

# The Prophecies of Malachy. The Popes and the End of the World

*The so-called "Prophecies of Malachy" represent one of the most fascinating and controversial prophetic texts concerning the destiny of the Catholic Church and the world. Attributed to Malachy of Armagh, an Irish archbishop who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, these predictions briefly describe, through enigmatic Latin mottos, the pontiffs from Celestine II up to the final pope, the mysterious "Peter the Second". Although modern scholars consider them forgeries dating back to the late sixteenth century, the prophecies continue to spark debates, apocalyptic interpretations, and speculation about possible eschatological scenarios. Regardless of their authenticity, they nevertheless represent a strong call to spiritual vigilance and conscious waiting for the final judgment.*

## **Malachy of Armagh. Biography of a "Boniface of Ireland"**

Malachy (in Irish *Máel Máedóc Ua Morgair*, in Latin *Malachias*) was born around 1094 near Armagh, into a noble family. He received his intellectual formation from the learned Imhar O'Hagan and, despite his initial reluctance, was ordained a priest in 1119 by Archbishop Cellach. After a period of liturgical refinement at the monastery of Lismore, Malachy undertook intense pastoral activity that led him to hold positions of increasing responsibility. In 1123, as Abbot of Bangor, he initiated the restoration of sacramental discipline; in 1124, appointed Bishop of Down and Connor, he continued liturgical and pastoral reform; and in 1132, having become Archbishop of Armagh after difficult disputes with local usurpers, he liberated the primatial see of Ireland and promoted the diocesan structure sanctioned by the Synod of

Ráth Breasail.

During his ministry, Malachy introduced significant reforms by adopting the Roman liturgy, replacing clan-based monastic inheritances with the diocesan structure prescribed by the Synod of Ráth Breasail (1111), and promoted individual confession, sacramental marriage, and confirmation.

For these reform efforts, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux compared him to Saint Boniface, the apostle of Germany.

Malachy made two journeys to Rome (1139 and 1148) to receive the metropolitan pallium for the new ecclesiastical provinces of Ireland, and on that occasion was appointed papal legate. Upon returning from his first journey, with the help of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, he founded the Cistercian abbey of Mellifont (1142), the first of numerous Cistercian foundations on Irish soil. He died during a second journey towards Rome, on November 2, 1148, in Clairvaux, in the arms of Saint Bernard, who wrote his biography titled "*Vita Sancti Malachiae*" (Life of Saint Malachy).

In 1190, Pope Clement III officially canonized him, making him the first Irish saint proclaimed according to the formal procedure of the Roman Curia.

### **The "Prophecy of the Popes": a text that appears four centuries later**

Only in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was a collection of 112 mottos associated with this reforming archbishop, supposedly describing as many pontiffs: from Celestine II to the enigmatic "Peter the Second," destined to witness the destruction of the "city of seven hills."

The first publication of these prophecies, dating back to 1595, when the Benedictine monk Arnold Wion included them in his work *Lignum Vitae*, presenting them as a manuscript written by Malachy during his visit to Rome in 1139.

The prophecies consist of short, symbolic phrases intended to characterize each pope through references to their name,

birthplace, coat of arms, or significant events of their pontificate. Below are the mottos attributed to the most recent pontiffs:

**109** – *\*De medietate Lunae\** (“From the half of the moon”)

Attributed to John Paul I, who reigned for only one month. He was elected on 26.08.1978, when the moon was in its last quarter (25.08.1978), and died on 28.09.1978, when the moon was in its first quarter (24.09.1978).

**110** – *\*De labore solis\** (“From the labour of the sun”)

Attributed to John Paul II, who led the Church for 26 years, the third-longest pontificate in history after Saint Peter (34-37 years) and Blessed Pius IX (more than 31 years). He was elected on 16.10.1978, shortly after a partial solar eclipse (02.10.1978), and died on 02.04.2005, a few days before an annular solar eclipse (08.04.2005).

**111** – *\*Gloria olivae\** (“Glory of the olive”)

Attributed to Benedict XVI (2005-2013). Cardinal Ratzinger, engaged in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, chose the name Benedict XVI in continuity with Benedict XV, a pope who worked for peace during World War I, as he himself explained in his first General Audience on April 27, 2005 (peace is symbolized by the olive branch brought by the dove to Noah at the end of the Flood). This symbolic connection was further strengthened by the canonization in 2009 of Bernardo Tolomei (1272-1348), founder of the Benedictine congregation of Santa Maria di Monte Oliveto (Olivetans).

**112[a]** – *\*In persecutione extrema Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae sedebit...\**

This is not strictly a motto, but an introductory phrase. In the original 1595 edition, it appears as a separate line, suggesting the possibility of inserting additional popes between Benedict XVI and the prophesied “Peter the Second.” This would contradict the interpretation that necessarily identifies Pope Francis as the last pontiff.

## **112[b] – *\*Petrus Secundus\****

Refers to the last pope (the Church had Saint Peter as its first pontiff and will have another Peter as its last) who will guide the faithful in times of tribulation.

The entire paragraph of the prophecy reads:

*\*“In persecutione extrema Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae sedebit Petrus Secundus, qui pascet oves in multis tribulationibus; quibus transactis, Civitas septicollis diruetur, et Iudex tremendus judicabit populum suum. Amen.” \**

“During the final persecution of the Holy Roman Church, Peter the Second will sit, who will feed his sheep amidst many tribulations; when these things are finished, the city of seven hills [Rome] will be destroyed, and the terrible Judge will judge his people. Amen.”

“Peter the Second” would thus be the last pontiff before the end of times, with a clear apocalyptic reference to the destruction of Rome and the final judgment.

## **Contemporary Speculations**

In recent years, speculative interpretations have multiplied: some identify Pope Francis as the 112<sup>th</sup> and final pontiff, others suggest that he is a transitional pope leading to the true last pope, and some even predict 2027 as a possible date for the end of times.

This last hypothesis is based on a curious calculation: from the first papal election mentioned in the prophecy (Celestine II in 1143) until the first publication of the text (during the pontificate of Sixtus V, 1585-1590), about 442 years passed; following the same logic, adding another 442 years from the publication would lead to 2027. These speculations, however, lack a scientific basis, as the original manuscript contains no explicit chronological references.

## **Contested Authenticity**

Since the text’s appearance, numerous historians have expressed doubts about its authenticity for several reasons:

- **absence of ancient manuscripts:** no copies datable before 1595 exist;
- **linguistic style:** the Latin used is typical of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, not the 12<sup>th</sup>;
- **retrospective accuracy:** the mottos referring to popes before the conclave of 1590 are surprisingly accurate, while those subsequent are much vaguer and easily adaptable to later events;
- **political purposes:** in an era of strong tensions between curial factions, such a prophetic list could have influenced the cardinal electors in the Conclave of 1590.

### **The Church's Position**

Catholic doctrine teaches, as reported in the [Catechism](#), that the destiny of the Church cannot be different from that of its Head, Jesus Christ. Paragraphs 675-677 describe "The Church's ultimate trial":

*Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the "mystery of iniquity" in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh.*

*The Antichrist's deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgment. The Church has rejected even modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom to come under the name of millenarianism, especially the "intrinsically perverse" political form of a secular messianism.*

*The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his*

*death and Resurrection. The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven. God's triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgment after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world.*

At the same time, official Catholic doctrine urges prudence, based on the very words of Jesus:

*"Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray" (Mt 24:11).*

*"For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Mt 24:24).*

The Church emphasizes, following the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 24:36), that the time of the end of the world cannot be known by humans, but only by God Himself. And the official Magisterium – The Catechism (no. 673-679) reiterates that no one can "read" the hour of Christ's return.

The prophecies attributed to Saint Malachy have never received official approval from the Church. However, beyond their historical authenticity, they remind us of a fundamental truth of the Christian faith: the end of times will occur, as taught by Jesus.

For two thousand years, people have reflected on this eschatological event, often forgetting that the "end of times" for each individual coincides with the end of their own earthly existence. What does it matter if the end of our life coincides with the end of times? For many, it will not. What truly matters is authentically living the Christian life day by day, following the teachings of Christ and always being ready to account to the Creator and Redeemer for the talents received. Jesus' warning remains ever relevant: "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on which day your Lord will

come" (Mt 24:42).

In this light, the mystery of "Peter the Second" represents not so much a threat of ruin, but rather an invitation to constant conversion and trust in the divine plan of salvation.

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# Is Confession Still Necessary?

*The Sacrament of Confession, often overlooked in today's hectic world, remains for the Catholic Church an irreplaceable source of grace and inner renewal. We invite you to rediscover its original meaning: not a mere formal ritual, but a personal encounter with God's mercy, established by Christ himself and entrusted to the ministry of the Church. In an age that downplays sin, Confession proves to be a compass for the conscience, medicine for the soul, and a wide-open door to peace of heart.*

## **The Sacrament of Confession: A Necessity for the Soul**

In the Catholic tradition, the Sacrament of Confession—also called the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance—holds a central place on the journey of faith. It is not merely a formal act or a practice reserved for a few particularly devout faithful, but a profound necessity involving every Christian called to live in God's grace. In an age that tends to relativize the concept of sin, rediscovering the beauty and liberating power of Confession is fundamental to fully responding to God's love.

Jesus Christ himself instituted the Sacrament of Confession. After His Resurrection, He appeared to the Apostles and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven

them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (Jn 20:22-23). These words are not symbolic; they establish a real and concrete power entrusted to the Apostles and, through succession, to their successors, the bishops and priests.

The forgiveness of sins, therefore, does not happen only privately between man and God, but also passes through the ministry of the Church. God, in His plan of salvation, willed that personal confession before a priest be the ordinary means of receiving His forgiveness.

### **The Reality of Sin**

To understand the necessity of Confession, one must first become aware of the reality of sin.

Saint Paul states, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). And, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8).

No one can claim immunity from sin, not even after Baptism, which purified us from original sin. Our human nature, wounded by concupiscence, continually leads us to fall, to betray God's love through actions, words, omissions, and thoughts.

Saint Augustine writes, "It is true; man's nature was originally created without fault and without any vice. conversely, the present nature of man, through which everyone is born from Adam, now needs the Physician, because it is not healthy. Certainly, all the goods it possesses in its structure, in its life, senses, and mind, it receives from the supreme God, its creator and maker. The vice, however, which obscures and weakens these natural goods, thus making human nature needy of illumination and care, was not derived from its irreproachable maker, but from original sin which was committed through free will." (Nature and Grace).

Denying the existence of sin is tantamount to denying the truth about ourselves. Only by recognizing our need for forgiveness can we open ourselves to the mercy of God, who never tires of calling us back to Himself.



## **Confession: Encounter with Divine Mercy**

The Sacrament of Confession is, first and foremost, a personal encounter with Divine Mercy. It is not simply self-accusation or a session of self-analysis. It is an act of love from God who, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), runs to meet the repentant child, embraces him, and clothes him with new dignity.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: *“Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer cooperates for their conversion.”* (CCC, 1422).

To confess is to allow oneself to be loved, healed, and renewed. It is to welcome the gift of a new heart.

## **Why Confess to a Priest?**

One of the most common objections is, “Why must I confess to a priest? Can’t I confess directly to God?” Certainly, every member of the faithful can – and should – turn directly to God with a prayer of repentance. However, Jesus established a concrete, visible, and sacramental means for forgiveness: confession to an ordained minister. And this applies to every Christian, meaning also priests, bishops, and popes.

The priest acts *in persona Christi*, that is, in the person of Christ Himself. He listens, judges, absolves, and offers spiritual counsel. This is not a human mediation that limits God’s love, but rather a guarantee offered by Christ Himself; forgiveness is communicated visibly, and the faithful can have certainty of it.

Furthermore, confessing before a priest demands humility, an indispensable virtue for spiritual growth. Openly acknowledging one’s faults frees us from the yoke of pride and opens us to the true freedom of the children of God.

It is not enough to confess only once a year, as required by the minimum of ecclesiastical law. The saints and spiritual masters have always recommended frequent confession – even bi-weekly or weekly – as a means of progress in the Christian life.

Saint John Paul II went to confession every week. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, despite being a Carmelite nun living in enclosure, confessed regularly. Frequent confession allows one to refine the conscience, correct ingrained faults, and receive new graces.

### **Obstacles to Confession**

Unfortunately, many faithful today neglect the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Among the main reasons are:

**Shame:** fearing the priest's judgment. But the priest is not there to condemn, but to be an instrument of mercy.

***Fear that confessed sins will be made public:*** confessors cannot reveal to anyone, under any circumstances (including the highest ecclesiastical authorities), the sins heard in confession, even at the cost of their own lives. If they do, they immediately incur *latae sententiae* excommunication (Canon 1386, Code of Canon Law). The inviolability of the sacramental seal admits no exceptions or dispensations. And the conditions are the same even if the Confession did not end with sacramental absolution. Even after the penitent's death, the confessor is bound to observe the sacramental seal.

***Lack of a sense of sin:*** in a culture that minimizes evil, one risks no longer recognizing the gravity of one's faults.

***Spiritual laziness:*** postponing Confession is a common temptation that leads to a cooling of the relationship with God.

***Erroneous theological convictions:*** some mistakenly believe that simply "repenting in one's heart" is sufficient without

the need for sacramental Confession.

***Despair of salvation:*** Some think that for them, there will be no more forgiveness anyway. Saint Augustine says: “Indeed, some, after having fallen into sin, lose themselves even more through despair and not only neglect the medicine of repentance but become slaves to lusts and wicked desires to satisfy dishonest and reprehensible cravings, as if by not doing so they would lose even that to which lust incites them, convinced they are already on the brink of certain damnation. Against this extremely dangerous and harmful disease, the memory of the sins into which even the just and holy have fallen is beneficial.” (ibid.)

To overcome these obstacles, one must seek advice from those who can give it, educate oneself, and pray.

### **Preparing Well for Confession**

A good confession requires adequate preparation, which includes:

- 1. *Examination of conscience:*** sincerely reflecting on one's sins, perhaps aided by lists based on the Ten Commandments, the capital sins, or the Beatitudes.
- 2. *Contrition:*** sincere sorrow for having offended God, not just fear of punishment.
- 3. *Purpose of amendment:*** a real desire to change one's life, to avoid future sin.
- 4. *Integral confession of sins:*** confessing all mortal sins completely, specifying their nature and number (if possible).
- 5. *Penance:*** accepting and performing the act of reparation proposed by the confessor.

### **The Effects of Confession**

Confession does not merely produce an external cancellation of sin. The internal effects are profound and transformative:

***Reconciliation with God:*** Sin breaks communion with God; Confession re-establishes it, bringing us back into full divine friendship.

***Inner peace and serenity:*** Receiving absolution brings profound peace. The conscience is freed from the burden of guilt, and a new joy is experienced.

***Spiritual strength:*** Through sacramental grace, the penitent receives special strength to fight future temptations and grow in virtue.

***Reconciliation with the Church:*** Since every sin also damages the Mystical Body of Christ, Confession also mends our bond with the ecclesial community.

The spiritual vitality of the Church also depends on the personal renewal of its members. Christians who rediscover the Sacrament of Confession become, almost without realizing it, more open to others, more missionary, more capable of radiating the light of the Gospel in the world. Only those who have experienced God's forgiveness can proclaim it convincingly to others.

The Sacrament of Confession is an immense and irreplaceable gift. It is the ordinary way through which Christians can return to God whenever they stray. It is not a burden, but a privilege; not a humiliation, but a liberation.

We are called, therefore, to rediscover this Sacrament in its truth and beauty, to practice it with an open and trusting heart, and to joyfully propose it also to those who have strayed. As the psalmist affirms, "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps 32:1).

Today, more than ever, the world needs purified and reconciled souls, capable of testifying that God's mercy is stronger than sin. If we did not do so at Easter, let us take advantage of the Marian month of May and approach Confession without fear;

there awaits us the smile of a Father who never stops loving us.

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## Young people's gifts to Mary (1865)

*In a dream recounted by Don Bosco in the Chronicle of the Oratory, dated May 30th, Marian devotion transforms into a vivid, symbolic judgment of the Oratory's youth: a procession of boys comes forward, each bearing a gift, before an altar magnificently adorned for the Virgin. An angel, the community's guardian, accepts or rejects these offerings, unveiling their moral meaning—fragrant or withered flowers, thorns symbolizing disobedience, animals embodying grave vices such as impurity, theft, and scandal. At the heart of this vision resonates Don Bosco's educational message: humility, obedience, and chastity are the three pillars for earning Mary's crown of roses.*

Don Bosco found consolation in acts of devotion to Mary, Help of Christians, whom the whole Oratory honored particularly in the month of May. Of his "Good Nights" the chronicle records but one—a most precious one—which he gave on the 30th:

30th May

I dreamed that you boys were heading in procession toward a lofty, richly decorated altar of Our Lady. You were all singing the same hymns to Her but not in the same way: many sang beautifully, others rather poorly and some totally out of tune. I saw too that some kept silent, strayed from the ranks, yawned or kept disturbing others. Everyone carried gifts, mostly flowers, to Our Lady. The

bouquets differed in size and kind. There were bouquets of roses, carnations, violets and so on. Some boys carried very odd presents, such as pigs' heads, cats, slimy toads, rabbits, lambs and so on. A handsome youth stood by the altar. A close look would show that he had wings. He may have been the Oratory's guardian angel. As you boys presented your gifts, he took each and placed it on the altar.

The first to reach the altar offered gorgeous bouquets which the angel silently placed on it. From other bouquets, instead, he had to remove decayed or scentless flowers, such as dahlias, camelias and the like, because Mary is not satisfied with mere looks. Some bouquets even had thorns and nails which, of course, were promptly plucked out and thrown away.

When a boy carrying a pig's head came up, the angel said to him, "How dare you offer this to Our Lady? Don't you know that this animal symbolizes the ugly vice of impurity? Mary Most Pure cannot tolerate such a sin. Step aside. You are not worthy to stand in Her presence."

To those who offered a cat the angel said: "Don't you know better? A cat represents theft, and you dare present it to Mary? Those who take what does not belong to them, those who steal food from the house, tear their clothes out of spite or waste their parents' money by not studying as they ought, are nothing but thieves!" These too the angel ordered to withdraw. He was equally indignant with boys offering toads. "Toads symbolize the shameful sin of scandal, and dare you offer them to Our Lady? Step aside.

Join the unworthy ones." These boys too shamefully withdrew. Some lads came up with a knife stuck in their hearts, a symbol of sacrilege. "Don't you realize that there is death in your soul?" the angel asked them. "If it weren't for God's mercy, you would be lost forever. For heaven's sake, have that knife removed from your heart!"

Eventually the rest of the boys reached the altar and presented their gifts-lambs, rabbits, fish, nuts, grapes and so on. The angel took them and placed them before Our Lady. Then he lined up all the boys whose gifts had been accepted in

front of the altar. I noticed to my deep regret that those who had been made to step aside were much more numerous than I had thought.

Two other angels now appeared at each side of the altar carrying ornate baskets filled with gorgeous, exceedingly beautiful crowns of roses. They were not earthly roses, but heaven-grown, symbolizing immortality. With these the guardian angel crowned all the boys ranged before Our Lady's altar. I noticed among them many whom I had never seen before. Another remarkable thing is this: some of the most beautiful crowns went to boys who were so ugly as to be almost repulsive. Obviously, the virtue of holy purity which they eminently possessed amply made up for their unattractive appearance. Many other boys possessed this virtue too, though not to the same degree. Youngsters excelling in obedience, humility, or love of God were also crowned according to their deserts.

The angel then addressed all the boys as follows: "It was Our Lady's wish that you should be crowned today with these beautiful roses. See to it that they may never be taken from you. Humility, obedience and chastity will safeguard them for you. With these three virtues you will always find favor with Mary and one day receive a crown infinitely more beautiful than that you wear today."

All of you then sang the first stanza of the *Ave Maris Stella*. Afterward you turned around and filed away as you had come, singing the hymn *Lodate Maria* so full-heartedly that I was really amazed. I followed you for a while; then I went back to take a look at the boys whom the angel had pushed aside, but they were no longer there.

My dear children, I know who was crowned and who was turned down.

The latter I will warn privately so that they may strive to bring gifts pleasing to Our Lady.

Now let me make a few observations:

1. All you were carrying a variety of flowers, but unfailingly

every bouquet had its share of thorns-some more, some less. After much thinking I came to the conclusion that these thorns symbolized acts of disobedience, such as keeping money instead of depositing it with Father Prefect, asking leave to go to one place and then going to another, being late to school, eating on the sly, going to other boys' dormitories although knowing that this is always strictly forbidden, lingering in bed after rising time, neglecting prescribed practices of piety, talking during times of silence, buying books and not submitting them for approval, sending or receiving letters on the sneak, and buying and selling things among yourselves. This is what the thorns stand for.

"Is it a sin to break the house rules?" many will ask.

After seriously considering this question, my answer is a firm "yes." I will not say whether it is mortal or venial. Circumstances will determine that, but it certainly is a sin. Some might counter that the Ten Commandments say nothing about obeying house rules. Well, the Fourth Commandment says: "*Honor thy father and thy mother.*" Do you know what "*father*" and "*mother*" stand for? Not only parents, but also those who take their place. Besides, doesn't Holy Scripture say: "... *Obey your superiors*"? [Heb. 13, 17] If you must obey them, it follows that they have the power to command. This is why we have rules, and these must be obeyed.

2. Some bouquets had nails among the flowers, the nails which crucified Jesus. How could that be? As usual, one starts with little things and goes on to more serious ones ... He allows himself undue liberties and falls into mortal sin. This is how nails managed to find their way into those bouquets, how they again crucified Jesus, as St. Paul says: "... crucifying again ... the Son of God." [Heb. 6, 6]

3. Many bouquets contained rotten or scentless flowers, symbols of good works done in the state of mortal sin – and therefore unmeritorious – or from human motives such as ambition, or solely to please teachers and superiors. That's



why the angel, after scolding those boys for daring to offer such things to Our Lady, sent them back to trim their bouquets. Only after they had done this did the angel accept them and place them on the altar. In returning to the altar, these boys did not follow any order, but went up to the angel as soon as they had trimmed their bouquets and then joined those to be crowned.

In this dream I saw both your past and your future. I have already spoken of it to many of you. I shall likewise tell the rest. Meanwhile, my children, see to it that the Blessed Virgin may always receive gifts from you which She will not have to refuse.

*(BM VIII, 73-76)*

Opening photo: Carlo Acutis during a visit to the Marian Shrine of Fátima.

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## **St Dominic Savio. The places of his childhood**

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

The Holy Year 1950 was also the year Dominic Savio

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

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

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

### **At Riva presso Chieri**

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

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

disappeared.

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

### **In Morialdo**

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

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

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

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

## **In Mondonio**

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

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

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

## **Memories of Morialdo**

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The family**

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

*"Well, what do you think?"*

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

**"What can this fabric be used for?"**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **Father Crespi and the Jubilee of 1925**

*In 1925, in anticipation of the Holy Year, Father Carlo Crespi promoted an international missionary exhibition. Recalled by the Collegio Manfredini of Este, he was given the task of*

*documenting the missionary endeavours in Ecuador, collecting scientific, ethnographic, and audio visual materials. Through travels and screenings, his work connected Rome and Turin, highlighting the Salesian commitment and strengthening ties between ecclesiastical and civil institutions. His courage and vision transformed the missionary challenge into an exhibition success, leaving an indelible mark on the history of Propaganda Fide and the Salesian missionary work.*

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

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

This involved:

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

2. Collecting material for the preparation of the International Missionary Exhibition in Rome and, subsequently

transferring it to Turin, to solemnly commemorate the first fifty years of the Salesian missions.

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

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

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

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

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

In a later writing, with great emotion he would recall his departure for the Missions: “*I remember my departure from Genoa on March 22 of the year 1923 [...]. When, once the decks that still held us bound to our native land had been removed, the ship began to move, my soul was pervaded by a joy so overwhelming, so superhuman, so ineffable, that I had never experienced it at any moment of my life, not even on the day of my First Communion, not even on the day of my first*



*Mass. In that instant I began to understand who a missionary was and what God reserved for him [...]. Pray fervently, so that God may preserve our holy vocation and make us worthy of our holy mission; so that none of the souls may perish, which in His eternal decrees God wanted to be saved through us, so that He may make us bold champions of the faith, even unto death, even unto martyrdom"* (Carlo Crespi, New detachment. The hymn of gratitude, in *Bollettino Salesiano*, L, n.12, December 1926).

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

From the first itineraries, Carlo Crespi did not limit himself to admiring, rather he collected, classified, noted, photographed, filmed, and documented anything that attracted his attention as a scholar. With enthusiasm, he ventured into the Ecuadorian East for films, documentaries, and to collect valuable botanical, zoological, ethnic, and archaeological collections.

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

A first itinerary, lasting three months, began in Cuenca, touched Gualaceo, Indanza, and ended at the Santiago River. Then he reached the valley of the San Francisco River,

the Patococha Lagoon, Tres Palmas, Culebrillas, Potrerillos (the highest locality, at 3,800 m a.s.l.), Rio Ishpingo, the hill of Puerco Grande, Tinajillas, Zapote, Loma de Puerco Chico, Plan de Milagro, and Pianoro. In each of these places, he collected samples to dry and integrate into the various collections. Field notebooks and numerous photographs document everything with precision.

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

In addition to this there was the danger of attacks by the indomitable inhabitants of the East that Fr. Carlo, however, managed to approach, laying the foundations for the feature film *"Los invencibles Shuaras del Alto Amazonas,"* which he would shoot in 1926 and screen on February 26, 1927, in Guayaquil. Overcoming all these pitfalls, he managed to gather six hundred varieties of beetles, sixty embalmed birds with wonderful plumage, mosses, lichens, ferns. He studied about two hundred local species and, using the sub-classification of the places visited by naturalists on Allionii, he came across 21 varieties of ferns, belonging to the tropical zone below 800 m a.s.l.; 72 to the subtropical one that goes from 800 to 1,500 m a.s.l.; 102 to the Subandean one, between 1,500 and 3,400 m a.s.l., and 19 to the Andean one, higher than 3,600 m a.s.l. (A very interesting comment was made by Prof. Roberto Bosco, a prestigious botanist and member of the Italian Botanical Society who, fourteen years later, in 1938, decided to study and systematically order "the showy collection of ferns" prepared in a few months by "Prof. Carlo Crespi, botanizing in Ecuador).

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

To summarise: already in October 1923, to prepare the Vatican Exhibition, Fr. Carlo had organised the first

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

Father Crespi spent the first semester of 1925 in the forests of the Sucúa-Macas area, studying the Shuar language and collecting further material for the missionary Exhibition of Turin. In August of the same year, he began a negotiation with the Government to obtain a significant funding, which concluded on September 12 with a contract for 110,000 Sucres (equal to 500,000 Lire of the time and which today would be € 489,493.46), which would allow the Pan-Méndez mule track to be completed). Furthermore, he also obtained permission to withdraw from customs 200 quintals of iron and material confiscated from some traders.

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

In the same year, he was busy organising the Exhibition and then giving several conferences and participating in the American Congress of Rome with two scientific conferences. This enthusiasm and his competence and scientific research responded perfectly to the directives of the Superiors, and, therefore, through the International Missionary Exhibition of 1925 in Rome and that of 1926 in Turin, Ecuador became more widely known. Furthermore, at the ecclesial level, he contacted the Society of the Propagation

of the Faith, the Holy Childhood, and the Association for the Indigenous Clergy. At the civil level, he established relationships with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Italian Government.

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

Having exhausted the task of collector, supplier, and animator of the great international exhibitions, in 1927 Fr. Crespi returned to Ecuador, which became his second homeland. He settled in the Vicariate, under the jurisdiction of the bishop, Msgr. Comin, always dedicated, in a spirit of obedience, to propaganda excursions, to ensure subsidies and special funds, necessary for the works of the missions, such as the Pan Méndez road, the Guayaquil Hospital, the Guayaquil school in Macas, the Quito Hospital in Méndez, the Agricultural School of Cuenca, the city where, since 1927, he began to develop his priestly and Salesian apostolate.

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

*Carlo Riganti*

*President of the Carlo Crespi Association*

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

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# The way to hell paved with feeble resolutions (1873)

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

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

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

Throughout the whole month of May-he said-particularly during the novena of Mary, Help of Christians, I constantly offered Masses and prayers to Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin imploring them to let me know what, most of all, drags souls into hell. I do not say now that the Lord did or did not enlighten me. I only say that almost every night I dreamed that this is due to the lack of firm resolves in confessions. I seemed to see boys leaving church after confession, their heads sprouting two horns.

What causes this? I asked myself. *Ah, this is due to feeble resolutions.* That's why so many go frequently to confession but never mend their ways and keep confessing the same sins over and over again. There are some (I am only conjecturing. not going on anything heard in confession,

because of the seal) who at the start of the school year were doing rather poorly in studies and are still doing no better: there are others who griped and are still griping. I thought it best to let you know this, because it is the result of my humble prayers and because it does come from the Lord.

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

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## Don Bosco promoter of “divine mercy”

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

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

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

We are now in the summer of 1846, when Don Bosco,

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

At this point the famous patriot Silvio Pellico, secretary-librarian to the Marchioness and an admirer and friend of Don Bosco, who had set some of his poems to music, intervened. The Salesian memoirs tell us that Pellico, with a certain boldness, proposed to the Marchioness that she commission Don Bosco to do the publication she was interested in. What did the Marchioness do? She accepted, albeit not too enthusiastically. Who knows? Perhaps she wanted to put him to the test. And Don Bosco, too, accepted.

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

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

So, Don Bosco, as soon as he returned from the country at the beginning of November, set to work, following

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

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

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

## **Educational practice**

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



“father full of goodness and love”.

## **Confession**

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

Don Bosco, as we know, is one of the great apostles of Confession, and this is first of all because he exercised this ministry to the full, as did, for that matter, his teacher and spiritual director Cafasso mentioned above, and the much admired figure of his almost contemporary the saintly Curé d'Ars (1876-1859). If the latter's life, as has been written, “was spent in the confessional” and if Cafasso was able to offer many hours of the day (“the necessary time”) to listen in confession to “bishops, priests, religious, eminent laymen and simple people who flocked to him”, Don Bosco could not do the same because of the many occupations in which he was immersed. Nevertheless, he made himself available in the confessional for the young people (and the Salesians) every day that religious services were celebrated at Valdocco or in Salesian houses, or on special occasions.

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

who was maybe behind the idea. It still remains a significant and indelible icon of his figure in the collective imagination.

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

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

Don Bosco believed in sin, believed in serious sin, believed in hell and spoke of their existence to readers and listeners. But he was also convinced that God is mercy in person, which is why he has given us the sacrament of Reconciliation. And so he insisted on the conditions for receiving it well, and above all on the confessor as "father"

and “doctor” and not so much as “doctor and judge”: “The confessor knows how much greater than your faults is the mercy of God who grants you forgiveness through his intervention” ([Life of Michael Magone](#), pp. 24-25).

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

As an “educator in the youth field” Don Bosco felt the need to insist less on *ex opere operato* and more on *ex opere operantis*, that is, on the dispositions of the penitent. At Valdocco everyone felt invited to make a good confession, all felt the risk of bad confessions and the importance of making a good confession; many of them then felt they were living in a land blessed by the Lord. It was not for nothing that divine mercy had caused a deceased young man to wake up after the funeral shroud had been pulled away so that he could confess his sins (to Don Bosco).

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

## **Communion**

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

Don Bosco is certainly one of the greatest promoters of the sacramental practice of frequent Communion. His doctrine, modelled on the Counter-Reformation way of thinking, gave importance to Communion rather than to the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, even if there was an evolution in its frequency. In the first twenty years of his priestly life, in the wake of St. Alphonsus, but also of the Council of Trent and before that of Tertullian and St Augustine, he suggested weekly Communion, or several times a week or even daily depending on the perfection of the

dispositions corresponding to the graces of the sacrament. Dominic Savio, who at Valdocco had begun to go to confession and communion every fortnight, then went on to receive it every week, then three times a week, finally, after a year of intense spiritual growth, every day, obviously always following the advice of his confessor, Don Bosco himself.

Later, in the second half of the 1860s, on the basis of his pedagogical experiences and a strong theological current in favour of frequent Communion, which saw the French Bishop de Ségur and the prior of Genoa Fr Giuseppe Frassinetti as leaders, Don Bosco moved on to inviting his young men to receive Communion more often, convinced that it allowed decisive steps in the spiritual life and favoured their growth in the love of God. And in the case of the impossibility of daily Sacramental Communion, he suggested spiritual Communion, perhaps during a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, so much appreciated by St Alphonsus. However, the important thing was to keep the conscience in a state to be able to receive Communion every day: the decision was in a way up to the confessor.

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

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

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

Don Bosco cared so much that his boys grew up nourished by the sacraments, but he also wanted the utmost respect for their freedom. And he left precise instructions to his educators in his treatise on the Preventive System: "Never force young people to attend the holy sacraments but only encourage them, and give them the comfort of taking advantage of them."

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

### **Fatherliness and mercy**

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

infrequently knew how to make the accusation in their place.

The figure of God the father, merciful and provident, who throughout history has shown his goodness from Adam onwards towards men, righteous or sinners, but all in need of help and the object of paternal care, and in any case all called to salvation in Jesus Christ, is thus modulated and reflected in the goodness of Don Bosco "Father of his young people", who only wants their good, who does not abandon them, always ready to understand them, pity them, forgive them. For many of them, orphans, poor and abandoned, accustomed from an early age to hard daily work, the object of very modest manifestations of tenderness, children of an era in which what prevailed was decisive submission and absolute obedience to any constituted authority, Don Bosco was perhaps the caress never experienced by a father, the "tenderness" of which Pope Francis speaks.

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

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

The loving kindness with which he treated and

wanted the Salesians to treat the boys had a divine foundation. He affirmed this by quoting an expression from St. Paul: 'Charity is benign and patient; it suffers all things, but hopes all things, and sustains all troubles'.

Loving kindness was therefore a sign of mercy and divine love that escaped sentimentalism and forms of sensuality because of the theological charity that was its source. Don Bosco communicated this love to individual boys and also to groups of them: "That I bear you much affection, I don't need to tell you, I have given you clear proof of it. That you love me, I do not need to tell you, because you have constantly shown it to me. But on what is this mutual affection of ours founded? [...] So the good of our souls is the foundation of our affection" (Epistolary II, no. 1148). Love of God, the theological *primum*, is thus the foundation of the pedagogical *primum*.

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

## **Works of mercy**

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

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## **A Blessed Easter of the Resurrection 2025!**

*“But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.” (Luke 24:12)*

**To behold the Risen Lord, our human eyes do not suffice; we need the light of faith. May this faith, enlightened and strengthened by the joy of the Resurrection we celebrate this Holy Easter 2025, always guide your earthly journey towards our heavenly home.**

**Christ is risen!**

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# **Don Elia Comini: martyr priest at Monte Sole**

*On December 18, 2024, Pope Francis officially recognized the martyrdom of Don Elia Comini (1910-1944), a Salesian of Don Bosco, who will thus be beatified. His name joins that of other priests—such as Don Giovanni Fornasini, already Blessed since 2021—who fell victim to the brutal Nazi violence in the Monte Sole area, in the Bologna hills, during World War II. The beatification of Don Elia Comini is not only an event of extraordinary significance for the Bologna Church and the Salesian Family, but also constitutes a universal invitation to rediscover the value of Christian witness: a witness in which charity, justice, and compassion prevail over every form of violence and hatred.*

## **From the Apennines to the Salesian courtyards**

Don Elia Comini was born on May 7, 1910, in the locality of “Madonna del Bosco” in Calvenzano di Vergato, in the province of Bologna. His birthplace is adjacent to a small Marian sanctuary dedicated to the “Madonna del Bosco,” and this strong imprint in the sign of Mary will accompany him throughout his life.

He is the second child of Claudio and Emma Limoni, who were married at the parish church of Salvaro on February 11, 1907. The following year, the firstborn Amleto was born. Two years later, Elia came into the world. Baptized the day after his birth—May 8—at the parish of Sant’Apollinare in Calvenzano, Elia also received the names “Michele” and “Giuseppe” that day.

When he was seven years old, the family moved to the locality of “Casetta” in Pioppe di Salvaro in the municipality of Grizzana. In 1916, Elia began school: he attended the first three elementary classes in Calvenzano. During that time, he also received his First Communion. Still

young, he showed great involvement in catechism and liturgical celebrations. He received Confirmation on July 29, 1917. Between 1919 and 1922, Elia learned the first elements of pastoral care at the "school of fire" of Mons. Fidenzio Mellini, who had known Don Bosco as a young man and had prophesied his priesthood. In 1923, Don Mellini directed both Elia and his brother Amleto to the Salesians of Finale Emilia, and both would treasure the pedagogical charisma of the saint of the young: Amleto as a teacher and "entrepreneur" in the school; Elia as a Salesian of Don Bosco.

A novice from October 1, 1925, at San Lazzaro di Savena, Elia Comini became fatherless on September 14, 1926, just a few days (October 3, 1926) before his First Religious Profession, which he would renew until Perpetual, on May 8, 1931, on the anniversary of his baptism, at the "San Bernardino" Institute in Chiari. In Chiari, he would also be a "trainee" at the Salesian Institute "Rota." He received the minor orders of the ostiariate and lectorate on December 23, 1933; of the exorcist and acolyte on February 22, 1934. He was ordained subdeacon on September 22, 1934. Ordained deacon in the cathedral of Brescia on December 22, 1934, Don Elia was consecrated a priest by the imposition of hands of the Bishop of Brescia, Mons. Giacinto Tredici, on March 16, 1935, at just 24 years old: the next day he celebrated his First Mass at the Salesian Institute "San Bernardino" in Chiari. On July 28, 1935, he would celebrate with a Mass in Salvaro.

Enrolled in the Faculty of Classical Letters and Philosophy at the then Royal University of Milan, he was always very well-liked by the students, both as a teacher and as a father and guide in the Spirit: his character, serious without rigidity, earned him esteem and trust. Don Elia was also a fine musician and humanist, who appreciated and knew how to make others appreciate "beautiful things." In the written compositions, many students, in addition to following the prompt, naturally found it easy to open their hearts to Don Elia, thus providing him with the opportunity to accompany and guide them. Of Don Elia "the Salesian," it was said that

he was like a hen with chicks around her ("You could read all the happiness of listening to him on their faces: they seemed like a brood of chicks around the hen"): all close to him! This image recalls that of Mt 23:37 and expresses his attitude of gathering people to cheer them and keep them safe.

Don Elia graduated on November 17, 1939, in Classical Letters with a thesis on Tertullian's *De resurrectione carnis*, with Professor Luigi Castiglioni (a renowned Latinist and co-author of a famous Latin dictionary, the "Castiglioni-Mariotti"): focusing on the words "*resurget igitur caro*", Elia comments that it is the song of victory after a long and exhausting battle.

### **A one-way journey**

When his brother Amleto moved to Switzerland, their mother—Mrs. Emma Limoni—was left alone in the Apennines: therefore, Don Elia, in full agreement with his superiors, would dedicate his vacations to her every year. When he returned home, he helped his mother but—as a priest—he primarily made himself available in local pastoral work, assisting Mons. Mellini.

In agreement with the superiors and particularly with the Inspector, Don Francesco Rastello, Don Elia returned to Salvaro in the summer of 1944: that year he hoped to evacuate his mother from an area where, at a short distance, Allied forces, partisans, and Nazi-fascist troops defined a situation of particular risk. Don Elia was aware of the danger he faced leaving his Treviglio to go to Salvaro, and a confrere, Don Giuseppe Bertolli SDB, recalls: "As I said goodbye to him, I told him that a journey like his could also be without return; I also asked him, of course jokingly, what he would leave me if he did not return; he replied in my same tone that he would leave me his books...; then I never saw him again." Don Elia was already aware that he was heading towards "the eye of the storm" and did not seek a form of protection in the Salesian house (where he could easily have stayed): "The last memory I have of him dates back to the summer of

1944, when, during the war, the Community began to dissolve; I still hear my words that kindly addressed him, almost jokingly, reminding him that he, in those dark times we were about to face, should feel privileged, as a white cross had been drawn on the roof of the Institute and no one would have the courage to bomb it. However, he, like a prophet, replied to me to be very careful because during the holidays I might read in the newspapers that Don Elia Comini had heroically died in the fulfillment of his duty." "The impression of the danger he was exposing himself to was vivid in everyone", commented a confrere.

Along the journey to Salvaro, Don Comini stopped in Modena, where he sustained a serious injury to his leg: according to one account, he interposed himself between a vehicle and a passerby, thus averting a more serious accident; according to another, he helped a gentleman push a cart. In any case, he helped his neighbor. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "When a madman drives his car onto the sidewalk, I cannot, as a pastor, be content to bury the dead and console the families. I must, if I find myself in that place, jump and grab the driver at the wheel."

The episode in Modena expresses, in this sense, an attitude of Don Elia that would emerge even more in Salvaro in the following months: to interpose, mediate, rush in personally, expose his life for his brothers, always aware of the risk this entails and serenely willing to pay the consequences.

### **A pastor on the front line**

Limping, he arrived in Salvaro at sunset on June 24, 1944, leaning on a cane as best he could: an unusual instrument for a 34-year-old young man! He found the rectory transformed: Mons. Mellini was hosting dozens of people, belonging to families of evacuees; moreover, the 5 Ancelle del Sacro Cuore sisters, responsible for the nursery, including Sister Alberta Taccini. Elderly, tired, and shaken by the war events, that summer Mons. Fidenzio Mellini struggled to make

decisions; he had become more fragile and uncertain. Don Elia, who had known him since childhood, began to help him in everything and took a bit of control of the situation. The injury to his leg also prevented him from evacuating his mother: Don Elia remained in Salvaro, and when he could walk well again, the changed circumstances and the growing pastoral needs would ensure that he stayed there.

Don Elia revitalized the pastoral work, followed catechism, and took care of the orphans abandoned to themselves. He also welcomed the evacuees, encouraged the fearful, and moderated the reckless. Don Elia's presence became a unifying force, a good sign in those dramatic moments when human relationships were torn apart by suspicion and opposition. He put his organizational skills and practical intelligence, honed over years of Salesian life, at the service of many people. He wrote to his brother Amleto: "Certainly, these are dramatic moments, and worse ones are foreseen. We hope everything in the grace of God and in the protection of the Madonna, whom you must invoke for us. I hope to be able to send you more news."

The Germans of the Wehrmacht were stationed in the area, and on the heights, there was the partisan brigade "Stella Rossa." Don Elia Comini remained a figure estranged from any claims or partisanship: he was a priest and asserted calls for prudence and pacification. He told the partisans: "Boys, watch what you do, because you ruin the population...", exposing it to reprisals. They respected him, and in July and September 1944, they requested Masses in the parish church of Salvaro. Don Elia accepted, bringing down the partisans and celebrating without hiding, instead preferring not to go up to the partisan area and, as he would always do that summer, to stay in Salvaro or nearby areas, without hiding or slipping into "ambiguous" attitudes in the eyes of the Nazi-fascists.

On July 27, Don Elia Comini wrote the last lines of his Spiritual Diary: "July 27: I find myself right in the middle of the war. I long for my confreres and my home in Treviglio; if I could, I would return tomorrow."

From July 20, he shared a priestly fraternity with Father Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, born on September 20, 1912, in Nembro in the Bergamo area, and already a teacher of Sacred Scripture in Bologna, also a guest of Mons. Mellini and helping with the pastoral work.

Elia and Martino are two scholars of ancient languages who now have to attend to more practical and material matters. The rectory of Mons. Mellini becomes what Mons. Luciano Gherardi later called "the community of the ark," a place that welcomes to save. Father Martino was a religious who became passionate when he heard about the Mexican martyrs and wished to be a missionary in China. Elia, since he was young, has been pursued by a strange awareness of "having to die," and by the age of 17, he had already written: "The thought that I must die always persists in me! – Who knows?! Let us act like the faithful servant: always prepared for the call, to 'render account' of the management."

On July 24, Don Elia begins catechism for the children in preparation for their First Communions, scheduled for July 30. On the 25th, a baby girl is born in the baptismal font (all spaces, from the sacristy to the chicken coop, were overflowing) and a pink bow is hung.

Throughout August 1944, soldiers of the Wehrmacht are stationed at the rectory of Mons. Mellini and in the space in front. Among Germans, displaced persons, and consecrated individuals... the tension could have exploded at any moment: Don Elia mediates and prevents even in small matters, for example, acting as a "buffer" between the too-loud volume of the Germans' radio and the now too-short patience of Mons. Mellini. There was also some praying of the Rosary together. Don Angelo Carboni confirms: "In the constant effort to comfort Monsignore, Don Elia worked hard against the resistance of a company of Germans who, having settled in Salvaro on August 1, wanted to occupy various areas of the Rectory, taking away all freedom and comfort from the families and displaced persons hosted there. Once the Germans were settled in Monsignore's archive, they again disturbed,

occupying a good part of the church square with their vehicles; with even gentler manners and persuasive words, Don Elia also obtained this other liberation to comfort Monsignore, who the oppression of the struggle had forced to rest." In those weeks, the Salesian priest is firm in protecting Mons. Mellini's right to move with a certain ease in his own home – as well as that of the displaced persons not to be removed from the rectory –: however, he recognizes some needs of the Wehrmacht men, which attracts their goodwill towards Mons. Mellini, whom the German soldiers will learn to call the good pastor. From the Germans, Don Elia obtains food for the displaced persons. Moreover, he sings to calm the children and tells stories from the life of Don Bosco. In a summer marked by killings and reprisals, with Don Elia, some civilians even manage to go listen to a bit of music, evidently broadcast from the Germans' device, and to communicate with the soldiers through brief gestures. Don Rino Germani sdb, Vice-Postulator of the Cause, states: "Between the two warring forces, the tireless and mediating work of the Servant of God intervenes. When necessary, he presents himself to the German Command and, with politeness and preparation, manages to win the esteem of some officers. Thus, many times he succeeds in avoiding reprisals, looting, and mourning."

With the rectory freed from the fixed presence of the Wehrmacht on September 1, 1944 – "On September 1, the Germans left the Salvaro area free, only a few remained for a few more days in the Fabbri house" – life in Salvaro can take a breath of relief. Don Elia Comini continues in his apostolic initiatives, assisted by the other priests and the nuns.

Meanwhile, however, Father Martino accepts some invitations to preach elsewhere and goes up into the mountains, where his light hair gets him into big trouble with the partisans who suspect him of being German, while Don Elia remains essentially stationary. On September 8, he writes to the Salesian director of the House of Treviglio: "I leave you to imagine our state of mind in these moments. We have gone through very dark and dramatic days. [...] My thoughts are

always with you and with the dear confreres there. I feel a deep nostalgia [...]"

From the 11th, he preaches the Exercises to the Sisters on the theme of the Last Things, religious vows, and the life of the Lord Jesus.

The entire population – declared a consecrated person – loved Don Elia, also because he did not hesitate to spend himself for everyone, at every moment; he did not only ask people to pray, but offered them a valid example with his piety and the little apostolate that, given the circumstances, was possible to exercise.

The experience of the Exercises gives a different dynamic to the entire week and involves both consecrated and lay people. In the evening, in fact, Don Elia gathers 80-90 people: he tried to ease the tension with a bit of cheerfulness, good examples, and charity. During those months, both he and Father Martino, along with other priests, first among them Don Giovanni Fornasini, were on the front lines in many works of charity.

### **The massacre of Montesole**

The most brutal and largest massacre carried out by the Nazi SS in Europe during the war of 1939-45 was that which took place around Monte Sole, in the territories of Marzabotto, Grizzana Morandi, and Monzuno, although it is commonly known as the "massacre of Marzabotto."

Between September 29 and October 5, 1944, there were 770 casualties, but overall the victims of Germans and fascists, from the spring of 1944 to liberation, were 955, distributed across 115 different locations within a vast territory that includes the municipalities of Marzabotto, Grizzana, and Monzuno and some portions of the surrounding territories. Of these, 216 were children, 316 were women, 142 were elderly, 138 were recognized partisans, and five were priests, whose fault in the eyes of the Germans was being close, with prayer and material help, to the entire population of Monte Sole during the tragic months of war and military



occupation. Along with Don Elia Comini, a Salesian, and Father Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, three priests from the Archdiocese of Bologna were also killed during those tragic days: Don Ubaldo Marchioni, Don Ferdinando Casagrande, and Don Giovanni Fornasini. The cause for beatification and canonization is underway for all five. Don Giovanni, the "Angel of Marzabotto," fell on October 13, 1944. He was twenty-nine years old, and his body remained unburied until 1945, when it was found heavily mutilated; he was beatified on September 26, 2021. Don Ubaldo died on September 29, shot by a machine gun on the altar step of his church in Casaglia; he was 26 years old and had been ordained a priest two years earlier. The German soldiers found him and the community engaged in the prayer of the rosary. He was killed there, at the foot of the altar. The others – more than 70 – in the nearby cemetery. Don Ferdinando was killed on October 9, shot in the back of the neck, along with his sister Giulia; he was 26 years old.

### **From the Wehrmacht to the SS**

On September 25, the Wehrmacht leaves the area and hands over command to the SS of the 16th Battalion of the 16th Armored Division "Reichsführer – SS," a division that includes SS elements "Totenkopf – Death's Head" and was preceded by a trail of blood, having been present at Sant'Anna di Stazzema (Lucca) on August 12, 1944; at San Terenzo Monti (Massa-Carrara, in Lunigiana) on the 17th of that month; at Vinca and surroundings (Massa-Carrara, in Lunigiana at the foot of the Apuan Alps) from August 24 to 27.

On September 25, the SS establish the "High Command" in Sibano. On September 26, they move to Salvaro, where Don Elia is also present: an area *outside* the immediate influence of partisans. The harshness of the commanders in pursuing total contempt for human life, the habit of lying about the fate of civilians, and the paramilitary structure – which willingly resorted to "scorched earth" techniques, in disregard of any code of war or legitimacy of orders given

from above – made it a death squad that left nothing intact in its wake. Some had received training explicitly focused on concentration and extermination, aimed at: the suppression of life, for ideological purposes; hatred towards those who professed the Jewish-Christian faith; contempt for the small, the poor, the elderly, and the weak; persecution of those who opposed the aberrations of National Socialism. There was a veritable catechism – anti-Christian and anti-Catholic – of which the young SS were imbued.

“When one thinks that the Nazi youth was formed in the contempt for the human personality of Jews and other ‘non-chosen’ races, in the fanatical cult of an alleged absolute national superiority, in the myth of creative violence and of the ‘new weapons’ bringing justice to the world, one understands where the roots of the aberrations lay, made easier by the atmosphere of war and the fear of a disappointing defeat.”

Don Elia Comini – with Father Capelli – rushes to comfort, reassure, and exhort. He decides to welcome primarily the survivors of families in which the Germans had killed in retaliation. In doing so, he removes the survivors from the danger of finding death shortly after, but above all, he tears them – at least to the extent possible – from that spiral of loneliness, despair, and loss of the will to live that could have translated into a desire for death. He also manages to speak to the Germans and, on at least one occasion, to dissuade the SS from their intention, making them pass by and thus being able to subsequently warn the refugees to come out of hiding.

The Vice-Postulator Don Rino Germani sdb wrote: “Don Elia arrives. He reassures them. He tells them to come out because the Germans have left. He speaks with the Germans and makes them go on.”

Paolo Calanchi, a man whose conscience reproaches him nothing and who makes the mistake of not fleeing, is also killed. It is still Don Elia who rushes, before the flames attack his body, trying at least to honor his remains, having

not arrived in time to save his life: "The body of Paolino is saved from the flames by Don Elia who, at the risk of his life, collects him and transports him with a cart to the Church of Salvaro."

The daughter of Paolo Calanchi testified: "My father was a good and honest man ['in times of ration cards and famine, he gave bread to those who had none'] and had refused to flee, feeling at peace with everyone. He was killed by the Germans, shot, in retaliation; later, the house was also set on fire, but my father's body had been saved from the flames by Don Comini, who, at the risk of his own life, had collected him and transported him with a cart to the Church of Salvaro, where, in a coffin he built with spare planks, he was buried in the cemetery. Thus, thanks to the courage of Don Comini and, very likely, also of Father Martino, after the war, my mother and I were able to find and have our dear one's coffin transported to the cemetery of Vergato, alongside that of my brother Gianluigi, who died 40 days later while crossing the front."

Once, Don Elia had said of the Wehrmacht: "We must also love these Germans who come to disturb us." "He loved everyone without preference." Don Elia's ministry was very precious for Salvaro and many displaced persons during those days. Witnesses have stated: "Don Elia was our fortune because we had a parish priest who was too old and weak. The entire population knew that Don Elia had this interest in us; Don Elia helped everyone. One could say that we saw him every day. He said Mass, but then he was often on the church steps watching: the Germans were down, towards the Reno; the partisans were coming from the mountain, towards the Creda. Once, for example, (a few days before the 26th) the partisans came. We were coming out of the Church of Salvaro, and there were the partisans there, all armed; and Don Elia urged them so much to leave, to avoid trouble. They listened to him and left. Probably, if it hadn't been for him, what happened afterward would have happened much earlier"; "As far as I know, Don Elia was the soul of the situation, as with his

personality he knew how to keep many things in hand that were of vital importance in those dramatic moments.”

Although he was a young priest, Don Elia Comini was reliable. This reliability, combined with a deep rectitude, had accompanied him for a long time, even as a cleric, as evidenced by a testimony: “I had him for four years at the Rota, from 1931 to 1935, and, although still a cleric, **he gave me help that I would have found it hard to get from any other older confrere.**”

### **The triduum of passion**

The situation, however, deteriorates after a few days, on the morning of September 29, when the SS carry out a terrible massacre in the locality “Creda.” The signal for the start of the massacre is a white rocket and a red one in the air: they begin to shoot, the machine guns hit the victims, barricaded against a porch and practically without a way out. Hand grenades are then thrown, some incendiary, and the barn – where some had managed to find refuge – catches fire. A few men, seizing a moment of distraction from the SS in that hell, rush down towards the woods. Attilio Comastri, injured, is saved because the lifeless body of his wife Ines Gandolfi shielded him: he will wander for days, in shock, until he manages to cross the front and save his life; he had lost, in addition to his wife, his sister Marcellina and his two-year-old daughter Bianca. Carlo Cardi also manages to save himself, but his family is exterminated: Walter Cardi was only 14 days old, he was the youngest victim of the Monte Sole massacre. Mario Lippi, one of the survivors, attests: “I don’t even know how I miraculously saved myself, given that of the 82 people gathered under the porch, 70 were killed [69, according to the official reconstruction]. I remember that besides the fire from the machine guns, the Germans also threw hand grenades at us, and I believe that some shrapnel from these slightly injured me in the right side, in the back, and in the right arm. I, along with seven other people, took advantage of the fact that on [one] side of the porch there was a small door

leading to the street, and I ran away towards the woods. The Germans, seeing us flee, shot at us, killing one of us named Gandolfi Emilio. I specify that among the 82 people gathered under the aforementioned porch, there were also about twenty children, two of whom were in swaddling clothes, in the arms of their respective mothers, and about twenty women.”

In Creda, there are 21 children under 11 years old, some very small; 24 women (including one teenager); almost 20 “elderly.” Among the most affected families are the Cardi (7 people), the Gandolfi (9 people), the Lolli (5 people), and the Macchelli (6 people).

From the rectory of Mons. Mellini, looking up, at a certain point, smoke is seen: but it is early morning, Creda remains hidden from view, and the woods muffles the sounds. In the parish that day – September 29, the feast of the Archangels – three Masses are celebrated, in immediate succession: that of Mons. Mellini; that of Father Capelli, who then goes to bring Extreme Unction in the locality “Casellina”; that of Don Comini. And it is then that the drama knocks at the door: “Ferdinando Castori, who also escaped the massacre, arrived at the Church of Salvaro smeared with blood like a butcher and went to hide inside the spire of the bell tower.” Around 8, a distraught man arrives at the rectory: he looked “like a monster for his terrifying appearance,” says Sister Alberta Taccini. He asks for help for the wounded. About seventy people are dead or dying amid terrible tortures. Don Elia, in a few moments, has the clarity to hide 60/70 men in the sacristy, pushing an old wardrobe against the door that left the threshold visible from below, but was nonetheless the only hope of salvation: “It was then that Don Elia, he himself, had the idea to hide the men next to the sacristy, then putting a wardrobe in front of the door (one or two people who were in Monsignore’s house helped him). The idea was Don Elia’s; but everyone was against the fact that it was Don Elia who did that work... He wanted it. The others said: ‘And what if they discover us?’” Another account: “Don Elia managed to hide about sixty men in a room adjacent to the

sacristy and pushed an old wardrobe against the door. Meanwhile, the crackle of machine guns and the desperate screams of people came from the nearby houses. Don Elia had the strength to begin the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the last of his life. He had not yet finished when a terrified and breathless young man from the locality 'Creda' arrived asking for help because the SS had surrounded a house and arrested sixty-nine people, men, women, and children."

"Still in sacred vestments, **prostrated at the altar, immersed in prayer**, he invokes for all the help of the Sacred Heart, the intercession of Mary Help of Christians, St. John Bosco, and St. Michael the Archangel. Then, with a brief examination of conscience, reciting the act of sorrow three times, he prepares them for death. He commends all those people to the care of the sisters and to the Superior to lead the prayer strongly so that the faithful may find in it the comfort they need."

Regarding Don Elia and Father Martino, who returned shortly after, "some dimensions of a priestly life spent consciously for others until the last moment are evident: their death was a prolongation in the gift of life of the Mass celebrated until the last day." Their choice had "distant roots, in the decision to do good even if it were the last hour, even willing to martyrdom": "Many people came to seek help in the parish, and unbeknownst to the parish priest, Don Elia and Father Martino tried to hide as many people as possible; then, ensuring that they were somehow assisted, they rushed to the site of the massacres to bring help to the most unfortunate; even Mons. Mellini did not realize this and continued to look for the two priests to get help to receive all those people" ("We are certain that none of them was a partisan or had been with the partisans").

In those moments, Don Elia demonstrates great clarity, which translates into both organizational spirit and the awareness of putting his own life at risk: "In light of all this, and Don Elia knew it well, we cannot therefore seek that charity which leads to the attempt to help others, but

rather that type of charity (which was the same as Christ's) that leads **to participating fully in the suffering of others**, not even fearing death as its ultimate manifestation. The fact that his choice was **lucid and well-reasoned** is also demonstrated by the organizational spirit he manifested until just a few minutes before his death, trying promptly and intelligently to hide as many people as possible in the hidden rooms of the rectory; then the news of the Creda and, after fraternal charity, heroic charity."

One thing is certain: if Don Elia had hidden with all the other men or even just stayed next to Mons. Mellini, he would have had nothing to fear. Instead, Don Elia and Father Martino took the stole, the holy oils, and a container with some consecrated Hosts: "They then set off for the mountain, armed with the stole and the oil of the sick": "When Don Elia returned from having gone to Monsignore, **he took the Ciborium with the Hosts** and the Holy Oil and turned to us: that face again! It was so pale that he looked like someone already dead. And he said: 'Pray, pray for me, because I have a mission to fulfill.' 'Pray for me, do not leave me alone!' 'We are priests and we must go and we must do our duty.' '**Let us go to bring the Lord to our brothers.**'"

Up at the Creda, there are many people dying in agony: they must hurry, bless, and – if possible – try to intercede regarding the SS.

Mrs. Massimina [Zappoli], also a witness in the military investigation in Bologna, recalls: "Despite the prayers of all of us, they quickly celebrated the Eucharist and, driven only by the hope of being able to do something for the victims of such ferocity, at least with a spiritual comfort, they **took the Blessed Sacrament and ran towards the Creda**. I remember that while Don Elia, already launched in his run, passed by me in the kitchen, **I clung to him in a last attempt to dissuade him**, saying that we would be left at the mercy of ourselves; he made it clear that, as serious as our situation was, there were those who were worse off than us and it was from them that they had to go."

He is unyielding and refuses, as Mons. Mellini later suggested, to delay the ascent to the Creda when the Germans had left: "It was [therefore] a passion, before being bloody, [...] of the heart, the passion of the spirit. In those times, everyone was terrified by everything and everyone: there was no longer trust in anyone: anyone could be a decisive enemy for one's life. When the two priests realized that someone truly needed them, they had no hesitation in deciding what to do [...] and above all they did **not resort to what was the immediate decision for everyone, that is, to find a hiding place**, to try to cover themselves **and to be out of the fray**. The two priests, on the other hand, went right in, consciously, knowing that their lives were 99% at risk; and they went in to be truly priests: that is, to assist and to comfort; to also provide the service of the Sacraments, therefore of prayer, of the comfort that faith and religion offer."

One person said: "Don Elia, for us, was already a saint. **If he had been a normal person [...] he would have hidden too, behind the wardrobe, like all the others.**"

With the men hidden, it is the women who try to hold back the priests, in an extreme attempt to save their lives. The scene is both frantic and very eloquent: "Lidia Macchi [...] and other women tried to prevent them from leaving, they tried to hold them by the cassock, they chased them, they called out loudly for them to come back: driven by an inner force that is the ardor of charity and missionary solicitude, they were now decisively walking towards the Creda bringing religious comforts."

One of them recalls: "I hugged them, I held them firmly by the arms, saying and pleading: – Don't go! – Don't go!"

And Lidia Marchi adds: "I was pulling Father Martino by the robe and holding him back [...] but both priests kept repeating: – We must go; the Lord is calling us."

"We must fulfill our duty. And [Don Elia and Father Martino,] like Jesus, went to meet a marked fate."



"The decision to go to the Creda was made by the two priests out **of pure pastoral spirit; despite everyone trying to dissuade them**, they wanted to go driven by the hope of being able to save someone among those who were at the mercy of the soldiers' rage."

At the Creda, almost certainly, they never arrived. Captured, according to a witness, near a "little pillar," just outside the parish's field of vision, Don Elia and Father Martino were later seen loaded with ammunition, at the head of those rounded up, or still alone, tied up, with chains, near a tree while there was no battle going on and the SS were eating. Don Elia urged a woman to run away, not to stop to avoid being killed: "Anna, for charity, run, run."

"They were loaded and bent under the weight of many heavy boxes that wrapped around their bodies from front to back. Their backs curved so much that their noses were almost touching the ground."

"Sitting on the ground [...] very sweaty and tired, with ammunition on their backs."

"Arrested, they are forced to carry ammunition up and down the mountain, witnesses of unheard-of violence."

"[The SS make them] go up and down the mountain several times, under their escort, and also committing, under the eyes of the two victims, the most gruesome acts of violence."

Where are the stole, the holy oils, and above all the Blessed Sacrament now? There is no trace of them left. Far from prying eyes, the SS forcibly stripped the priests of them, getting rid of that Treasure of which nothing would ever be found again.

**Towards the evening of September 29, 1944**, they were taken with many other men (rounded up and not for reprisal or because they were pro-partisan, as the sources show), to the house "of the Birocciai" in Pioppe di Salvaro. Later, they, divided, would have very different fates: few would be released after a series of interrogations. The majority, deemed fit for work, would be sent to forced labor camps and

could – later – return to their families. Those deemed unfit, for mere age criteria (cf. concentration camps) or health (young, but injured or pretending to be sick hoping to save themselves) would be killed on the evening of October 1 at the “Botte” of the Canapiera in Pioppe di Salvaro, now a ruin because it had been bombed by the Allies days before.

Don Elia and Father Martino – who were interrogated – were able to move until the last moment in the house and receive visits. Don Elia interceded for everyone and a very troubled young man fell asleep on his knees: in one of them, Don Elia received the Breviary, so dear to him, which he wanted to keep with him until the last moments. Today, careful historical research through documentary sources, supported by the most recent historiography from a secular perspective, has shown how no attempt to free Don Elia, made by Cavalier Emilio Veggetti, ever succeeded, and how Don Elia and Father Martino were never truly considered or at least treated as “spies.”

## **The Holocaust**

Finally, they were included, although young (34 and 32 years old), in the group of the unfit and executed with them. They lived those last moments praying, making others pray, having absolved each other and giving every possible comfort of faith. Don Elia managed to transform the macabre procession of the condemned up to a walkway in front of the canapiera reservoir, where they would be killed, into a choral act of entrustment, holding the Breviary open in his hand for as long as he could (then, it is said, a German violently struck his hands and the Breviary fell into the reservoir) and above all singing the Litanies. When the fire was opened, Don Elia Comini saved a man because he shielded him with his own body and shouted “Pity.” Father Martino instead invoked “Forgiveness,” struggling to rise in the reservoir, among the dead or dying companions, and tracing the sign of the Cross just moments before dying himself, due to a huge wound. The SS wanted to ensure that no one survived by throwing some hand grenades. In the following days, given the impossibility of

recovering the bodies immersed in water and mud due to heavy rains (the women tried, but even Don Fornasini could not succeed), a man opened the 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).

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## **The dream of the 22 moons (1854)**

*In March 1854 on a feast day, after evening prayer Don Bosco gathered all the pupils in the back sacristy saying he wanted to tell them about a dream. Among others present were young Cagliero, Turchi, Anfossi, clerics Reviglio and Buzzetti. Our narration is based on their accounts. All of them believed that Don Bosco's dreams were true supernatural revelations. Don Bosco spoke as follows:*

I was with you in the playground, delighted to see all of you so lively and happy, jumping, shouting, and running about. Suddenly, however, one of you came out of the building wearing some sort of top hat and began strolling around in the playground. The transparent headgear was lit from the inside and revealed the picture of a moon with the number ‘22’ in its center. Amazed, I was about to walk up to the boy and tell him to cut off that nonsense when suddenly all of you stopped playing as if the bell had rung and lined up as usual on the porch by classes. It was now semi-dark. While all of you looked frightened, nearly a dozen of you were deathly pale. I passed in front of these pale ones for a closer look, and

among them I saw the boy with the top hat. He was even paler than the rest, and a black drape-like those used at funerals was hanging from his shoulders. I was about to ask him what his strange garb meant when a grave and dignified-looking stranger stopped me and said: "Wait! Know that this boy has only twenty-two moons to live. Before these are over, he will die. Take care of him and prepare him!" I wanted some explanation of this message and his sudden appearance, but the stranger had already vanished. My dear boys, I know who that lad is. He is right here among you.

Terror gripped all of the boys. This was the very first time that Don Bosco had ever predicted the death of anyone in the house publicly and so solemnly. He could not help noticing their fear, and so he continued: "Don't be afraid! True, I know that boy, and he is here now, but this is a dream, as I have said, and you know that dreams are only dreams. One thing is certain, though-we must always be prepared, just as Our Divine Savior has warned us in the Gospel, and never commit sin. If we follow this rule, death will not frighten us. Put your conscience in order, therefore, and resolve not to offend God anymore. On my part, I shall look after the boy of the twenty-two moons. These moons signify twenty-two months. I hope that he will die a good death."

Understandably, this announcement frightened the boys, but in the long run it did them good because their attention was focused on death as they kept themselves in God's grace and counted the months. Now and then when Don Bosco would ask: "How many more moons?" they would reply "Twenty" or "Eighteen<sup>2</sup>" or "Fifteen" and so on. Sometimes those who paid the closest attention to everything he said would tell him that so many moons had already gone by, attempting at the same time to make their own predictions or guesses, but Don Bosco would say nothing. When [John Baptist] Piano entered the Oratory as a young student in November, 1854, he heard his companions say that nine moons

had already passed. He then found out about Don Bosco's prediction and he too began keeping track of the moons.

The year 1854 went by, and so did many months of 1855, and then came October, the twentieth month. At this time the cleric [John] Cagliero was in charge of three adjoining rooms in the old Pinardi house. They served as a dormitory for several boys, including Secundus Gurgo a handsome, healthy, seventeen-year-old from Pettinengo (Biella) who seemed destined to live to a ripe old age. His father had asked Don Bosco to take him in as a boarder. The youth, an excellent pianist and organist, studied music assiduously and earned good money by giving lessons in town. From time to time during the course of the year Don Bosco had asked Cagliero about the conduct of his charges with more than routine interest. In October he called him and asked: "Where do you sleep?"

"In the last room," Cagliero answered. "From there I can keep an eye on the other two."

"Wouldn't it be better if you moved your bed into the middle room?"

"If you say so, but I think I'd better tell you that it is rather damp because one of its walls is actually the wall of the church tower, which is still very porous. Winter is coming and I might get sick. Besides, I can watch all the boys in the dormitory quite well from where I am!"

"I know you can," Don Bosco replied, "but it would be better if you moved into the middle room." Cagliero complied, but after a while he asked Don Bosco's permission to move his bed back to the last room. Don Bosco did not let him do so. "Stay where you are and don't worry," he told him. "You won't get sick!"

Cagliero felt at ease again. A few days later Don Bosco summoned him again. "How many sleep in your room?"

"There are three of us: Gurgo, Garavaglia, and myself-four, if you include the piano!"

"Good," Don Bosco said. "You are all musicians and Gurgo can teach you to play the piano. Make sure that you look after him well." That was all he said, but Cagliero's curiosity was aroused.

Suspecting something, he tried to question Don Bosco, but he cut him short, saying: "You'll know in due time." The secret, of course, was that the boy of the twenty-two moons was in that room.

One evening, at the beginning of December, after night prayers, Don Bosco mounted the podium as usual to give the Good Night and announced that one of the boys would die before Christmas. We must note that no one at the Oratory was sick at that time. Naturally this announcement, coupled with the fact that the twenty-two moons would soon be over, made everyone jittery. There was much talk about what he had said as well as fear that it would come true.

During these days Don Bosco once more sent for the cleric Cagliero. He asked him how Gurgo was behaving and whether he returned to the Oratory punctually after giving his music lessons in town. Cagliero replied that the boy was doing fine, as were the other boys. "Good," Don Bosco said. "See that they keep it up, and let me know if anything goes wrong."

About the middle of December Gurgo had a sudden attack of abdominal pains so violent that the doctor, who had been summoned at once, recommended that the boy receive the Last Sacraments. The pains continued for eight days, but, thanks to Dr. Debernardi's care, they at last began to subside and Gurgo was able to get up again. The trouble apparently vanished, but – in the doctor's opinion – the boy had had a narrow escape. Meanwhile, his father had been informed. No one had, as yet, died at the Oratory, and Don Bosco wanted to spare the boys

the sight of a funeral. The Christmas novena had begun and Gurgo – now almost completely recovered – was planning to go home for Christmas. Nevertheless, Don Bosco seemed to doubt the good news of the boy's recovery. His father arrived and, finding his son in good condition, asked permission to take him home for some further convalescence. He then went to book two seats on the stagecoach, intending to leave on the next day for Novara and Pettinengo. It was Sunday, December 23 [1855]. That evening Gurgo felt a craving for meat, although the doctor had forbidden it. Thinking that it would help to build his strength, his father went out to buy some and cooked it in a little pot. The boy drank the broth and ate the half-cooked meat-perhaps to excess. At bedtime his father retired for the night while Cagliero and the infirmarian remained with the boy. Sometime during the night Gurgo suffered another very severe attack of colic. "Cagliero, Cagliero!" he gasped. "I'm through giving you piano lessons."

"Come now, don't say that!" Cagliero protested.

"I'll never see home again. Pray for me. Oh, what pains. Pray to Our Lady for me."

"Of course I'll pray, and you do likewise."

Cagliero began praying but, overcome by fatigue, he soon fell asleep. He was suddenly awakened by the infirmarian who pointed to Gurgo and ran out to call Father Alasonatti whose room was next door. He came immediately, but within minutes Gurgo was dead. That morning Cagliero met Don Bosco as he was coming down the stairs on his way to say Mass. He had been informed of the death and looked very, very sad.

The whole Oratory was stunned. The twenty-second moon was not yet over. By dying shortly before dawn on December 24 Gurgo had also fulfilled Don Bosco's second prediction-namely that one of the boys would die before Christmas.



After lunch, the boys and the clerics silently gathered around Don Bosco. The cleric John Turchi asked him point-blank whether Gurgo had been the boy of the moons. "Yes," Don Bosco replied, "it was he; he was the one I saw in my dream." Then he added: "You may have noticed that some time ago I had him sleep in a special room. Into that same room I also moved one of the best clerics, John Cagliero, so that he could look after him constantly." As he said this, he turned to Cagliero and said: "The next time you'll know better than object to Don Bosco's arrangements. Do you understand now why I did not allow you to leave that room? I did not let you have your way because I wanted Gurgo to have someone to look after him. If he were still alive, he could tell you how often I spoke to him of death in a roundabout way and prepared him for it."

"I understood then," Bishop Cagliero later wrote, "why Don Bosco had given me those instructions. I learned to appreciate more and more his words and fatherly advice."

"I still remember," Peter Enria stated, "that on the evening of that day-Christmas Eve-at the Good Night Don Bosco was looking about as though searching for someone. After a while he said: 'Gurgo is the first boy to die here at the Oratory. He was well prepared and we hope he is now in heaven. I exhort you to be ever ready. . . .' He could say no more, so great was his grief at the loss of one of his boys."

*(BM V, 243-247)*