquiry, which also heard witnesses under oath.

This process concluded on May 5, 2024, in the presence of Monsignor Salvatore Rumeo, current bishop of the Diocese of Noto. A few days later, the procedural acts were delivered to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, which opened them on June 21, 2024. At the beginning of 2025, the same Dicastery declared their “Legal Validity,” allowing the Roman phase of the Cause to enter full swing.

Now the contribution to the Cause continues also by spreading knowledge of Nino’s figure, who at the end of his earthly journey recommended: “Do not leave me doing nothing. I will continue my mission from heaven. I will write to you from Paradise.”

The journey of hope in his company thus becomes a longing for Heaven, when “we will meet face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12) and will be able to read with joyful admiration the mystery of the universe, which will share with us endless fullness [...]. Meanwhile, we unite to take care of this home entrusted to us, knowing that whatever good is in it will be taken up in the feast of heaven. Together with all creatures, we walk on this earth seeking God [...] We walk singing!” (cf. *Laudato Si’*, 243-244).

Roberto Chiaramonte

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 grates 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).

Life according to the Spirit in Mamma Margaret (2/2)

[*\(continuation from previous article\)*](#)

4. Exodus to her son's priesthood

From the dream at the age of nine, when she was the only one to understand her son's vocation, “who knows, maybe he will become a priest”, she was the most convinced and tenacious supporter of her son's vocation, facing humiliation and sacrifice for this: “His mother then, who wanted to support him at the cost of any sacrifice, did not hesitate to make the resolution to have him attend the public schools in Chieri the following year. She then took care to find truly Christian people with whom she could place him to board.” Margaret discreetly followed John's vocational and formation path, amidst serious financial straits.

She always left him free in his choices and in no way conditioned his path towards the priesthood, but when the parish priest tried to convince Margaret why John should not choose the religious life, so as to guarantee her financial

security and help, she immediately reached out to her son and said words that would remain engraved in Don Bosco's heart for the rest of his life: "I only want you to examine carefully the step you want to take, and then follow your vocation without looking to anyone. The parish priest wanted me to dissuade you from this decision, in view of the need I might have in the future for your help. But I say: "have nothing to do with these things, because God is first of all. Do not bother yourself about me. I want nothing from you; I expect nothing from you. Think well: I was born in poverty, I have lived in poverty, I want to die in poverty. Indeed I protest to you. If you resolve to become a secular priest and by misfortune become rich, I will not come to pay you a single visit, indeed I will never set foot in your house again. Remember this well!"

But along this vocational journey, she did not fail to be strong for her son, reminding him, on the occasion of his departure for the seminary in Chieri, of the demands of the priestly life: "John, you have donned the priestly habit; I feel all the consolation that a mother can feel at her son's good fortune. But remember that it is not the habit that honours your state, it is the practice of virtue. If you ever come to doubt your vocation, ah for pity's sake, do not dishonour this habit! Lay it down quickly. I would rather have a poor peasant, than a priest son who has neglected his duties." Don Bosco would never forget these words, an expression both of his awareness of his priestly dignity and the fruit of a profoundly upright and holy life.

On the day of Don Bosco's First Mass Margaret once again made herself present with words inspired by the Spirit, both expressing the authentic value of the priestly ministry and her son's total surrender to his mission without any pretence or request: "You are a priest; you say Mass; from here on you are closer to Jesus Christ. Remember, however, that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. You will not realise it at once, but little by little you will see that your mother has told you the truth. I am sure that you will

pray for me every day, whether I am still alive or already dead; that is enough for me. From now on think only of the health of souls and do not take any thought for me." She renounce her son completely to offer him in the service of the Church. But losing him she found him again, sharing his educational and pastoral mission among the young.

5. Exodus from the Becchi to Valdocco

Don Bosco had appreciated and recognised the great values he had drawn from his family: peasant wisdom, healthy shrewdness, a sense of work, the essential nature of things, industriousness in keeping busy, optimism to the full, endurance in times of misfortune, the ability to bounce back after beatings, cheerfulness always and in any case, the spirit of solidarity, living faith, the truth and intensity of affection, a taste for welcome and hospitality; all goods that he had found at home and that had built him up that way. He was so marked by this experience that, when he thought of an educational institution for his boys, he wanted no other name for it than "home" and defined the spirit that would be impressed on it as "family spirit". And to give the right imprint, he asked Mamma Margaret, by now old and tired, to leave the tranquillity of her little house in the hills, to go down to the city and take care of those boys picked up from the streets, those who would give her no small amount of worry and sorrow. But she went to help Don Bosco and to be a mother to those who no longer had family and affections. While John Bosco learned the art of loving concretely, generously, unselfishly and towards everyone at Mamma Margaret's school his mother would share her son's choice to devote his life to the salvation of the young to the very end. This communion of spirit and action between son and mother marked the beginning of the Salesian work, involving many people in this divine adventure. Having reached a peaceful situation, she accepted, despite being no longer young, to leave the quiet life and security of the Becchi, to go to Turin in a suburban area and in a house stripped bare. It was a real departure in her life!

So Don Bosco, after thinking and rethinking how to get out of the difficulties, went to speak to his parish priest at Castelnovo, telling him of his need and his fears.

"You have your mother!" The Parish Priest replied without a moment's hesitation: "have her come with you to Turin."

Don Bosco, who had foreseen this answer, wanted to make some reflections, but Don Cinzano replied:

"Take your mother with you. You will find no one better suited to the work than her. Rest assured; you will have an angel at your side!"

Don Bosco returned home convinced by the reasons put before him by the provost. However, two reasons still held him back. The first was the life of privations and changed habits to which his mother would naturally have to be subjected in that new position. The second came from the repugnance he felt at proposing to his mother a task that would have made her in some way dependent on him. For Don Bosco his mother was everything, and with his brother Joseph, he was accustomed to keep her every wish as unquestionable law. However, after thinking and praying, seeing that there was no other choice left, he concluded:

"My mother is a saint, so I can propose to her!"

So one day he took her aside and thus spoke to her:

"I have decided, mother, to return to Turin among my dear young people. From now on, as I will no longer be staying at the Refuge, I will need a servant; but the place where I will have to live in Valdocco, because of certain people who live near there, is very risky, and does not leave me calm. I therefore need to have at my side a safeguard to remove every reason for suspicion and gossip from malevolent people. You alone could remove all fear from me; would you not gladly come and stay with me?" At this unanticipated exodus, the pious woman remained somewhat thoughtful, and then answered:

"My dear son, you can imagine how much it costs my heart to leave this house, your brother and other loved ones;

but if it seems to you that such a thing might please the Lord I am ready to follow you."

Don Bosco assured her, and thanking her, concluded:

"Let us arrange things then, and after the Feast of the Saints we will leave."

Margaret went to live with her son, not to lead a more comfortable and pleasant life, but to share with him the hardships and sufferings of hundreds of poor and abandoned boys; she went there, not attracted by greed for money, but by love of God and souls, because she knew that the part of the sacred ministry Don Bosco had taken on, far from giving him any resources or profit, obliged him to spend his own goods, and also to seek alms. She did not stop; on the contrary, admiring her son's courage and zeal, she felt even more encouraged to be his companion and imitator, until her death.

Margaret lived at the Oratory bringing the motherly warmth and wisdom of a profoundly Christian woman, heroic dedication to her son in times that were difficult for his health and physical safety, thus exercising an authentic spiritual and material motherhood towards her priest son. In fact, she settled in Valdocco not only to cooperate in the work begun by her son, but also to dispel any occasion for slander that might arise from the dubious premises nearby.

She left the quiet security of Joseph's home to venture with her son on a mission that was not easy and was risky. She spent her time in unreserved dedication to the youngsters "of whom she was a mother". She loved the boys of the oratory as her own children and worked for their welfare, education and spiritual life, giving the oratory that family atmosphere that would be a characteristic of Salesian houses from the beginning. "If there is the holiness of ecstasies and visions, there is also the holiness of pots to clean and socks to mend. Mamma Margaret was such a saint."

In her relations with the children she was exemplary, distinguishing herself by her refined charity and her humility in serving, reserving the humblest of occupations

for herself. Her intuition as a mother and spiritual woman resulted in recognising in Dominic Savio as an extraordinary work of grace.

Even at the Oratory, however, there was no lack of trials and when there was a moment of hesitation due to the harshness of the experience, caused by a very demanding life, the glance at the Crucifix pointed out by her son was enough to infuse her with new energy: "From that instant no word of lament escaped her lips. Indeed, from then on she seemed insensitive to those miseries."

Fr Rua summed up the testimony of Mamma Margaret well, after living for four years at the oratory: "A truly Christian woman, pious, generous-hearted and courageous, prudent, who devoted herself entirely to the good education of her children and her adoptive family."

6. Exodus to the Father's house

She was born poor. She lived poor. She died poor wearing the only dress she used; in her pocket were 12 lire destined to buy a new one, which she never bought.

Even at the hour of death, she turned to her beloved son and left him with words worthy of the wise woman: "Have great confidence in those who work with you in the vineyard of the Lord... Take heed that many seek their own good instead of the glory of God... Seek neither elegance nor splendour in works. Seek the glory of God; have poverty of deed as your basis. Many love poverty in others, but not in themselves. The most effective teaching is for us to be the first to do what we command others."

Margaret, who had consecrated John to the Blessed Virgin, had entrusted him at the beginning of his studies to her, recommending devotion and the propagation of love of Mary, now reassured him: "Our Lady will not fail to guide your affairs."

Her whole life was a total gift of self. On her deathbed she could say: "I have done my whole share." She died at the age of 68 in the Valdocco Oratory on 25 November 1856.

The Oratory boys accompanied her to the cemetery, mourning her as "Mamma".

Don Bosco, saddened, said to Pietro Enria: "We have lost our mother, but I am sure she will help us from Heaven. She was a saint!" And Enria himself added: "Don Bosco did not exaggerate in calling her a saint, because she sacrificed herself for us and was a true mother to us all."

In conclusion

Mamma Margaret was a woman rich in interior life and with a rock-solid faith, sensitive and docile to the voice of the Spirit, ready to grasp and realise God's will, attentive to the problems of her neighbour, available to provide for the needs of the poorest and especially the abandoned young. Don Bosco would always remember the teachings and what he had learned at his mother's school and this tradition would mark his educational system and spirituality. Don Bosco had experienced that the formation of his personality was vitally rooted in the extraordinary climate of dedication and goodness of his family; that is why he wanted to reproduce its most significant qualities in his work. Margaret intertwined her life with that of her son and with the beginnings of the Salesian work: she was Don Bosco's first "Cooperator"; with active goodness she became the maternal element of the Preventive System. At the school of Don Bosco and Mamma Margaret this means caring for the formation of consciences, educating to the fortitude of the virtuous life in the struggle, without discounts and compromises, against sin, with the help of the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, growing in personal, family and community docility to the inspirations and motions of the Holy Spirit to strengthen the reasons for good and to bear witness to the beauty of faith.

For the entire Salesian Family, this testimony is a further invitation to adopt a privileged attention to the family in the pastoral care of young people, forming and involving parents in the educational and evangelising action

of their children, valuing their contribution in processes of affective education and encouraging new forms of evangelisation and catechesis of and through families. Mamma Margaret today is an extraordinary model for families. Hers is a family holiness: as a woman, a wife, a mother, a widow, an educator. Her life contains a message of great relevance, especially in the rediscovery of the sanctity of marriage.

But another aspect must be emphasised: one of the fundamental reasons why Don Bosco wanted his mother beside him in Turin was to find in her a guardian for his own priesthood. "Take your mother with you", the old parish priest had suggested to him. Don Bosco took Mamma Margaret into his life as priest and educator. As a child, an orphan, it was his mother who took him by the hand, and as a young priest it was he who took her by the hand to share a special mission. One cannot understand Don Bosco's priestly holiness without the holiness of Mamma Margaret, a model not only of family holiness, but also of spiritual motherhood for priests.

Life according to the Spirit in Mamma Margaret (1/2)

Fr Lemoyne leaves us a truly outstanding portrait in his preface to the life of Mamma Margaret: "We will not describe extraordinary or heroic events, but we will portray a simple life, constant in the practice of good, vigilant in the education of her children, resigned and able to foresee the anxieties of life, resolute in all that duty imposed upon her. Not rich, but with a queen's heart; not instructed in worldly knowledge, but educated in the holy fear of God; deprived at an early age of those who were to be her support, but secure with the energy of her will leaning on heavenly help, she was

able to happily carry out the mission that God had entrusted to her.”

With these words, we are offered the pieces of a mosaic and a canvas on which we can build the adventure of the Spirit that the Lord gave to this woman who, docile to the Spirit, rolled up her sleeves and faced life with hard-working faith and maternal charity. We will follow the stages of this adventure with the biblical category of the “exodus”, an expression of an authentic journey in the obedience of faith. Mamma Margaret also experienced her “exodus”; she too walked towards “a promised land”, crossing the desert and overcoming trials. We see this journey reflected in the light of her relationship with her son and according to two dynamics typical of life in the Spirit: one less visible, consisting of the inner dynamic of self-change, a prior and indispensable condition for helping others; the other more immediate and documentable: the ability to roll up one’s sleeves to love one’s neighbour in the flesh, coming to the aid of those in need.

1. Exodus from Capriglio to the Biglione farmstead

Margaret was educated in the faith, lived and died in the faith. “God was at the forefront of all her thoughts. She felt she lived in God’s presence and expressed this conviction in words that were customary for her: “God sees you.” Everything spoke to her of God’s fatherhood and great was her trust in Providence, showing gratitude to God for the gifts she had received and gratitude to all those who were instruments of Providence. Margaret spent her life in a continuous and incessant search for God’s will, the only real and practical criterion for her choices and actions.

At the age of 23 she married Francis Bosco, who was widowed at 27, with his son Anthony and his semi-paralysed mother. Margaret became not only wife, but adoptive mother and help for her mother-in-law. This step was the most important for the married couple because they knew well that having received the sacrament of marriage in a holy way was a source

of many blessings for them: for serenity and peace in the family, for future children, for work and for overcoming difficult moments in life. Margaret lived her marriage to Francis Bosco faithfully and fruitfully. Their rings would be a sign of fruitfulness that would extend to the family founded by her son John. All this would arouse a great sense of gratitude and love for this pair of holy spouses and parents in Don Bosco and his boys.

2. Exodus from the Biglione farmstead to the Becchi

After just five years of marriage, in 1817, her husband Francis died. Don Bosco recalled that as he left the room his mother in tears “took me by the hand” and led him out. Here is the spiritual and educational icon of this mother. She takes her son by the hand and leads him out. Already from this moment there is that “taking by the hand” which would unite mother and son in both the vocational journey and the educational mission.

Margaret found herself in a very difficult situation from an emotional and financial point of view, including a specious dispute brought by the Biglione family. There were debts to pay, hard work in the fields and a terrible famine to face, but she dealt with all these trials with great faith and unconditional trust in Providence.

Widowhood opened up a new vocation for her as an attentive and caring educator of her children. She devoted herself to her family tenaciously and courageously, refusing an advantageous marriage proposal. “God gave me a husband and took him away from me; when he died he entrusted me with three children, and I would be a cruel mother if I abandoned them when they needed me most... The guardian... is a friend, but I am the mother to my children; all the gold in the world could never make me abandon them.”

She educated her children wisely, anticipating the pedagogical inspiration of the Preventive System. She was a woman who had made the choice for God and was able to pass on the sense of his presence to her children, in their everyday

lives. She did so in a simple, spontaneous, clear way, seizing every small opportunity to educate them to live in the light of faith. She did this by anticipating the "word in the ear" that Don Bosco would later use with the boys to call them to the life of grace, to the presence of God. She did this by helping them to recognise the work of the Creator, who is a providential and good Father. in creatures. She did this by recounting the facts of the gospel and the lives of the saints.

Christian education. She prepared her children to receive the sacraments, passing on to them a vivid sense of the greatness of God's mysteries. John Bosco received his First Communion on Easter 1826: "O dear son, this was a great day for you. I am convinced that God has truly taken possession of your heart. Now promise Him to do all you can to keep you good until the end of your life." These words of Mamma Margaret make her a true spiritual mother of her children, especially of John, who would immediately show himself sensitive to these teachings which have the flavour of a true initiation, an expression of the capacity to introduce the mystery of grace in a woman unlettered, but rich in the wisdom of children.

Faith in God is reflected in the demand for moral rectitude that she practised with herself and inculcated in her children. "Against sin she had declared perpetual war. Not only did she abhor what was evil, but she strove to keep away the offence of the Lord even from those who did not belong to her. So she was always on the alert against scandal, cautious, but resolute and at the cost of any sacrifice."

The heart that animated Mamma Margaret's life was an immense love and devotion to the Most Holy Eucharist. She experienced its salvific and redeeming value in her participation in the holy sacrifice and in accepting the trials of life. She educated her children to this faith and love from an early age, passing on that spiritual and educational conviction that would find in Don Bosco a priest in love with the Eucharist and who would make the Eucharist a

pillar of his educational system.

Faith found expression in the life of prayer and in particular prayer in common in the family. Mamma Margaret found the strength of a good education in an intense and caring Christian life. She led by example and guided by word. In her school young John thus learned the preventive power of God's grace in a vital form. "Religious instruction, which a mother imparts by word, by example, by comparing her son's conduct with the particular precepts of the catechism, causes the practice of Religion to become normal and sin to be rejected by instinct, just as goodness is loved by instinct. Being good becomes a habit, and virtue does not cost much effort. A child so educated must do violence to himself to become evil. Margaret knew the power of such a Christian education and how the law of God, taught in catechism every evening and frequently recalled even during the day, was the sure means of making children obedient to their mother's precepts. She therefore repeated the questions and answers as many times as was necessary for the children to learn them by heart."

Witness of charity. In her poverty, she practised hospitality with joy, without making distinctions or exclusions; she helped the poor, visited the sick, and her children learnt from her to love the least of these disproportionately. "She was of a very sensitive nature, but this sensitivity so much became charity that she could rightly be called the mother of those in need." This charity manifested itself in a marked ability to understand situations, to deal with people, to make the right choices at the right time, to avoid excesses and to maintain a great balance throughout: "A woman of much sense" (Fr Giacinto Ballesio). The reasonableness of her teachings, her personal consistency and firmness without anger, touch the souls of the children. Proverbs and sayings flourish with ease on her lips and she condensed precepts for life in them: "A bad laundress never finds a good stone"; "Whoever does not know at twenty

does not do by thirty and will die foolish"; "Conscience is like a tickle. Some feel it and some do not."

In particular it should be emphasised that John Bosco was to be a great educator of boys, "because he had had a mother who had educated his affectivity. A good, nice, strong mother. With so much love she educated his heart. One cannot understand Don Bosco without Mamma Margaret. One cannot understand him." Mamma Margaret contributed with her maternal mediation to the work of the Spirit in the shaping and formation of her son's heart. Don Bosco learnt to love, as he himself declared, within the Church, thanks to Mamma Margaret and with the supernatural intervention of Mary, who was given to him by Jesus as "Mother and Teacher".

3. Exodus from the Becchi to the Moglia farmstead

A moment of great trial for Margaret was the difficult relationship between her children. "Margaret's three sons, Anthony, Joseph and John, were different in temperament and inclinations. Antonio was coarse in manners, of little or no delicacy of feeling, a manic exaggerator, a true portrait of "I couldn't care less"! He lived by bullying. He often let himself go and beat his little brothers, and Mamma Margaret had to run to get them out of his hands. However, she never used force to defend them and true to her maxim, she never laid a hair on Antonio's head. One can imagine what mastery Margaret had over herself to restrain the voice of blood and love she bore to Joseph and John. Antonio had been sent to school and had learned to read and write, but he boasted that he had never studied or gone to school. He had no aptitude for studies, he did the work in the countryside."

On the other hand, Antonio was in a particularly difficult situation: older than his age, he was wounded by being fatherless and motherless. Despite his intemperance, he was generally submissive, thanks to the attitude of Mamma Margaret who managed to control him with reasoned kindness. With time, unfortunately, his intolerance towards young John in particular, who did not easily allow himself to be subdued,

would grow and his reactions towards Mamma Margaret would also become harsher and at times stronger. In particular, Antonio did not accept that John should dedicate himself to his studies and tensions would reach a climax: "I want to end this grammar. I've come big and fat, I've never seen these books." Antonio was a child of his time and his peasant condition and could neither understand nor accept that his brother could devote himself to his studies. Everyone was upset, but the one who suffered most was Mamma Margaret, who was personally involved and had war at home day after day: "My mother was distressed, I wept, the chaplain grieved."

In the face of Antonio's jealousy and hostility, Margaret sought a solution to the family conflict, sending John to the Moglia farmstead for about two years and then, in the face of Antonio's resistance, she adamantly arranged for the division of the property in order to allow John to study. Of course, it was only the 12-year-old John who left home, but his Mother also experienced this profound detachment. Let us not forget that Don Bosco in his *Memoirs of the Oratory* does not speak of this period. Such silence suggests a difficult experience to process, being at that time a twelve-year-old boy, forced to leave home because he could not live with his brother. John suffered in silence, waiting for the hour of Providence and with him Mamma Margaret, who did not want to close off her son's path, but open it up through special ways, entrusting him to a good family. The solution taken by the mother and accepted by the son was a temporary choice in view of a definitive solution. It was trust and abandonment in God. Mother and son live a season of waiting.

[\(continued\)](#)

The Good Shepherd gives his life: Father Elia Comini on the 80th anniversary of his sacrifice

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

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

'Receive me as an expiatory victim'

Elia Comini was born in Calvenzano di Vergato (Bologna) on 7 May 1910. His parents Claudio, a carpenter, and Emma Limoni, a seamstress, prepared him for life and educated him in the faith. He was baptised in Calvenzano. He made his

First Communion and received Confirmation in Salvaro di Grizzana. From an early age he showed great interest in catechism, church services and singing in serene and cheerful friendship with his companions. The archpriest of Salvaro, Monsignor Fidenzio Mellini, as a young soldier in Turin, had attended the Valdocco oratory and had met Don Bosco who had prophesied the priesthood for him. Monsignor Mellini highly regarded Elias for his faith, kindness and unique intellectual abilities and urged him to become one of Don Bosco's sons. For this reason he directed him to the small Salesian seminary in Finale Emilia (Modena) where Elia attended middle school and upper secondary. In 1925 he entered the Salesian novitiate at Castel De' Britti (Bologna) and made his religious profession there on 3 October 1926. From 1926-1928 he attended the Salesian high school in Valsalice (Turin), where Don Bosco's grave was then kept, as a student cleric of philosophy. It was in this place that Elias began a demanding spiritual journey, witnessed by a diary he kept until just over two months before his tragic death. These are pages revealing an inner life as profound as it was not perceived on the outside. On the eve of the renewal of his vows, he would write: 'I am more than ever happy on this day, on the eve of the holocaust that I hope will be pleasing to You. Receive me as an expiatory victim, even though I do not deserve it. If you believe, give me some reward: forgive me my sins of the past life; help me to become a saint.'

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

charity and the traits of Salesian loving-kindness, which he transmitted to the young through his affable character, goodness and smile.

Triduum of passion

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

On 23 July, the Nazis, following the killing of one of their soldiers, began a series of reprisals: ten men were killed, houses set on fire. Father Comini did his utmost to welcome the relatives of those killed and to hide those still wanted. He also helped the elderly parish priest of San Michele di Salvaro, Monsignor Fidenzio Mellini: he taught catechism, led retreats, celebrated, preached, exhorted, played and sing and made people sing to calm down a situation that was heading for the worst. Then, together with Father Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, Father Elias continually rushed to help, console, administer the sacraments and bury the dead. In some cases he even managed to save groups of people by leading them to the rectory. His heroism was manifested with increasing clarity at the end of September 1944, when the *Wehrmacht* (German Armed Forces) largely gave way to the terrible SS.

The triduum of passion for Father Elia Comini and

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

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

The following day, Sunday 1 October 1944, at dusk, the machine-gun inexorably mowed down the 46 victims of what was to go down in history as the 'Massacre of Pioppe di Salvaro': they were the men considered unfit for work; among them, the two priests, young and forced two days earlier to do heavy work. Witnesses who were at a short distance, as the crow flies, from the site of the massacre, could hear the voice of Father Comini leading the Litanies and then heard the

sound of gunfire. Father Comini, before falling to his death, gave absolution to all and shouted: 'Mercy, mercy!', while Father Capelli got up from the bottom of the barrel and made wide signs of the cross, until he fell back with his arms outstretched on the cross. Nobody could be recovered. After twenty days, the grates were opened and the waters of the Reno swept away the mortal remains, completely losing track of them. In the Botte people died amid blessings and invocations, amid prayers, acts of repentance and forgiveness. Here, as in other places, people died as Christians, with faith, with their hearts turned to God in the hope of eternal life.

History of the Montesole massacre

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

community intent on praying the rosary. He was killed there, at the foot of the altar. The others – more than 70 – in the nearby cemetery. Father Ferdinando was shot in the back of the head on 9 October, with his sister Giulia; he was 26 years old.

Servant of God Akash Bashir

On 25 February, we celebrated the feast of our Salesian protomartyrs, Bishop Aloysius Versiglia and Father Callistus Caravario. Martyrdom, since the time of the first Christian community, has always been a clear sign of our faith, similar to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our salvation. Currently, in our Salesian Congregation, we are dealing with the cause of martyrdom of Akash Bashir, a young Salesian former pupil from Pakistan, who gave his life for the salvation of his parish community at the age of 20. The diocesan investigation phase for the beatification process ended on 15 March, the anniversary of his martyrdom.

Pakistan is one of the most extremist Muslim countries in the world. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan emerged after World War II, with independence from India in 1947. However, Christians were already present in this region thanks to Dominican and Franciscan missionaries. Currently, Christians in Pakistan make up about 1.6% of the total population (Catholics and Anglicans), or about 4 million people. Religious minorities face daily discrimination, marginalisation, lack of equal opportunities in employment and education, and religious discrimination and sometimes persecution persist, making religious freedom a critical issue.

Despite the challenges, Christian communities in Pakistan demonstrate resilience and hope. Churches and

Christian organisations play a key role in providing support and promoting interreligious unity, and the Salesians have contributed significantly with their presence.

Akash Bashir's life began in a small village near Afghanistan, in a family of five children, he being the third. Akash, born during the summer on 22 June 1994, faced extreme weather and survived with difficulty. Despite the difficulties of the adverse climate, family poverty and poor nutrition, these challenges helped shape his character.

Akash's dream of serving in the army was thwarted by educational and financial insecurity. The Bashir family decided to migrate eastwards, to the Punjab, to the city of Lahore, close to the border with India, specifically to the Christian district of Youhanabad, where the Salesians run a boarding school, a primary school and a technical school. In September 2010, Akash Bashir entered the Salesian Don Bosco Technical and Youth Centre.

In a difficult political-religious context, Akash volunteered as a security guard in Youhanabad Parish in December 2014. His role as a security guard at St John's Parish consisted of guarding the entrance to the courtyard and controlling the worshippers at the entrance gate, as the churches are protected by a wall with only one entrance door. On 15 March 2015, during the celebration of Mass, Akash was on duty.

That day was the Fourth Sunday of Lent ("Laetare" Sunday) celebrated by 1200-1500 faithful attending the Mass, presided over by Father Francis Gulzar, the parish priest. At 11.09 a.m., a first terrorist attack hit the Anglican community less than 500 metres from the Catholic church. A minute later, at 11.10 a.m., a second detonation took place right at the entrance to the courtyard of the Catholic Parish, where Akash Bashir, as a volunteer security guard, was on duty.

His Eminence, Cardinal Ángel Fernández, the Rector Major of the Salesians, in the introduction to his biography describes Akash's martyrdom in these words:

"On 15 March 2015, while Holy Mass was being celebrated in St John's parish, the group of security guards made up of young volunteers, of which Akash Bashir was a member, faithfully guarded the entrance. Something unusual happened that day. Akash noticed that a person with explosives under his clothes was trying to enter the church. He restrained him, spoke to him and tried to stop him from continuing, but realising that he could not hold him back he hugged him tightly saying, "I will die, but I will not let you enter the church." So the young man and the suicide bomber died together. Our young man offered his life saving thundreds of people, boys, girls, mothers, teenagers and grown men who were praying inside the church at that moment. Akash was 20 years old."

After the explosion, four people lay dying on the ground: the man with the explosives, a vegetable vendor, a six-year-old girl and Akash Bashir. His sacrifice prevented the death toll from being much higher. The Gospel proclaimed that day recalled Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (John 3: 20-21). Akash sealed these words with his blood as a young Christian.

On 18 March, the Archbishop of Lahore presided over an ecumenical funeral celebration for Akash and the Anglican Christians, attended by 7,000-10,000 faithful. Afterwards, the body was transferred to the Youhanabad cemetery, where it was buried in a tomb built by Akash's father.

The life of Akash Bashir is a powerful testimony to the early Christian communities surrounded by philosophies, adverse cultures and persecution. The communities of the Acts of the Apostles were also minorities, but with strong faith and unlimited courage, similar to the Christians in Pakistan.

The shining example of Salesian Past Pupil Akash Bashir continues to inspire the world. He lived the words of

Jesus: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

On 15 March 2022, the diocesan enquiry officially began, marking a significant step towards the possible beatification of the first Pakistani citizen. The conclusion of the diocesan enquiry on 15 March 2024 marks a fundamental milestone on the path to beatification and canonisation.

I finish by recalling again the words of His Eminence, Card. Ángel Fernández on Akash Bashir:

"To be a saint today is possible! And it is undoubtedly the most obvious charismatic sign of the Salesian educational system. In a special way, Akash is the flag, the sign, the voice of so many Christians who are attacked, persecuted, humiliated and martyred in non-Catholic countries. Akash is the voice of so many courageous young people who manage to give their lives for the faith despite the difficulties of life, poverty, religious extremism, indifference, social inequality and discrimination. The life and martyrdom of this young Pakistani, only 20 years old, makes us recognise the power of God's Holy Spirit, alive, present in the least expected places, in the humble, in the persecuted, in the young, in God's little ones. His Cause for Beatification is for us a sign of hope and an example of youthful holiness unto martyrdom."

*Fr Gabriel de Jesús CRUZ TREJO, sdb
vice-postulator of the cause of Akash Bashir*

Salesian Protomartyrs:

Aloysius (Louis) Versiglia and Callistus Caravario

Louis and Callistus: the same missionary vocation for the salvation of souls, but a different story.

25 February this year marks the 94th anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop Aloysius (Louis) Versiglia and Fr Callistus Caravario, missionaries to China.

Louis Versiglia and Callistus Caravario: two figures different in many respects but united by a great apostolic zeal and their last act of pure love in defence of the Catholic religion and the purity of three Chinese girls.

Louis: the aspiring vet who became a Salesian missionary

Aloysius Versiglia, born on 5 June 1873 in Oliva Gessi (PV). As a child, although a regular altar boy at the parish church of his village, he had no intention of becoming a priest. In fact, he was annoyed when his fellow villagers, seeing him so devout in church, prophesied his future as a priest. This was not part of his life plan at all, not even when at the age of 12 he was sent to study in Valdocco in Turin. He loves horses and dreamt of becoming a veterinarian. Studying in Turin reinforced in him the hope of later enrolling in the prestigious Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at Turin University.

At Valdocco, however, he met Don Bosco, by then old and ill, and was charmed by his charism.



Versiglia with Fr Braga and the students of the St Joseph Institute in Ho Sai

During these years at Valdocco, something began to take shape in Versiglia's soul. The charity and devotion radiated by the

Salesian environment, together with the fascination of Don Bosco, slowly worked their way into Louis' soul, until a decisive event, and from that day on he would no longer have any doubts. On 11 March 1888, in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, while attending the farewell ceremony for a group of missionaries leaving for Argentina, he was impressed by the modest and recollected demeanour of one of the six young men leaving. Hence his vocation. From that day, the strong desire to become a priest, a Salesian missionary priest, was born in him. (The story of his missionary vocation is well described in the letter he wrote to his Rector Fr Barberis in 1890).

Louis therefore made his novitiate in Foglizzo (1888-1890), where he was irreproachable in everything: charitable with his companions, very pious and at the same time enterprising and full of life. He then won a scholarship for a course in philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome and received a bachelor's degree in philosophy at the age of twenty.

He was ordained a priest when he was only twenty-two years old with a dispensation granted by the Holy See given his psychological and moral maturity, superior to his age. He was immediately sent to teach philosophy to the novices at Foglizzo, where, with his outspoken and always cheerful character, he was respected and admired by everyone for his competence, friendliness and impartiality. He demanded observance of the rules, leading everyone by example.

After Foglizzo, he was entrusted with the direction of the new novitiate in Genzano outside Rome, where he also transmitted the missionary ideal to his clerics.

Callistus: a pure young man eager to be a missionary



Cleric Caravario in Shanghai with Fr Garelli and 20 baptising students

Callistus Caravario's vocation, on the other hand, has a completely different story. He was born on 8 June 1903,

exactly thirty years after Louis Versiglia, in Courgnè (TO), and moved to Turin with his family at the age of five. He was good-natured, very attached to his mother, who showed him special attention, and from an early age showed a marked vocation for the priesthood. His first amusements were imitating the gestures of the priest celebrating Mass. He soon learnt to serve Mass, did so with devotion, and attended the St Joseph's oratory in Turin with passion and commitment. It became his second home.

In primary classes in St John the Evangelist college, for two years he had cleric Charles Braga, now Servant of God, as his teacher.

He constantly told his mother that he would become a priest when he grew up.

In 1914 he began secondary classes at the Valdocco Oratory, where he was particularly attracted by the missionaries who visited the Superiors there and with whom he often spent time in recreation, feeding his desire for the Missions.

In 1918 he began his novitiate in Foglizzo and took his religious vows the following year. He attended the Saint Aloysius Oratory in Via Ormea where he introduced more than one young man to the priesthood.

In 1922 he met Bishop Versiglia, who had arrived in Turin from China to attend the General Chapter, and expressed his strong desire to follow him in the Mission. The Superiors, however, did not allow him to realise his dream immediately, because this would oblige him to cut short his studies, but Callistus assured Versiglia: "Bishop, you will see that I will be true to my word: I will follow you to China. You will see that I will certainly follow you."

The following year, through a group of missionaries leaving for China, he sent a letter to Fr Braga, missionary in Shiu-chow, asking him to "prepare a little place for him."

Louis and Callistus: different missionary experiences but

united by their complete dedication to their neighbour and by winning the affection and attachment of young people

Fr Versiglia kept his missionary ideal alive over the years and the opportunity to go on mission presented itself to him in 1906, when the Rector Major of the Salesians, following negotiations with the bishop of Macao, appointed him head of an expedition to Macao, a Portuguese colony on the southern coast of China, to run and manage an orphanage.

The expedition consisted of two other priests and three brothers: a tailor, a shoemaker and a printer. The missionaries arrived in Macao on 13 February 1906.

Fr Versiglia adopted Don Bosco's educational method, trying to create a family environment based on loving-kindness. For the orphans their "Luì San-fù" (Father Louis) had total and loving dedication which was fully reciprocated by them. As soon as he arrived they ran to him and greet him warmly. This is why Fr Versiglia became known in Macao as the "father of the orphans".

In the orphanage run by Versiglia, games and music were fundamental educational tools. This inspired him to open a festive oratory and establish a band with brass instruments and drums, which immediately captured the curiosity and sympathy of all the Chinese, in whose eyes the little musicians seem to be "a fantastic group from another world."

Over the years, Fr Versiglia transformed the orphanage into a professional Arts and Crafts school for orphaned pupils that was so highly regarded that it was adopted as a model for other schools in Macao. The children who graduated from there immediately found employment in the city's administrative offices or managed to open their own handicraft shops. This school made a valuable contribution to social and cultural promotion and its importance was recognised by all.

In 1911, the Bishop of Macao entrusted Versiglia with the evangelisation of the Heung Shan district, a region in the vast delta of the Pearl River.

In this territory, the task of evangelisation was particularly difficult. "There is everything to do, preparing catechists,

teachers, schools..." wrote Fr Versiglia. A difficult task above all because of the lack of personnel, both male and female, and the great distrust of the Chinese people towards missionaries, considered as foreigners sent by colonialist countries and therefore enemies.

A few months later, the thousand-year Chinese monarchy was overthrown and the Republic was established in October 1911, but clashes between imperial and revolutionary troops continued. Piracy flourished again and epidemics broke out. The bubonic plague even spread and Fr Versiglia spared no sacrifices to help anyone in need, visiting the poor, comforting the sick and administering baptisms. Once a month he also visits lepers relegated to a nearby island.

In Versiglia's firm desire to help everyone, even the most wretched, estranged and forgotten, to assist them both materially in the daily needs of life, and spiritually by saving their souls, we cannot but see in him a boundless love for his neighbour.

In 1918, the first completely autonomous Salesian Mission in China came into being, the Shiu-Chow Mission, which encompassed a vast mountainous region, where one could only move around by boat, on foot or on horseback, and the inhabitants were scattered in villages far away from each other.

In 1921, he was consecrated bishop.

The various confreres all gave testimony to Versiglia's great charity, which led him to be almost the servant of his missionaries, and when they were sick he assisted them day and night. Charity even in small things. Fr Garelli, for example, would recount that when he arrived from Italy at the residence in Shiu-chow, which was small, poor and unfurnished, Versiglia told him, "You see, there is only one bed here. I am now broken in to missionary life, but you are not! You are still used to the comforts of civilised life. So, you sleep on that bed and I will sleep here on the floor."

Even as a bishop, he continued to sacrifice himself for his confreres and for the Chinese, and offered himself for any service: printer, sacristan, gardener, painter, even barber. He undertook very tiring and very long pastoral visits, some lasting up to two months, in very uncomfortable conditions, he slept on the decks of public boats in the midst of people trampling over him, in dilapidated hotels, in the midst of a deluge...

He built schools, residences, churches, dispensaries, an orphanage, an old people's home, all thanks to his special skills: 1) he had skills as an architect; in fact, he designed and planned all the buildings himself and then directed the work, 2) he had great oratorical skills that enable him to raise the necessary funds. On his only two trips to Italy in 1916 and 1922 and on his trip to the Eucharistic Congress in Chicago, where he went for specific health reasons, he gave several seminars in which he charmed people, opening the hearts of many benefactors.

The years in Shiu-chow were even more difficult years. The republican government, in order to drive out powerful generals who still controlled vast areas of the north, asked for help from Russia, which sent its armaments, but also began to engage in Bolshevik propaganda against Western imperialism, and the missionaries were seen as enemies who must be driven out, their residences often occupied by the military, etc. Over the years, the scene became increasingly difficult, it became more and more dangerous to travel, piracy raged, some missionaries were kidnapped by pirates.

Bishop Versiglia did his utmost to defend the residences and people in danger and said, "if a victim is needed for the Vicariate, I beg the Lord to take me."

Callistus: young missionary passionate about Christ to the point of total self-giving

Callistus' missionary experience was different and shorter, but equally conducted with the greatest dedication of self.

He succeeded in realising his missionary dream at the age of

twenty-one (1924), when he obtained permission to follow Fr Garelli to Shanghai, where the Salesians were entrusted with the direction of a large vocational school.

At the handing over of the missionary cross in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, cleric Caravario formulated this prayer: "Lord, I do not wish my cross to be either light or heavy, but as You wish. Give it to me as You wish. I only ask that I may bear it willingly." Words that tell us so much about his willingness to accept God's will even in suffering and hardship.

Caravario therefore arrived in Shanghai in November 1924, and here, in addition to studying Chinese, he was entrusted with a huge amount of work: the complete care, twenty-four hours a day, of one hundred orphans, catechism, preparation for baptism and confirmation, animation of recreations. Pursuing his ideal of becoming a priest, he also began to study theology with great seriousness.

In 1927, he had to leave Shanghai due to the outbreak of the revolution and was sent to the distant island of Timor, a Portuguese colony in the Indonesian archipelago, ecclesiastically dependent on the Bishop of Macao, to open an arts and crafts school. He would stay in Timor for two years, which he would take advantage of to enrich his religious culture and his relationship with God in view of the Priesthood. In Timor, as in Shanghai, his apostolate bore the fruit of various vocations, and he earned the trust and affection of the young people "who all mourned his departure" when the Salesian house in Dili was closed in 1929.

He was therefore sent to the Shiu-chow Mission where he met his primary school teacher, Fr Charles Braga, and Bishop Versiglia, who ordained him a priest on 18 May 1929. That day, he wrote to his mother: "Mother, I am writing to you with a heart full of joy. This morning I was ordained, I am a priest for ever. By now your Callistus is no longer yours: he must be completely the Lord's. Will the time of my priesthood be long or short? I do not know. The important thing is that by presenting myself to the Lord I can say that I have made the

grace He has given me bear fruit.”

Caravario was extremely thin and weak due to malaria contracted in Timor, and Versiglia entrusted him with the Lin-chow Mission, thinking that the good climate of that area would benefit his physical health.

Like Versiglia, Caravario faced the hardships of apostolic journeys with a spirit of sacrifice and adaptation. “In this land there are many souls to be saved and workers are few; therefore, we must, with the Lord’s help, save them even at the cost of any sacrifice.”

Thanks to his qualities of purity, piety, gentleness and sacrifice, he was considered by his confreres to be the perfect model of a missionary priest.

Louis and Callistus: together in the ultimate sacrifice

On 24 February 1930 Bishop Versiglia left for a pastoral visit to the Lin-chow residence together with Fr Callistus Caravario, two teachers and three young girls who had studied at the Shiu-chow boarding school. On 25 February, on their way up the Lin-chow river, their boat was stopped by a dozen Bolshevik pirates who demand five hundred dollars as a pass (which the missionaries obviously did not have with them) and attempted to kidnap the girls, but Versiglia and Caravario firmly oppose this in order to protect the purity of the girls. Bishop Versiglia was determined to do his duty to the point of giving his life: “If it is necessary to die to save those entrusted to my care, I am ready.” The pirates pounced on them, insulting the Catholic religion, and beat them brutally. Then they led them into a thicket, shot them and mistreated their bodies.

The girls, freed a few days later by the regular army, would testify to the serenity with which the two missionaries went to their deaths.

Louis and Callistus sacrificed themselves to defend the faith and purity of the three young girls.

Those who knew them testify that their strength of will and attachment to God permeated their entire lives in a heroic

manner, and that their zeal for the salvation of souls was special.

The holiness of these beautiful souls was their daily conquest and their martyrdom was their crowning achievement.

Dr Giovanna Bruni

Laura Vicuña: a daughter who “begets” her mother

Stories of wounded families

We are used to imagining the family as a harmonious reality, characterised by the co-presence of several generations and by the guiding role of parents who set the norm and of children who – when they learn this – are guided by them in life’s experiences. Nonetheless, families often find themselves beset by dramas and misunderstandings, or marked by wounds that attack their optimal configuration and give them a distorted and false image.

The history of Salesian holiness also has stories of wounded families: families where at least one of the parental figures is missing, or the presence of the mother and father becomes, for different reasons (physical, psychic, moral and spiritual), penalising for their children, now on their way to the honours of the altars. Don Bosco himself, who had experienced the premature death of his father and the estrangement from the family by the prudent wish of Mamma Margaret, wanted – and this is no coincidence – the Salesian work to be particularly dedicated to “poor and abandoned youth” and did not hesitate to reach out to the young people formed in his oratory with an intense vocational pastoral (demonstrating that no wound from the past is an obstacle to a

full human and Christian life). It is therefore natural that Salesian holiness itself, which draws on the lives of many of Don Bosco's young people later consecrated through him to the cause of the Gospel, bears within itself – as a logical consequence – traces of wounded families.

Of these boys and girls who grew up in contact with Salesian works, we present Blessed Laura Vicuña, born in Chile in 1891, fatherless and whose mother began a cohabitation in Argentina with the wealthy landowner Manuel Mora; Laura, therefore, hurt by her mother's situation of moral irregularity, was ready to offer her life for her.

A short but intense life

Born in Santiago de Chile on 5 April 1891, and baptised on the following 24 May, Laura was the eldest daughter of José D. Vicuña, a fallen nobleman who had married Mercedes Pino, the daughter of modest farmers. Three years later a little sister, Julia Amanda, arrived, but soon her father died, after suffering a political defeat that undermined his health and compromised, along with the family's financial support, also his honour. Deprived of any "protection and prospect of a future", the mother landed in Argentina, where she resorted to the guardianship of the landowner Manuel Mora: a man "of proud and haughty character" who "did not hide his hatred and contempt for anyone who opposed his plans." A man, in short, who guaranteed protection only on the surface, but was actually used to taking what he wanted by force if necessary, exploiting people. In the meantime, he paid for the studies for Laura and her sister at the boarding school run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Their mother – who was under Mora's psychological influence – lived with him without finding the strength to break the bond. However, when Mora began to show signs of unhealthy interest in Laura herself, and especially when the latter embarked on the path of preparation for her First Communion, she suddenly realised the gravity of the situation. Unlike her mother – who justified one evil

(cohabitation) in view of a good (her daughters' education at boarding school) – Laura understood that this was a morally illegitimate argument, which put her mother's soul in grave danger. At this time, Laura also wanted to become a Sister of Mary Help of Christians herself: but her request was rejected because she was the daughter of a "public concubine". And it is at this point that a change took place in Laura (received into the boarding school when "impulsiveness, ease of resentment, irritability, impatience and wanting to be seen" still dominated in her) that only Grace, combined with her own commitment, could bring about: she asked God for her mother's conversion, offering herself for her. At that moment, Laura could move neither "forwards" (entering the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) nor "backwards" (returning to her mother and Mora). With a gesture then charged with the creativity typical of saints, Laura embarked on the only road still accessible to her: one of height and depth. In her First Communion resolutions she had noted:

I resolve to do all I know and can to [...] make reparation for the offences that you, Lord, receive every day from people, especially from people in my family; my God, give me a life of love, mortification and sacrifice.

The intention in an "Act of Offering" was now finalised, which includes the sacrifice of her very life. Her confessor, recognising that the inspiration was from God, but ignorant of the consequences, agreed, and confirmed that Laura was "aware of the offering she has just made". She spent the last two years in silence, cheerfulness and with a smile. And yet, the gaze she cast on the world – as confirmed by a photographic portrait, very different from the familiar hagiographic stylisation – also speaks of the painful awareness and pain that she felt. In a situation where she lacked both the "freedom from" (conditioning, obstacles, hardships) and the "freedom to" do many things, this pre-teen testified to the "freedom for" of total self-giving.

Laura did not despise, but loved life: her own and her mother's. For this she offered herself. On 13 April 1902, Good Shepherd Sunday, she asked herself, "If He gives life... what is stopping me from giving mine for Mum?" Dying, she added. "Mum, I am dying, I myself have asked Jesus... for almost two years I have been offering Him my life for you..., to obtain the grace of your return!"

These are words devoid of regret and reproach, but loaded with great strength, great hope and great faith. Laura had learnt to accept her mother for what she was. Indeed, she offered herself to give her what she alone could not achieve. When Laura died, her mother converted. Laurita de los Andes, the daughter, had thus helped to generate her mother in the life of faith and grace.

Blessed Titus Zeman, martyr for vocations

A man destined for elimination

Titus Zeman was born in Vajnory, near Bratislava (in Slovakia), on 4 January 1915, the first of ten children in a simple family. At the age of 10, he was suddenly healed through Our Lady's intercession and promised to "be her son forever" and become a Salesian priest. He began to realise this dream in 1927, after overcoming opposition from his family for two years. He had asked the family to sell a field to be able to pay for his studies, and had added, "If I had died, you would well have found the money for my funeral. Please use that money to pay for my studies."

The same determination constantly returns in Zeman: when the communist regime established itself in Czechoslovakia and persecuted the Church, Father Titus

defended the crucifix symbol (1946), paying with his dismissal from the school where he taught. Having providentially escaped the dramatic "Night of the Barbarians" and the deportation of religious (13-14 April 1950), he decided to cross the Iron Curtain with the young Salesians to Turin, where he was welcomed by the Rector Major Fr Peter Ricaldone. After two successful crossings (summer and autumn 1950), the expedition failed in April 1951. Fr Zeman faced an initial week of torture and another ten months of preventive detention, with further heavy torture, until the trial on 20-22 February 1952. He would then undergo 12 years in detention (1952-1964) and almost five years on parole, always spied on and persecuted (1964-1969).

In February 1952, the Prosecutor General demanded the death penalty for him for espionage, high treason and illegal border crossing, which was commuted to 25 years in hard prison without parole. However, Fr Zeman was branded a "man destined for elimination" and experienced life in forced labour camps. He was forced to grind radioactive uranium by hand and without protection; he spent long periods in solitary confinement, with a food ration six times less than that of the others. He becomes seriously ill with heart, lung and neurological diseases. On 10 March 1964, having served half his sentence, he was released from prison on parole for seven years. He was physically unrecognisable and experienced a period of intense suffering, also spiritual, due to the ban on publicly exercising his priestly ministry. He died, after receiving amnesty, on 8 January 1969.

Saviour of vocations to the point of martyrdom

Fr Titus lived his vocation and the special mission to which he felt called to work for the salvation of vocations with a great spirit of faith, embracing the hour of "ordeal" and "sacrifice" and testifying to his ability, also due to the grace received from God, to face the offering of his life, the passion of imprisonment and torture and finally death with a Christian, consecrated and priestly conscience.

This is attested by the rosary of 58 beads, one for each period of torture, which he made of bread and thread, and above all the reference to *Ecce homo*, as the One who kept him company in his sufferings, and without Whom he would not have been able to face them. He guarded and defended the faith of young people in times of persecution, to oppose the communist re-education and ideological redevelopment. His journey of faith was a continuous “shining forth” of virtues, the fruit of an intense interior life, which translates into a courageous mission, in a country where Communism intended to wipe out every trace of Christian life. Fr Titus’ entire life was summed up in encouraging others to that “fidelity in vocation” with which he decisively followed his own. His was a total love for the Church and his own religious vocation and apostolic mission. His bold undertakings flow from this unified and unifying love.

Witness of hope

The heroic witness of Blessed Titus Zeman is one of the most beautiful pages of faith that the Christian communities of Eastern Europe and the Salesian Congregation wrote during the harsh years of religious persecution by communist regimes in the last century. Particularly resplendent was his commitment to young consecrated and priestly vocations, decisive for the future of the faith in those territories.

With his life, Fr Titus showed himself to be a man of unity, who broke down barriers, mediated in conflicts, always looked to the integral good of the person; moreover, he always considered an alternative, a better solution, a non-surrender to unfavourable circumstances to be possible. In the same years in which some apostatised or betrayed, and others became discouraged, he strengthened the hope of young men called to the priesthood. His obedience was creative, not formal. He acted not only for the good of his neighbour, but in the best possible way. Thus, he did not limit himself to organising the clerics’ escapes abroad, but accompanied them

by paying in person, allowing them to reach Turin, in the conviction that 'at Don Bosco's house' they would have an experience destined to mark their entire lives. At the root of this was the awareness that to save a vocation is to save many lives: first of all that of the one called, then those that an obeyed vocation reaches, in this case through religious and priestly life.

It is significant that the martyrdom of Fr Titus Zeman was recognised in the wake of the bicentenary of the birth of St John Bosco. His testimony is the incarnation of Jesus' vocational call and pastoral predilection for children and young people, especially for his young Salesian confreres, a predilection that manifested itself, as in Don Bosco, in a true 'passion', seeking their good, putting all his energies, all his strength, all his life into this in a spirit of sacrifice and offering, "Even were I to lose my life, I would not consider it wasted, knowing that at least one of those I had helped has become a priest in my place."