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MARTINO CAPELLI: WINTER HAS COME

A short story of mercy



Biographical notes of Blessed Martino Capelli, SCJ (1912-1944)

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OPENING

It's simple. During one of the most terrible crimes committed by Nazi troops in Italy, in the Monte Sole area of the Apennine Mountains south of Bologna, several Dehonians were affected. One of them would lose his life. It might be better to say that it was taken from him, but the truth is that he offered his life.

Indeed, during World War II, the "Eccidio di Monte Sole," also known as the "Marzabotto Massacre," took place. It was the fall of 1944. Allied troops were advancing northward across the Italian peninsula, and German troops were retreating. The Apennines formed the edge of the Gothic Line, one of the German troops' defensive fronts. This line included the area known as Monte Sole. It was a strategic area which, due to its position, allowed control of the routes leading to the battlefield through the valleys formed by the Reno and Setta rivers. Finally, and in our case, an important factor is that this rural and wooded area was a hub of 'partisan' resistance activities, specifically those of the so-called 'Stella Rossa' (Red Star) Brigade, led by Mario Musolesi, alias 'Lupo', meaning 'Wolf'.

The history of World War II in Italy is complex and controversial. We will not dwell on it here. Suffice it to say that the strong socio-political polarization that existed in those years reached peaks of extreme violence as the control of the invading German troops gave way from south to north.

The events that specifically concern us took place between September 29 and October 5, 1944. The regular German troops withdrew and control of the territory was entrusted to members of the Nazi SS. The commander of the troops in the area was Major Walter Reder. Together with members of the Italian fascist party, with the official aim of defeating the partisan forces and thus securing the passage of the retreating German troops, search operations were carried out in the Monte Sole area. As we shall see, the bulk of the partisan forces quickly dispersed, partly defeated. Far from confirming that the objective had been achieved, the Nazi forces unleashed a wave of violence that would end in a massacre of the civilian population, who were subjected to atrocious crimes: houses set on fire, and villages completely destroyed. Above all once the 'useful' men had been deported to forced labor camps, the civilian population living in the area was

indiscriminately murdered, especially women, the elderly, and children. And we must point out another very specific social group: Catholic priests. The search for guerrillas (who were not captured, but only dispersed) turned into a systematic elimination of those elements declared useless, expendable, hateful, dangerous witnesses, or fodder for warning and revenge. This included Catholic priests.

After the war, the area was deeply scarred. Houses in ruins, churches destroyed, communities devastated, villages razed and abandoned. Why? Their inhabitants were literally massacred. Today, the ruins that can still be visited remain as silent witnesses. It is a walk that certainly touches and impresses the soul. The towns of Marzabotto, Monzuno, and Grizzana Morandi and their surroundings suffered most from the cold, mechanical, calculated, and devastating Nazi fury.

How many people are estimated to have fallen victim to their barbarism? According to various sources, the number varies between 770 and 1,800 people. One of them was a 32-year-old Dehonian priest: Fr. Nicola *Martino* Capelli, scj. This is a brief account of his last days.

SUMMER
OF 1944

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1. BURZANELLA

Burzanella is the setting for the events that bring us into contact with the figure of Fr. Martino Capelli. It is an Italian town in the province of Bologna, in the Emilia-Romagna region. Located about 553 meters above sea level, it is currently inhabited by about 50 people.

It is Thursday, July 6, 1944. The then Province of Italy of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus had opened its Scholasticate in the city of Bologna. Scholasticate is the name given in this religious congregation to the time and, by extension, the place where new religious carry out their last and longest stage of formation, with a preferential dedication to the study of philosophy and theology.

The notes in the chronicle of the Scholasticate from those days inform us that the superiors had decided to leave the city and go to another place. The reason: the advance of the front and the hostilities. The first place chosen was Castiglione dei Pepoli.

This municipality then had around 8,000 inhabitants (today it is estimated to have around 5,500) and is about 58 kilometers from the capital of Bologna. It is a town with a history marked by its disputed border position between the regions of Emilia and Tuscany. And, in fact, the movement of troops meant that the war did not spare this population.

In fact, the chronicler describes in the entry for July 6, 1944, how there was a bombing by British forces that day and how, although there was no serious damage, the situation became dangerous for the house. He continued:

The war, which for more than four years had stopped at the door of our Scholasticate, today crossed the threshold and with a heavy hand destroyed our nest as well: Castiglione is being evacuated following tonight's incident. In fact, around 8:20 p.m., a loud explosion is heard. Then, the roar of a low-flying plane. It seems to be German, but in reality it is English, which has dropped seven incendiary bombs on the square: no serious damage is reported, but there are some injuries. On the same night, four anti-aircraft guns are set up in Cavanice, whose operation greatly disturbs some of the clergy, who are unable to control their nerves. The German Command is established on the ground floor. All this, due to the danger of enemy attacks on the village because of the

nearby highway, has led the Superiors to carry out the evacuation that had been planned for some time.

2. WORLD WAR II IN ITALY

As we know, this second great war had begun on September 1, 1939, with the German invasion of Poland. Italy, under the regime of Benito Mussolini's fascist party, was an ally of Nazi Germany. This remained the case until September 3, 1943, when a secret agreement was signed between Italy and the Allied forces, known as the Armistice of Cassibile, which ended Italy's participation in World War II as part of the Axis. This marked a turning point, leading to the German occupation of much of the country and, as we will discuss later, the formation of the Italian Social Republic (RSI). In September 1943, German forces occupied northern Italy and fortified the Apennine mountain range with the so-called "Gothic Line," which was established as the last major defensive barrier to slow the Allied advance across the Po Valley toward northern Italy. The Bologna area suffered intense Allied bombing between 1943 and 1945, targeting ports, railway junctions, and industries, causing many civilian casualties and extensive damage to urban heritage.

On the other hand, the entire region of Emilia-Romagna (whose capital is Bologna) was the scene of operations by the Italian resistance. This was made up of several groups. One of them was the Garibaldi Brigades. Their name came from the Italian volunteer units that had fought in the Spanish Civil War under the name, precisely, of the Garibaldi Battalion. In this new stage of their existence, they were partisan units aligned with the Italian Communist Party, fighting against German forces and against the fascism of the Italian Social Republic (also known as RSI or the Republic of Salò). This arose after Allied forces took southern Italy and German troops invaded the north. On July 25, 1943, following a coup d'état, Mussolini was arrested and Hitler launched a special operation to secure his release. Thus, this short-lived fascist puppet state of Nazi Germany in northern Italy was founded on September 23, 1943. Although Mussolini was its founder and sole leader, the RSI was under the direct control of Germany, with important decisions being made by the Nazi military command. This regime was based in the city of Salò, in the province of Brescia, on the shores of Lake Garda. It existed until 1945, when it was overthrown by the Italian resistance. Those who aligned themselves with the RSI were called "republichini."

The goal was always the same: to organize armed resistance against fascism and German occupation through sabotage, attacks on enemy troop columns, and coordination with the Allies. The strength of the partisans grew significantly between 1944 and 1945 and was decisive during the aforementioned uprising in April 1945.

Although it exceeds the time frame of our narrative, we must mention how things ended that began in the last days of Fr. Capelli. In April 1945, the Allied *15th Army Group* launched the final offensive on the Po plain, called *Operation Grapeshot*. The fighting converged on Bologna, the city that gave its name to the battle that was fought between April 9 and 21, 1945. On that day, Bologna was liberated thanks also to the outstanding participation of troops from the II Polish Corps (part of the British 8th Army) and British, American, and Italian units. Local partisan forces also took part in the urban uprising. The fall of Bologna paved the way for the crossing of the Po River and the rapid occupation of northern Italy until the German surrender.

3. THE PARISH PRIEST OF BURZANELLA: DON LUIGI TOMMASINI

We pick up where we left off with our scholastic chronicler, returning to July 6, 1944, when the religious of the Dehonian Scholasticate community left Castiglione for the same reasons of insecurity caused by the Allied bombing of Bologna, and moved again, led by their superior, Fr. Lorenzo Ceresoli, to Burzanella, which at that time had about 790 inhabitants and was cut off from all means of communication.

The local parish priest welcomed the large and young community and made two rooms available to them, next to the bell tower of the parish church, as dormitories for the 16 scholastic religious. His name was Don Luigi Tommasini.

Born on June 1, 1909, in Minerbio (Emilia-Romagna), in 1943 he was living in Camugnano, about 6 kilometers from Burzanella. Raised in a society gripped by poverty after World War I, after working as a carpenter until the age of 18, he decided to enter the seminary and was ordained a priest on September 11, 1939. Cardinal Giovan Battista Nasalli Rocca appointed him parish priest of Burzanella (Camugnano), a position he assumed on November 19, 1939.

A year later, with Italy already involved in the armed conflict, he was called in for questioning by the police because of some words he had uttered that were

deemed “imprudent” while the declaration of war was being proclaimed. On the advice of his cardinal-archbishop, he applied to become a military chaplain, but his application was rejected.

In 1941, he had advised parishioners opposed to military service to present themselves as volunteer militarized workers in Germany. At the employment office in Bologna, he obtained official authorization for their recruitment. At the same time, he interceded with the military command to obtain exemptions for some parishioners.

Thus, on January 29, 1942, he moved to Saarbrücken (Germany) as chaplain to these militarized workers. There he came into conflict with the fascist union delegates and German managers because of his defense of the workers. This cost him house arrest in Neustadt and Heidelberg on July 25, 1943.

On September 8, he decided to return to Italy, avoiding taking the German train arranged for the return of the Italians. Taking advantage of the confusion caused by an air raid, he managed to cross the border and, on foot or by improvised means, reached Borgo Panigale, from where he returned to Burzanella by taxi.

Seeing the developments that would take place in his parish territory, he embarked on a path that would be very important for understanding many of Fr. Martino’s subsequent vicissitudes.

In fact, one night the parish priest gathered his parishioners to organize the defense of the village. He advised them to respond to the RSI’s call and then flee with their weapons and take to the hills. This is how the first armed groups were formed, about which he kept himself constantly informed. Following his advice, an air-raid shelter was even built under one of the nearby hills.

The Dehonian scholastics were not the first group that Don Luigi had taken in. In the winter of 1943, a group of Jews from Bologna stayed at the parish house. In February 1944, he was interrogated by the German command, who wanted to know if there were Jews or partisans in the area.

In the spring of 1944, faced with an increase in the number of partisans, he requested the collaboration of military personnel capable of training them. He thus ended up joining the Stella Rossa brigade, commanded by Mario Musolesi. Maneuvering astutely between the Fascists and the Germans, he managed to

convince the German command to employ as many prisoners as possible in the construction of a road to Monte Acuto Ragazza (Camugnano). However, the actions of the partisan groups caused considerable difficulties from the spring and summer of 1944 onwards.

While the Dehonian scholastics were in Marzabotto, on July 19, 1944, after the Nazis and fascists had carried out a large raid following the murder of the sister-in-law of the local fascist party leader, he interceded with the German command stationed in Castiglione dei Pepoli to obtain the release of those captured, which took place on July 22.

On September 26, 1944, he learned of an imminent German attack, which would later culminate in the Marzabotto massacre. He shared this information with Musolesi (who ignored him) and with his brother priests and parish priests in the surrounding area: Don Ferdinando Casagrande, Don Ubaldo Marchioni, and Don Giovanni Fornasini. They preferred to stay with their parishioners, paying with their lives. However, on September 27, 1944, Don Tommasini, together with 2,000 parishioners, left Burzanella and headed for Monte Acuto Ragazza, crossing the front line.

But before all this took place, some Ursuline nuns who lived next to the Dehonian community offered them an attic that was adapted as accommodation, and at the same time, a space under the stairs was set up as a pantry and kitchen. The parish church was the center of the community's liturgical and spiritual life. In the parish priest's house, a refectory and two separate rooms were set up for the vice-superior, Fr. Enrico Agostini, and one of the teachers, the young Fr. Martino Capelli.

Fr. Martino had been preaching from June 17 to July 4 in the parish of another small village in the area about 12 kilometers away: Poggio di Veggio.

But on July 6, while the rest of the young community was on their way to Burzanella, even though he had a room ready, Fr. Martino did not accompany them. It was decided that he would stay a few more days in Castiglione dei Pepoli to take care of transporting the rest of the community's belongings. So Fr. Capelli was left alone that night...

4. THAT NIGHT ALONE

He ate little and quickly... Everything in the house was either empty or packed up. Only the table remained, with that oil lamp on it, and his Bible. He took it in his hands. Today he would no longer need it to prepare his sermons.

With what was happening around him, everything that had embittered his heart in recent months seemed silly. Once ordained a priest, he still had to complete his fourth year of theology. In addition, he had been appointed “prefect general,” which meant he had to coordinate the delegates from each course and act as a liaison between the superiors and the scholastics... and he was a little fed up with the schedules and rhythms of student life! He felt tied down, and he was a priest! He wanted to exercise his ministry. He even felt the call to be a missionary.

As a man from the north, he was rather practical and dreamed of going on missions to Africa or China. The reason was that on March 28, 1939, the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* had assigned the Italian SCJ Province a mission in the autonomous territory of Yunnan, on the border with Burma and Laos, in what was then the Apostolic Prefecture of Tali. Today it is a diocese with 6,000 Catholics. Curiously, its cathedral is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

He remembered the words of that letter he wrote to his family: “I am very happy in the scholasticate, hoping to go on missions, either in Africa or China. Pray for this intention: what an honor for you to have a missionary brother!” On June 28, 1939, he wrote a letter to the then Provincial Superior, Fr. Giovanni Zagaria, requesting to go to China.

But that door would soon close. Various circumstances meant that no Dehonian would ultimately leave for China. Fr. Martino still continued to dwell on the great disappointment he felt.

Not China, but not Africa either. The superiors had followed Martino’s very positive intellectual development. A model Nicola with his very high grades had replaced the slow learner who was quick to misbehave in class. And it may seem logical that his destination was finally... Rome.

On October 27, 1939, he took the train to the nation’s capital, which had been at war for barely two months. He studied Sacred Scripture and Church History at the Pontifical Biblical Institute and the Pontifical Athenaeum of Propaganda

Fide, now known as the Urbaniana University. This athenaeum had been created specifically for the preparation of missionaries. The door to the missions had not been completely closed!

He continued to cherish his Bible and smile. Studying it had fascinated him, especially because of the demands and rigor that this discipline entails. He saw himself condemned to sink into a sea of papers and books, but he found himself in an exciting cultural exchange among impressive people.

While most of Europe faced combat and the triumph of death, in Rome “the whole world” was studying and fraternizing. “Italians, Poles, French, English, Germans, Hungarians, Swiss, Americans, Brazilians, Canadians, Africans, Asians, Chinese, Indians, Syrians, Spaniards. Cosmopolitan Rome. Races, languages, cultures. Religions, ideas face to face,” he wrote in one of his letters.

In Rome, he had begun to see, hear, and touch the great dramas that surrounded him. He became interested in the soldiers leaving for the front and in prisoners. He was 27 years old and, and from being a good religious and teacher, he would become a religious priest aware of his times and capable of taking on its challenges.

After obtaining his degree in theology, Fr. Martino Capelli returned to Bologna on July 20, 1942. However, he would return to Rome again to attend the Vatican Paleographic School during the 1942-1943 academic year.

So many memories! Lying on the makeshift bed he had prepared for himself for those two nights, he turned off the lamp and, with the Bible on his lap, fell into a deep, though not peaceful, sleep.

5. ARREST AND EXECUTION OF PARTISANS

The time came for Fr. Capelli to get into the truck he had managed to rent. On the afternoon of that Saturday, July 8, he arrived in Burzanella, bringing with him the rest of the community’s belongings. He spent the next day in the village. He was in charge of presiding over Vespers in the parish, followed by the solemn Eucharistic blessing.

Then came the feast day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which fell on a Sunday that year. First there was a procession with the image of the Virgin Mary, and in

the solemn Mass that followed, Fr. Capelli served as subdeacon. The celebration ended with the singing of *the Te Deum* by the young Dehonian community. That same day, the superior, Fr. Lorenzo Ceresoli, returned to Castiglione, but not before exhorting his confreres to “give good example *semper, omnibus, ubique.*”

Those young religious and their superiors hoped to find a little peace and quiet in Burzanella in the face of the growing atmosphere of war. But this was not to be, as they witnessed much violence, reprisals, and summary executions. That same afternoon, they had their first contact with a group of partisans who, mounted on horses and carrying rifles, sang: “When Italy is liberated and slavery forgotten, then the fascists will no longer exist and we will all be brothers in work, then you will thank those who were once called rebels.” It was a perfect summary of the internal social situation at the time.

That first contact was a sign that the area was already practically full of partisan forces. In a short time, the area became the scene of frequent clashes with the “repubblichini” of the RSI and with the German armed forces, first with their regular troops and then with the SS paramilitaries.

On the morning of Tuesday, July 18, rifle and machine gun shots were heard. A group of German *Wehrmacht* soldiers had surrounded Burzanella and burned down some of the houses that had sheltered rebels. In addition, as a result of a raid, they had captured five people. One was a young man, proud, covered in blood from his wounds, with a broken arm tied in a sling with a handkerchief; two other young men were carrying an unconscious elderly man on their backs; and finally, a fifth man was also wounded. Despite the intimidating gestures of the German soldiers, the young Dehonian religious watched from the windows of their rooms as they were taken to a meadow near the parish house. Fr. Capelli, seeing what was happening, exclaimed: “They are really killing them, we have to go out, we have to do something!”

Meanwhile, the German soldiers led the detainees to the church square where a summary trial immediately began in the space to the left of the rectory. A German commander arrived there surrounded by soldiers. The vice-superior, Fr. Enrico Agostini, and Fr. Martino Capelli approached the military commander and both asked for mercy for these men. However, the summary trial began, after which three were released because they had not fired any shots and had declared themselves free citizens, while two of the young men were sentenced to death.

Fr. Agostini, supported by Fr. Martino, redoubles his pleas for clemency, which are rejected by the commander with a: “*Keine Gnade! Keine Gnade!*” (No mercy!). And, yes, they were shot. But first, this time on the initiative of Fr. Capelli, the two priests intervened at the risk of their own lives, insisting that the condemned men be allowed to confess. The two young men knelt down, one confessing to Fr. Capelli and the other to the parish priest, Don Luigi Tommasini, who had also come to the scene.

Fr. Agostini saw how Fr. Capelli embraced and kissed both condemned men before they were executed. A shot to the back of the neck at close range ended their lives. However, one of them was still able to exclaim before he died: “I die for an idea. Avenge me!”

Some scholastics, after witnessing this scene from a window of the rectory, gathered to pray for the souls of the condemned men. Fr. Capelli and Brother Pietro Di Paolo covered both bodies with a sheet. Meanwhile, at 11:00 a.m., the German forces left Burzanella.

This is the first episode we know of that would later determine the course of events. We can say that, although motivated by charity, it was a risky pastoral gesture that would place Fr. Martino under the watchful eye of the occupying troops. In fact, this first gesture brought many questions to Fr. Capelli’s heart. The most important one was: would the Germans see his intervention as a gesture of collaboration with their enemies?

News arrives of two other men who have been killed. After lunch, the parish priest Tommasini, Fr. Capelli, Brother Oliviero Girardi, and Brother Michele Corradini go out in search of the two bodies, but they find only one. In the evening, the partisans arrive in the village and, after collecting the body of the deceased, transport it to the cemetery and keep vigil over it throughout the night.

At 5:30 the next morning, insistent knocking on the door of the rectory precedes an order to report to the authorities with personal documentation. Meanwhile, throughout the day, a dozen men are arrested. The fascists leave the village at 10 p.m.

Little by little, a feeling of anxiety takes hold of Fr. Capelli. The sense of danger for himself and his community of young religious in Burzanella pushes him to make a decision: to leave this place, at least for a while, and move alone to the house

of the parish priest of Pioppe di Salvaro, his friend Don Fidenzo Mellini. He does so on Thursday, July 20.

6. PIOPPE DI SALVARO: DON ELIA COMINI, SDB, JOINSHI

Father Capelli left on July 20, 1944, for Pioppe di Salvaro. He did not travel alone, but was accompanied by Brothers Remo Canal and Romano Boschetti, who helped him with his luggage and returned that same afternoon. Pioppe di Salvaro is only 15 miles from Burzanella and 19 miles from Bologna. The Reno River runs through the town.

There they were welcomed by the parish priest and archpriest, Monsignor Fidenzo Mellini. Now elderly, he had asked Fr. Capelli for help in assisting him in his ministry during those summer months. The archpriest offers all the new arrivals a modest meal at his parish house, after which the two scholastics return to Burzanella, starring in a small event that will have some relevance in the immediate future.

In fact, the meal must have been so frugal that, while entertaining themselves by eating a few grains of raw wheat plucked from the ears, the two young men took the wrong path and got lost in the woods. There they encountered a group of partisans who, upon seeing them, pointed their rifles at them. After questioning them, they let them go, showing them the paths that lead to Burzanella, but not before recommending that they give their fallen comrades a dignified burial. This is what they did upon their arrival in Burzanella, attending the funerals of the deceased and then rejoining their community.

This transfer of Fr. Capelli, despite the particular situation at the time, does not avoid the important question, given his status as a religious, of how, why, and who decided on this change of residence. It is important to address this question at this time, above all because of the reputation for disobedience that some attributed to him after his death, claiming that what happened to him was the result of his disobedience.

Precisely because of the spiritual and personal portrait that has been handed down to us, because of his mere status as a religious, and also precisely because of the circumstances of the moment, it is not very credible that Fr. Capelli made the decision on his own. There is no reliable and certain information indicating an act of objective disobedience on the part of the religious, so we are inclined to think that the decision was made with the consent of his superiors.

On Friday, July 21, Fr. Martino celebrated his first Mass in his new location. We have some documentary evidence thanks to a nun who was living in the village at the time and who, in her written memoirs, used to indicate the number of Masses celebrated in the parish each day. This is how we know with some certainty that Fr. Capelli was present in the village on July 25, 26, 30, and 31, as well as on August 1, 2, 3, and 15. How? When the nun uses the expressions “one Mass” or “two Masses,” it means that one priest, the parish priest, or two priests, the parish priest and Fr. Martino, were present in the village, respectively. And when she writes “three Masses,” it means that a third priest had joined them. Thus, we see the one who will be Fr. Capelli’s companion in martyrdom, the Salesian religious Fr. Elia Comini.

Elia Comini was born on May 7, 1910, in Calvenzano, in the province of Bologna. In 1914, Elia’s family moved to a place called Casetta, in the parish of Salvaro, whose parish priest, Monsignor Fidenzio Mellini, had known St. John Bosco in Turin. It was the saint who had told Mellini that he was going to be a priest. Don Fidenzo had therefore known Don Elia for a long time and had followed his vocational journey. After his novitiate in Castel de Britti, he made his first religious profession in 1926. That same year, the young Salesian’s father died, and the archpriest became his second father. On March 16, 1935, he was ordained a priest. Fr. Comini was assigned to the Salesian schools in Chiari and Treviglio, where he stood out for his affable character, his kindness, and his smile.

Although the distances between the hamlets in the Pioppe di Salvaro area made working within the parish boundaries quite tiring, the stable presence of both young priests allowed Fr. Capelli to accept the various preaching assignments he had received from other parish priests in the surrounding area.

Fr. Martino continues to live that double tension between the itinerant preacher, who does not hesitate to travel from mountain to mountain and valley to valley, moved by the zeal to transmit the Word of God; and, on the other hand, that reserved and silent religious who felt in his Dehonian soul the contemplative call to devote time to deep prayer, especially in meditation and Eucharistic adoration, which require a certain stability.

This caught the attention of another person who had taken refuge in the parish priest’s house, the primary school teacher from Pioppe di Salvaro, who, terrified by the bombing of Bologna where she lived, decided to stay in the village. She went so far as to say that, seeing Fr. Capelli, “she understood that his mission

was of a different nature, and that his pain at human suffering was a continuous sacrifice: he was almost a living martyr.”

And the hour was certainly approaching. On Sunday, July 23, German troops were 3 kilometers from the village, in Malfolle. There they carried out one of their many reprisals following partisan attacks. They machine-gunned ten men and burned several farmhouses in that small village, as well as in the mountains near Pioppe di Salvaro.

This event marked another step in Fr. Capelli’s actions. From that day on, Fr. Martino devoted himself to hiding the men of Pioppe di Salvaro. They were terrified and sought refuge in the church and parish house to escape the raids that the Germans, deployed in the mountains, carried out insistently once they realized that the men had abandoned their homes to escape certain death or deportation.

But, it seems that August would be a period of relative calm. On the day of the Assumption, Fr. Capelli leaves to preach in San Martino di Casaglia di Caprara, where Fr. Ubaldo Marchioni was parish priest. The paths crossed the woods continuously. He knows that they are controlled by the partisans. True to their strategy, they used to show themselves well armed to intimidate. And that was how they entered the peasants’ houses to make it clear to them, in passing, that they would not tolerate any collaboration with the German invaders or the Italian fascists. The familiar anxiety and pure, unadulterated fear returned to Fr. Capelli’s heart... How could he control these emotions? And one word echoed in his head: “Nembro.”

7. FR. MARTINO’S VOCATION

Nembro is the name of Fr. Martino’s hometown. Located in the province of Bergamo, it currently has about 11,000 inhabitants. It was a place of simple, hard-working people that welcomed the birth of Nicola Capelli. It was at 7 a.m. on September 20, 1912. His mother was Maria Teresa Bonomi. She was the second wife of his father, Martino, a carpenter by trade. Two days later, at his baptism, the newborn son was given the name Nicola, to which was added Giuseppe.

In his first steps in life, he shared the fate of so many European biographies of the early 20th century: great poverty, too many mouths to feed in the family, but

much affection and a spirit of sacrifice in his parents. In fact, it is more than likely that the reason for the premature death of his mother Teresa was malnutrition.

Two of Nicola's sisters, Pierina (known for holiness during her lifetime) and Marta (strong-willed and decisive), took religious vows and moved to France. It is not surprising that, from a very young age, Nicola also showed a natural inclination towards service, which manifested itself in small gestures of help, such as fetching water or running errands, in exchange, of course, for a slice of bread.

He would also accompany his mother when she was overcome by fatigue or illness. At those times, she would pass on to him her faith, her love for the Lord and the Virgin Mary, as well as the ability to smile in the midst of effort and pain. The future Fr. Martino would never forget the serenity of knowing how to suffer with dignity. It is no coincidence, then, that Nicola maintained a deep Marian devotion in which he would always invoke Mary as Our Lady of Sorrows. She would be his new Mother after the death of his own, and he would consider himself her disciple in the school of pain and love. This dimension of love lived in suffering (or of suffering assumed in and for love) would form in him a sensitivity that he later also recognized among the Dehonians, a congregation characterized by a reparative and oblationary spirituality. In his spiritual portrait, we can highlight traits such as these:

- how the thread of his life is woven between wanting to be a priest, a missionary, and a martyr
- a desire for martyrdom that is not an empty impulse, but a constant in his life, since he renews it several times and in his spiritual writings it is a constant goal to reach
- A path forged by a very special devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows, whom he encountered and rediscovered so many times in his beloved Shrine of the Madonna dello Zuccarello in his native Nembro.

But there is no better way to verify and understand what has been said than by reading his spiritual writings, which can be found in this volume in the final appendix, with appropriate commentary.

What is surprising about Nicola is his early, firm, and total orientation toward God. Even as a child, he showed a great love for Holy Mass: he insisted on attending it every day, even when he had trouble staying awake in the morning. Over time, he became an excellent altar boy.

A cheerful and lively child, Nicola enjoyed himself naturally, but always retained a certain reserve and contemplation, traits that distinguished him even during games. He never stopped laughing and joking, but his behavior reflected a maturity unusual for his age.

His mother witnessed a precocious and mysterious desire for total self-giving: when reading the Passion of Jesus with him, little Nicola was moved to tears and expressed the desire to die like Christ.

Thus, in this family context, his vocation to follow the Lord began to take root. For a family of humble origins, the answer to this vocation was relatively close at hand: in Albino, where the railway line, which had brought some prosperity to the area, allowed Nicola to enter the Apostolic School of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The institution, founded in 1907 next to a small church dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe (the great Mexican Marian devotion), offered religious and academic training to young men aspiring to religious life.

Nicola arrived in Albino at the age of twelve, together with his brother Antonio (who left after three days), accompanied by his mother and a sister. Once he had settled into a suitable environment, his academic performance improved markedly. In Albino he found harmony: he felt at home. This facilitated a sincere and profound formative process, in which those other attitudes that required correction also appeared.

But a sad event forced him to mature quickly: on April 30, 1932, when he was 13 years old, his father died suddenly in the street after feeling ill. From that moment on, he went through a difficult period that required the patience and understanding of his teachers. They continued to believe in his potential, even when Nicola was distracted, careless, and talkative. In a word, rebellious. But some teachers managed to perceive his sincerity and his true vocation.

Thanks to his efforts and the support he received, Nicola improved and finished his studies with excellent grades. Thus, on June 21, 1929, he was one of 16 young men (out of the 46 who had started at the Apostolic School) admitted to the Novitiate.

In the fear with which he now walked the forest paths, the figure of his mother emerged to comfort him and renew in his memory the strengths that had made him who he was and how he was. The leaves were beginning to take on that brownish color that speaks of maturity, that speaks of the hope of Easter...

AUTUMN
1944

AUTUMN 1944

8. OVERTURE: THE MOUNTAIN PRIESTS

DON UBALDO MARCHIONI

On the afternoon of September 7, Fr. Capelli set out on the 10-kilometer journey to Casaglia di Caprara to respond to a call to preach on the occasion of the feast of the Nativity of St. Mary the following day. The celebration was held in the now-destroyed church of St. Martin, the saint from whom he took his religious name. He had already been in the small village on August 15. He had been invited back by the new parish priest who had been in charge of the parish for seven months: Don Ubaldo Marchioni.

This priest also deserves a special mention. He was born on May 19, 1918, in Vimignano (Grizzana) and in 1943 he was living in Marzabotto as parish priest of San Martino. His priestly vocation matured early, and in 1930 he entered the secondary seat of the Archdiocesan Seminary of Borgo Capanne (Granaglione), later completing his diaconate at Villa Revedin (Bologna). He was finally ordained a priest in 1942, and on June 29 of that same year, he celebrated his first Mass in his hometown.

While he was coadjutor in the parish of Monzuno, a year before the day on which we have paused the narration of Fr. Capelli's life, he had already helped scattered soldiers and, in the face of the risk of vandalism, helped to save food reserves. Moreover, at the end of October 1943, in the sacristy of the church of Vado (Monzuno), he attended the first meetings in which it was decided, on the one hand, to form the Stella Rossa Lupo partisan brigade and, on the other, to organize a consumer cooperative to meet the needs of the poorest population.

In January 1944, despite the serious situation, Cardinal Nasalli Rocca, Archbishop of Bologna, decided to revise the parish boundaries, assigning Don Ubaldo to a new parish on February 27, 1944. Don Ubaldo requested and obtained the parish of San Martino di Caprara, which he took possession of on March 23, 1944. His father Augusto, his mother Antonietta, and his younger sister Marta moved in with him in the rectory. A climate of cooperation and solidarity immediately developed between the new parish priest and his parishioners, due in part to the extraordinary and terrible circumstances of those days.

Although the Stella Rossa Lupo brigade was already operating in the area, it was necessary to strengthen ties with the partisans, whom the young priest tried to help, protect, and support. But there was something that Don Ubaldo could not bear or approve of: the fratricidal fighting between Italians, which brought constant reprisals.

As we have already pointed out, these were days of frequent fighting both on the plains and in the mountains. Tireless, Don Ubaldo tried to visit everyone and, during those days, managed to reach his hometown by bicycle. There he meets another sister, his eldest, Maria, and a Capuchin uncle, Father Mauro. He confides in him all his anxieties and concerns about the fate of his people and his own safety, but he remains firm in his determination not to abandon his flock.

We are getting ahead of ourselves, but we will look at these events in more detail later. German troops surround the entire area of Monte Sole, where all these small villages with peculiar names that we are collecting in our narrative are located. The partisans, taken by surprise, lose many comrades, including their commander Mario Musolesi, known as “Lupo.” Some manage to escape, but at that moment it becomes clear: the military plan was not only to defeat the Stella Rossa, but also to “clean” a strategic area of all human presence. That, distilled in the violent Nazi mentality, meant directing their actions against the defenseless civilian population.

On September 29, Nazi reprisals erupted. That day, Don Ubaldo gathered the townspeople in the church of San Martino and urged them to receive the sacraments. He then decides to go to Cerpiano, passing through Santa Maria di Casaglia (Marzabotto) to distribute the consecrated hosts reserved in the tabernacle, as he fears they will be desecrated. When he arrives, he finds almost a hundred people gathered there, frightened and trembling. He prays the Holy Rosary with them and distributes the Eucharistic hosts. While they were still praying, the Nazi forces arrived. After breaking down the door, they forced everyone to leave and go to the cemetery, but not before executing a paralyzed woman and two other people who had sought refuge in the bell tower. For his part, Don Ubaldo was forbidden to accompany his parishioners.

Don Ubaldo was still at the foot of the altar when they shot him, without warning, with bursts of machine-gun fire that ended his life. Then the SS tried to set fire to the church, but not before placing a sign next to the priest’s lifeless body that read: “Rebels, this is your fate.”

Meanwhile, the rest of the village is led to the cemetery and crowded against the walls of the chapel. Once the machine guns are in place, they begin to shoot and throw grenades at them. Only four people will survive. The entire village is set on fire. The next day, Don Ubaldo's mother and sister will be killed in San Martino, with only his father managing to escape.

Under the rubble of the church, a chalice with visible bullet holes is later found. It is the chalice that, perhaps, but there are few other alternatives, Don Ubaldo was holding in his hands when he was killed.

This story serves as an overture to what is about to happen. We conclude with an example of the spiritual tone that permeated those days. When the SS commander who led the events described above stands before a court, he will ask for what he never granted: the grace of forgiveness. Don Ubaldo's father will be one of the four people who grant that forgiveness. When asked how he could forgive, the old man, who had lost his wife and two children, replied in his dialect: "What I do, only I know!"

DON FERDINANDO CASAGRANDE

Another priest from the area, murdered at the age of 29, was Don Ferdinando Maria Casagrande. Born in 1914, he completed his studies at the diocesan and regional seminaries in Bologna and was ordained a priest on July 16, 1938. He made his solemn entry into the new parish of Gugliara-Gardelletta-La Quercia on April 30, 1944.

During the winter, every night, he taught classes to young people and children (and even some adults) from San Martino di Caprara. In the classroom of his parish house, he gave lessons in practical accounting and also taught them how to value hay, livestock, and manure. He remained there until September 22, 1944, when the Germans set fire to almost all the houses.

On September 29, 1944, together with his family, he was also forced to flee the place called Le Caivane, where the Germans were burning all the houses on the Setta hillside, and take refuge behind the cemetery of San Martino di Caprara. Until October 9, 1944, together with other survivors, he was the parish priest of a "hidden parish."

Amidst risks and hardships, he prayed and collaborated with the women, who were forced to play the role of gravediggers. On October 9, 1944, together with his

sister Giulia, he left to go to the German command with the intention of obtaining permission to change shelters and not die of hunger. They did not return.

The two Casagrande siblings, thrown into a deep pit after the massacre, were found embracing each other. When their bodies were found in May 1945, the wound caused by the shot fired at point-blank range, which exited through their foreheads, was visible on the back of their necks.

DON GIOVANNI FORNASINI

Giovanni Remo Fornasini (1915-1944) was born in Pianaccio di Lizzano in Belvedere. After being ordained a priest on June 28, 1942, he was appointed parish priest of Sperticano on August 21 of that year.

After September 8, 1943, he became the spiritual guide for the entire Monte Sole area, where many displaced families took refuge during those months. He managed to save detainees; he celebrated the funerals of the victims of the Nazi massacre, despite the ban; he managed to free the hostages taken after the explosion of the train in the Misa tunnel (July 30); he offered himself in exchange for those arrested; he helped three English prisoners cross the front...

After preventing the destruction of Sperticano, he was forced to receive the SS in the rectory. After opposing the SS's abuse of two young people, the next day the SS commander showed up as usual for breakfast at his house and asked for the "pastor." Don Giovanni got up, went down from his room, took his breviary, the ritual sprinkler, some hosts, and left for San Martino. What happened next is unknown: he never returned.

The commander returned and sat down to lunch, and when he returned in the evening, his brother's wife asked the captain, "And the Pastor?" The commander's reply was like an arrow: "Pastor, kaputt!". It was October 13, 1944. Don Giovanni was only 29 years old.

His body was found by his brother Luigi on April 22, 1945, in the San Martino cemetery, with his head severed from his body, and he was buried two days later in the Sperticano cemetery. A year after his disappearance, on October 13, 1945, he was finally laid to rest in the Church of San Tommaso in Sperticano.

9. PORTRAIT OF A SPIRIT IN FORMATION

We return to Pioppe di Salvaro. On the afternoon of September 11, spiritual exercises had begun for the nuns present in the parish. They are preached by Don Elia Comini and the parish priest-archpriest Fidenzo Mellini. Fr. Martino Capelli rests and takes the opportunity to put some order into his recent memories and the two lines of force that characterize his spirit.

After the Apostolic School in Albino, the next step was the Novitiate in Albisola, where he took the new name Martino, received the Scapular of the Sacred Heart, the black cord with which to gird his cassock, and the book of the SCJ Constitutions. When he made his first profession on September 23, 1930, at the age of 18, he signed his name as Fr. Martino Maria Capelli of Our Lady of Sorrows. A very strong bond is evident between the Blessed Virgin Mary and his personal spirituality. In fact, Our Lady of Sorrows accompanied him in Nembro; Our Lady of Guadalupe did so in Albino; and Our Lady Queen of Heaven, known as “Madonna dei Poveri,” awaited him on October 6, 1930, at the Scholasticate in Bologna, which Fr. Dehon himself had founded in 1912.

His journey during his formative years was based on making himself available to others, which unfolded in two directions: Marian and martyrdom. Yes, when his mother died on September 29, 1931, with a very deep sadness, he turned to Saint Mary, asking her to now also be his “material mother.”

But at the same time, little by little, the idea of “martyrdom” began to emerge preponderantly. On December 10, 1931, he attended a missionary conference on the martyrdoms in Mexico a decade earlier. It captured his attention so much that he came into contact with the experience of faith and suffering of the Mexican martyrs. That story resonated with Capelli as a call to her deepest commitment to the mystery of the passion and death of the Lord Jesus. And it resonated in a soul that was originally timid and not without fears. We affirm all this in light of her writing of December 12, 1931, where she says:

Oh Virgin, Queen of Mexican Martyrs, grant that one day I too may be a martyr for Christ the King and for You, Immaculate Virgin. Oh Mother, I write to you still moved by the other day’s lecture on Mexico the martyr. I am sure that through the intercession of your Martyrs you will grant me this. Your son. Frater Martino Capelli.

This seems not so much an emotional impact as a deeper dynamism that is already at work in him. He was the only scholastic who was particularly moved

by that lecture. The SCJ Congregation did not train or guide in this strictly martyr-like sense. Moreover, it shows the strength of a simple and concrete spirituality: “priest, missionary, martyr.”

The day of his perpetual profession arrived on September 23, 1933, in the presence of another scholastic with whom he had shared a year of study and service, Bernardo Longo (1907-1964), who would become a missionary and martyr and whose cause for beatification is also open.

The final portrait with which Capelli leaves his time of formation speaks to us of a religious with a “profound sense of humanity,” capable of acting “with great simplicity and understanding,” with “great balance” and “propriety.” The Dehonian Apostolic School in Trent was the first place where his gifts were put to use in apostolic activity among children who, being children, “were a torment. Always around me. Always clinging to my shoelaces...,” he wrote. But it was “an opportunity to do good. To give. To help. To support.”

Little by little, the year 1938 approaches, which contains the dates that mark his access to the various degrees of holy orders: subdeacon on March 12, deacon on April 2, and, on June 26, in the chapel of the Scholasticate of Bologna, through the laying on of hands by the Bishop of Imola, Paolino Tribbioli, priesthood. Fr. Martino’s first solemn Mass was celebrated in the Sanctuary of Zuccarello in Nembro.

10. MEETING THE PARTISANS

On September 17, Fr. Martino was to preach in Montorio, another village also located 12 km from Pioppe di Salvaro. The occasion was the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, which had been moved to the 17th that year. He was expected to arrive the afternoon before to help with confessions. But Fr. Capelli did not show up.

The parish priest’s concern grew when he did not arrive early on Sunday morning... he arrived just in time for the solemn Mass! Fr. Capelli appeared “breathless, sweaty, with his habit and hair in disarray.” Despite everything, with a slight delay, he began the celebration of Holy Mass.

At lunch, Fr. Martino explained what had happened. He had indeed left Pioppe di Salvaro on foot the previous afternoon, but on the stretch between Termine and Cadetto, he was stopped by the partisans. They held him all afternoon, all

night, and part of the next morning (), subjecting him to thorough interrogation. It seems that the reason was that visits by another priest (also a military priest) to Monsignor Mellini had aroused suspicion, as was usual, among both the partisans and the Germans. The partisans believed they had arrested a priest who, in their view, was a spy for the “repubblichini,” the fascist forces.

Capelli had to prove his innocence, explaining that he was a priest and professor at the Dehonian Scholasticate in Bologna, who offered his pastoral collaboration to Monsignor Mellini and other parish priests in the area... He added that, as the interrogation dragged on, he ended up reproaching his partisan captors for some crimes committed against defenseless and innocent people. Perhaps because of this, or because he was unable to convince them, the partisans threatened to make him dig a grave and then kill him. Only that same morning, thanks also to the intervention of a more moderate partisan, did they let him go, but not before warning him sternly not to leave the area, not to change his location, and not to try to disappear. The climax was to threaten him with death once again.

Later, it would become known that during a conversation that same afternoon, Fr. Martino did not seem particularly disturbed by the incident in the forest. In fact, at the end of the afternoon services, he announced his return to Pioppe di Salvaro the following day, even suggesting that a young man accompany him to the woods “to do some good,” that is, to stop among the partisans, of whom he said: “Poor people, they need someone to talk to them a little about religion, to talk to them a little about God.” That young man, named Zanini, expressed his astonishment, and Fr. Martino confided that he had not felt so bad during his detention and confirmed his plan. And, indeed, on Monday, September 18, back in Pioppe, he entered the woods of Monte Termine where he met the partisans and attempted to carry out his initiative.

This moment would prove to be important because it seems that, in that group, he would meet a person who would play a decisive role in his final days. His name was Giuliano De Balzo, nicknamed *Cacao* or *Boccia*. This would be the partisan who, expelled from their ranks for theft, would take revenge by switching to the Nazi-Fascist side and testifying against Capelli. This traitor would be executed by a former comrade a few months after the events we are about to recount.

11. WAR COMES TO PIOPPE DI SALVARO

The encounter with the partisans was not going to be so joyful or gratuitous. Don Luigi Tommasini, the parish priest of Burzanella, had made it known that the partisans of Pioppe were threatening Fr. Martino and that he was therefore in danger. Fr. Enrico Agostini, de facto superior of the Scholasticate community, sent Capelli “the order of the Provincial Superior” to return to the community in Burzanella.

The envoy was Fr. Albino Franzini, who met Fr. Martino at the parish house. He had dinner with him and prepared a place for him to spend the night. Then, Fr. Franzini and Fr. Capelli were invited to leave the house and, climbing up towards Monte Salvaro, he informed him that he had been sent there by Fr. Agostini on behalf of the Provincial Superior, Fr. Nicola Zagaria, to return to the community in Burzanella, since, given the rapid advance of the Allies, it was possible that the entire community would return to Castiglione. As they walked, they were interrupted by a young partisan who pointed his rifle at them. Immersed in their conversation, the religious passed by him without noticing him. After six or seven minutes, he withdrew, disappearing into the woods. Beyond this anecdote, which speaks to the gravity of the situation, Fr. Capelli’s response was negative: he considered that his presence in Pioppe di Salvaro was still necessary due to the difficult situation and the advanced age of Monsignor Mellini, even though Fr. Comini was present. As we shall see, that was neither the first nor the only reason...

September 24, 1944, was a Sunday. The parish house in Pioppe di Salvaro was full of refugees and displaced persons who saw the parish church as a refuge of protection and peace. After the celebration of Holy Mass and breakfast, the two Dehonians, Franzini and Capelli, spoke briefly with the Salesian Comini. Finally, Fr. Capelli reiterated his refusal to return to Burzanella.

We finally arrive at one of the doubts (already anticipated) that would haunt Fr. Capelli’s life adventure for decades: had we just witnessed an act of disobedience? In Fr. Franzini’s subsequent reflections, that encounter on the mountain with the partisan on the afternoon of Saturday, September 23, was much more than a coincidence. The partisan did not cross his path by chance, but was tasked with following, watching, and spying on a name on the partisan “blacklist”: Fr. Martino Capelli. Aware of this, Fr. Martino refused to carry that threat with him, which could extend to his young Dehonian brothers in the scholastic community.

As things stood, on Monday, September 25, Pioppe suffered an aerial bombardment that caused great material damage, although there were no casualties. In the village were the Dehonians Fr. Lino Cattoi, Fr. Comini, and Fr. Capelli. Seeing what had happened, Fr. Capelli spoke with his confreres and asked them to go to Malfolle, because “I would like to go up there too.” Another large group of Dehonian refugees was already in this village: Fr. Nicola Colia (who was in charge of pastoral care in another nearby town called Pioppe), Fr. Basilio Memmolo (who was in charge of Sibano), Fr. Vigilio Sommavilla, a Polish scholastic named Gaulich and called Gaulicchio to hide his nationality (who performed tasks such as farming, cooking, etc.), and Fr. Cattoi (who also worked in Pioppe). This priest pointed out that, as far as he was concerned, there was no problem with him going with them, but he did note that the number of religious gathered was already quite large and that this could make the Germans suspect that they were all partisans. It seems clear, then, that everyone was aware of the partisans’ threats against Capelli and the consequences for the Germans.

Monday’s bombing was not an isolated incident. The war is right there. The front is approaching the area with all its dire consequences. On the one hand, the partisans in the vicinity of Pioppe di Salvaro carry out an ambush that kills three civilians, actions so reckless that they endanger the entire population. On the other, two SS companies arrive in Sibano, establishing their permanent headquarters in the village parish house. And, completing the cast of actors, Allied troops enter Castiglione dei Pepoli on Tuesday, September 26. This war scenario, set between the Setta and Reno rivers, will last almost seven months.

And the inevitable begins to happen. Members of the SS, climbing the mountains of Pioppe di Salvaro, encounter a group of partisans. In the clash, one of the Germans is killed. Retaliation: the SS murder three men, set fire to three barns and the Calanchi family home in the small village of Casella.

The news reaches the parish house where Fr. Martino and Fr. Comini are staying, and both set out for the scene. Accompanied by a young couple, while being watched by the Germans from the road, they proceed to give a Christian burial to Paolo Calanchi, the father of the family, who was shot in retaliation along with two other neighbors. From that moment on, this Christian and ministerial gesture meant that they were particularly exposed to the SS, which put their own lives in danger.

After burying Mr. Calanchi, they go to the aid of the other inhabitants, accompanying them to the church of Pioppe di Salvaro and comforting the children and women. Once settled in the church, the two religious think about how to recover the other bodies. They had to be pulled out of the mud and wood had to be found to make coffins. They achieved both objectives, but the arrival of night forced them to postpone the transfer of the deceased to the cemetery until Thursday, the 28th.

Upon returning to the parish house in Pioppe di Salvaro, Fr. Capelli went to visit the nuns and console another family of victims. On this occasion, Capelli gave a speech in which he spoke passionately about the priestly ministry and its obligations. He seemed almost aware of his martyrdom and willing to give his life.

12. BEFORE STALIN'S PORTRAIT

On Wednesday, September 27, 1944, scholastics Remo Canal and Guido Ignazio Dalla Sega set out, amid grave dangers due to the fighting, for Pioppe di Salvaro, sent again by Fr. Agostini to invite Fr. Capelli, for the second time, to move to Burzanella, given the danger of death from the partisans. According to Canal, the initiative had once again come from the Provincial Superior, who was residing in Albino.

Without any written document from Fr. Agostini for security reasons, they arrived in Pioppe di Salvaro around 10:30 or 11:00 in the morning. Fr. Capelli was in the parish house, and, guessing the reason for the unexpected and risky visit, he led the two young religious to the crypt of the church where he listened to what they had to say. He receives the tremulous message and immediately gives his answer, remembered thus by Dalla Sega: "I am not leaving, I am not leaving this place, because to leave would be to give credence and faith to the accusations made against me." And he added: "Will you do me a favor?" The scholastics asked what kind of favor, and Fr. Capelli replied: "Accompany me to the partisan headquarters to clarify my situation." According to the other scholastic, Canal, Capelli's words were: "No, it would be a kind of admission of guilt, it would be like saying that the partisans are right, that I am guilty, and I don't want that. I'm staying, and that's that."

Be that as it may, they immediately set off together for a house on the edge of a forest, which was fairly well protected. Once inside, they were led into a large room presided over by the Italian and Soviet flags, crossed, and a large portrait

of Stalin. Fr. Capelli stated that he was there to clarify his situation. According to Dalla Sega, the partisans declare that they have nothing against him, stating that he was not a suspect. They even issue a typed statement, which was read and approved by all those present and signed by the commander and Capelli himself.

However, once outside, and with some relief, Fr. Capelli tells the students that it would be better if they did not return with him to Pioppe di Salvaro. Just in case, and “so that no one sees us together.” The two scholastics arrived in Burzanella before dinner and reported what had happened to Fr. Agostini.

The next day was apparently quiet. But the Allied presence in Castiglione dei Pepoli, thus establishing the advanced spearhead that broke the so-called “Gothic Line,” prompted a decision by the SS to “clean up” the entire territory between the Setta and Reno rivers, in order to open the way to Bologna through the confluence of the two rivers. The calm was therefore due to the preparations of the SS, who had murdered the three men from Casella near Pioppe di Salvaro the previous day. In fact, on that day, Fr. Martino celebrated and preached at the funeral, as well as leading the subsequent transfer to the cemetery.

But the chaos of terror was unleashed. In Bel Poggio, the SS shot six men accused of collaboration. Their bodies remained unburied at the door of their homes. Capelli and Comini assisted the families (there were also children) and sheltered them in the parish house in Pioppe di Salvaro.

Fr. Martino was certain that his priestly work could serve to curb the misdeeds that were being committed, especially on the partisan side. It could be said that, in those circumstances, both Fr. Martino and Fr. Comini became the true point of reference for the population, considering also that all civil authority had disappeared. That first execution that day was followed by others, prompting what Fr. Agostini later described as “Fr. Capelli’s heroic act,” which the village schoolteacher described as follows: “Entering a forbidden area to collect some bodies, give them a Christian burial, and save their families.”

The cold, that relentless inner cold, had taken hold of almost everyone, almost suddenly...

AND THEN,
SUDDENLY,
WINTER...

AND THEN, SUDDENLY, WINTER

...a winter that promises an Easter spring. It may sound a bit pretentious, but that's how it was. On Friday, September 29, 1944, a triduum began that would lead Fr. Capelli to give his life on Sunday, October 1. Providence or coincidence, we leave that up to the reader to decide. The events were as follows.

13. THE DECISION

It was the great feast day of St. Michael the Archangel in the parish of Pioppe di Salvaro! However, nothing was as it should be. From early morning, the men of the village were fleeing through the mountains. However, these were invaded by German SS patrols. The *Wehrmacht*, the regular German army, had received orders to withdraw and hand over command of the area to the special *Panzerdivision 16*-SS battalion, led by Major Walter Reder. The assigned objective: to inflict a definitive defeat on the Stella Rossa partisan brigade, led by Mario Musolesi «Lupo.» But that was not all. Subsequently, the courts will describe this military operation, in which elderly people, women, and children are murdered, as a «cleansing operation.»

In La Creda di Grizzana, there was a clash between partisans and the SS. Once again, a German commander was wounded, triggering immediate retaliation: elderly people, women, and children from the area were captured, herded together, looted, machine-gunned, and finally burned to hide the extermination.

In Pioppe di Salvaro, following the holiday schedule, Fr. Martino celebrated Holy Mass around five o'clock. Suddenly, members of different families living in Casellina burst through the doors of the church and began shouting that their village was burning: people, animals, and houses. They begged for someone to do something so that the men could hide.

The nuns begged Fr. Martino to act to protect all the men from the Germans' search and persecution. It was a very serious request, and he knew the consequences. Fr. Capelli knelt for a few moments before the tabernacle in prayer. Was the time coming? He left the church shortly afterwards, accompanied by Fr. Comini. From then on, their destinies would be linked. Don Elia, who knew the church well, suggested hiding the men in a small sacristy adjacent to the main sacristy, placing a cupboard in front of the door. So, together, they received all the men, about seventy of them, and hid them. During the day, members of the SS passed

through the village up to three times, entering the church with their submachine guns drawn and passing by the altar where the entrance to the hiding place was located.

Later, the elderly parish priest Monsignor Mellini asked Father Martino to take Viaticum to a sick woman in Casellina. Father Martino went and returned without any problems to carry out his task. As soon as he arrives home, he is called by a man who asks for help after escaping from La Creda di Grizzana, where the SS had arrested 69 farmers. The parish priests confirm that there are still people dying. The impulse of the young religious was, on the one hand, to bring Viaticum and, if possible, to save at least women and children by virtue of the habit they wore.

Father Elia entered the church to take the pyx with the consecrated bread and holy oils, and, addressing those who were there, he asked them: «Pray, pray for me, because I have a mission to fulfill.» When he met Fr. Martino, both priests put on their surplice and stole in the presbyteral manner, thus clearly identifying themselves as Catholic priests.

When a parishioner, pulling on Father Martino's habit, tries to stop them by pointing out the madness and danger they are exposing themselves to, she hears these words from the lips of the two young men: «We are priests and we must go, we must do our duty.» With that, they set off with a firm and swift step towards La Creda di Grizzana. They are aware of the risk; they are practically the only men who are visible and who have not fled or gone into hiding. They are wearing their habits and have added priestly vestments... it is difficult to imagine a greater exposure of one's life to obvious danger. Finally, Fr. Martino and Fr. Elia, dodging the exchange of fire between the combatants, manage to spiritually assist the people who have been killed and burned.

14. THE CAPTURE

We do not know the exact time or place of the capture. Some witnesses claim that they never reached Capossena. Others claim that they were taken prisoner by the SS as they were preparing to assist the victims of the massacre. Stripping them of their priestly insignia, without knowing the fate of the Holy Oils and the Blessed Sacrament, they forced them to carry ammunition, going up and down the mountain under guard. On the way, the priests were forced to witness horrific acts of violence with their own eyes. There are witnesses who saw them coming

down from La Creda di Grizzana loaded with ammunition, a little below the village of Serra di Sotto. Others saw them exhausted, sweaty, and dirty, carrying those heavy boxes with great effort, holding them in front of them with their hands.

The testimonies describe priests humiliated and exhausted by the SS. One person saw them in the woods chained to a tree. He tried to approach them to help them, but Fr. Elia made him leave. His testimony remains: “They were laden and bent under the weight of so many heavy boxes that wrapped around their bodies from front to back. Their backs formed a curve that made their noses almost touch the ground.” An elderly man saw them in the Capossena area, “sitting on the ground [...] very sweaty and tired, with ammunition on their backs.”

The news reached the parish house in Pioppe di Salvaro, informing Monsignor Mellini of the arrest of the two young priests and the hard forced labor to which they were being subjected at gunpoint.

15. PRISONER IN THE HEMP FACTORY

As night fell, Capelli and Comini were locked up along with fifty other hostages, some captured in the raids and others held as disabled workers, in the hemp factory stable (also known as the “Borgia house” or “carters’ house”) in Pioppe di Salvaro. It was a two-story building with a basement, now converted into a prison.

Three railway workers from the Marzabotto line and a Repubblicaio soldier from Riola were released during the day. But little by little, the adjacent and upper rooms were filling up. None of those imprisoned there were considered partisans. This fact is important in understanding why things happened the way they did. In other words, if the reason for their arrest and imprisonment was not due to a reprisal raid by the SS, nor was it espionage, nor was it membership of the partisans (mainly because the latter two were usually punished with immediate death), the reason was none other than their status as Catholic priests. But there is a further nuance to be added. There were also other priests there: the Servite Father Artusi, the parish priest of Sperticano, Don Fornasini, the parish priest of Calvenzano, Don Vincenzo Venturi, and the Dehonian Father Memmolo.

In fact, at 7 a.m. on September 29, Father Basilio Memmolo was in Malfolle and had attempted to free a prisoner held by the SS. As a result, he was detained, with the promise that he could return home once his documents had been checked in

a nearby town. When they arrived at that town, they found no checkpoint, so they had to continue on to Pioppe di Salvaro, where he was imprisoned in the hemp factory. Thus, the confirmed detail is this: Capelli and Comini were arrested as Catholic priests in the exercise of their ministry.

Fr. Memmolo was the one who placed Fr. Martino and Fr. Comini on the upper floor of the factory. In fact, after receiving permission to go to the bathroom, he heard someone calling him from the windows above, but he was unable to identify who it was. It seems that Fr. Martino Capelli then left without permission and was slapped by a guard, being immediately taken back to his cell.

And so it was that the night of that Friday descended, darkly, very darkly, on the lives and souls of those men.

16. THE TRIAGE

At noon on Saturday, September 30, an Italian officer from the Republic of Salò (or the RSI) arrived, along with a German second lieutenant sent expressly for this operation. They were accompanied by a third person. He was a boy of about seventeen, probably from Calvenzano, a former partisan who had been a cook among them. We already met him in that room presided over by Stalin's portrait. His name is Giuliano De Balzo, *Cacao* or *Boccia*.

A general interrogation was carried out, as a result the men were classified as "fit" and "unfit" for deportation to Germany. The largest group, which included Fr. Memmolo, was interrogated, and we know from him that there was a special interest in learning about the links between our two priests and the parish priest of San Martino di Casaglia di Caprara, Don Ubaldo Marchioni, who had been killed a few hours earlier and was considered by the fascists to be the leader of the partisans.

In the end, they formed three groups: one of elderly and wounded people, another of young and healthy people, and finally one of priests. Only two people were not initially assigned to any group: Fr. Elia Comini and Fr. Martino Capelli. This would happen at the end, when they were assigned to the group of elderly or disabled people... two young men aged 32 and 34, who had proven themselves perfectly fit for work after spending a whole day carrying ammunition through the mountains...! The sentence had been passed.

From that moment on, Fr. Capelli began to show signs of redness in his face, possibly due to fever or lack of hydration. It is a fact that they were not given water. In addition, he showed obvious signs of agitation. However, Fr. Martino did not expect a violent end, as he asked Fr. Memmolo for money to go to Bologna and then to Bergamo.

Around 1:00 p.m., the group of priests, including Fr. Memmolo, is finally sent to Bologna so that the Cardinal Archbishop can issue certificates of good political conduct. Neither Fr. Capelli nor Fr. Comini are in that group, as they are locked up again.

In Bologna, the Cardinal issues the required documents and later issues two more in the names of Fr. Capelli and Fr. Comini. But none of those priests were able to return to Pioppe di Salvaro.

On Saturday afternoon, Monsignor Mellini's pleas were heard by Sister Alberta Taccini and Sister Ester, who went to visit and do everything possible to free the two religious. They brought food supplies with them, but not only were they forbidden by the Germans to approach the house or speak to the detainees, they were also mistreated, pushed with a rifle in their backs, and threatened with death if they did not leave immediately. It seems that the SS officer responsible for this was Major Walter Reder himself, easily recognizable by his amputated arm. It was he who forced the nuns to stand against the wall while pointing his gun at them, slapping one nun in the face when she tried to speak and, to complete his "courageous" action, kicking her hard. That afternoon there was also a failed attempt at liberation by one of the influential people in the area.

Meanwhile, witnesses recall seeing Fr. Elia at the window, pointing to the sky and waving with tearful eyes, while Fr. Capelli appeared pale, possibly sad.

17. THE EXECUTION

Sunday dawned. It brought with it a new month on the calendar: October 1. The group of skilled craftsmen who had been captured spent the night in the church of Pioppe; the group of unskilled craftsmen, which included our two religious, was in the carters' house.

Posing as the sister of one of the priests, a woman managed to bring them a breviary, some underwear, and food. Upon entering, she encountered Fr. Elia. Fr.

Martino did not exchange a word with her, but, interrupting his prayer, he traced the sign of the cross over her. Regarding this attitude, more witnesses insist that Capelli spoke little and prayed a lot. That group of elderly prisoners begged the priests not to leave them and pleaded for something to be done for all of them.

But the response was that the Nazis brutally attacked the group of elderly people to take their documents, watches, wallets, and shoes. Martino and Elia confessed to each other and then gave absolution to all those present. And six o'clock in the afternoon arrived. The group of those deemed fit saw the elderly pass by wearing an acacia twig in the buttonhole of their jackets... it was the sign of condemnation.

At 7:30 p.m., all the prisoners in the group of elderly or disabled people, a total of 46 (of whom 41 were killed, 3 managed to survive, and 2 initially escaped with their lives only to die shortly afterwards while fleeing the place of extermination), were led to the building where the water tank that generated electricity to power the machines in the hemp factory was located. In Pioppe, it was called the "botte." At that time, it was empty, being more of a mud and sludge reservoir than a pool of water.

They were made to line up along one of the dam's walkways, directly in front of about 20 SS soldiers and two machine guns pointed at them. At least two other soldiers stood guard at unseen locations.

The group was divided into two. When the first group entered the enclosure, they were placed in a row of three. Comini and Capelli were placed in the front row. Fr. Martino remained for a time deep in prayer. Meanwhile, the Salesian Comini implored one last time: "Mercy, mercy!" And the two began to impart blessings and absolutions, in loud voices, trying to avoid the inevitable.

Faced with the shouting crowd, two soldiers came out from behind a column, threatening them with axes in their hands and imposing silence. The two religious said, "We forgive." And Fr. Martino was heard to exclaim, "My Jesus, mercy!"

It was 7:45 p.m. The voices were interrupted by the rattling of machine gun fire. The horror was accompanied by moans of pain. Those with minor injuries were finished off with rifle shots. The second group of condemned men, in addition to being spectators of what was about to happen to them, were ordered to throw the dead into the "botte," while an officer finished off those who still showed signs of life with his pistol.

At that hour and at that time, it was already dark in northern Italy. So, taking advantage of the darkness and all the commotion, some tried to escape, but the SS, hidden and aided by the light of flashlights, began to literally hunt them down. The situation spiraled out of control and the second group was machine-gunned with some haste, resulting in more than half of those machine-gunned being slightly wounded. For this reason, the SS threw four or five grenades into the “botte” before retreating.

18. SUBMERGED IN THE BOTTE

The sound of Nazi boots receded, and inside the «botte,» one of the elderly men, Aldo Ansaloni, managed to emerge from the pile of corpses that had been machine-gunned or torn apart by the grenades. He had no choice but to grab hold of and lean on the bodies next to him. He could see that one of them was Fr. Capelli, because he managed to identify his black Franciscan cord in the darkness, the distinctive sign of the Dehonian religious habit.

But the surprise was enormous when, upon feeling contact with his body, Fr. Capelli, although his stomach was literally torn open by bullets, managed to regain consciousness, stand up with difficulty, and utter a few words that the elderly man, who was already deaf, could not understand.

Fr. Martino was dying, but he managed to gather the strength to make the sign of the cross over everything and everyone. Tireless. Until he could no longer continue. His body fell on top of his companions in misfortune, face down and arms outstretched in the shape of a cross. Thus Fr. Nicola *Martino* Capelli, a religious priest of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, breathed his last breath.

In the days that followed, the Germans prevented the recovery of the bodies; or rather, the recovery of the evidence of their murderous massacre, which was outside the bounds of any law of war or peace. But over the years, it became known that a woman, defying death, managed to reach the «botte» late at night and found Fr. Capelli still alive. At that moment, Fr. Martino had risen again, managing to say to him: «Tell my confreres to forgive me for the harm I have caused them.»

19. AND THEN, SILENCE...

All attempts to recover the bodies failed. The Masses for the repose of the souls of those killed, including our protagonist, could not be celebrated as they should have been, that is, *corpore in sepulto*. What happened to them? About twenty days later, the canal gates were opened, the locks of the mountain lakes were raised, and when so much water was released, the current swept away the corpses, which were already in a deplorable state, carrying them down the Reno River and scattering them.

Silence, anger, fear, and silent forgiveness reigned in Pioppe di Salvaro. This silence was torn apart and desecrated by the voices of SS soldiers who, boasting, shouted through the streets: “Due pastoren kaput.”

20. ... WHICH IS NOW AN ELOQUENT WORD

Fr. Martino Capelli will be beatified in Bologna on September 27, 2026. His life, his tireless preaching, reduced to silence by the monstrous unreasonableness of hatred, will now be eloquent in a new way.

Fr. Martino died violently at the hands of a Nazi SS firing squad, who carried out the death penalty without a normal trial before a civil or military court. His death was not an isolated incident and thus became part of a pattern of apostolic and ministerial action that also took on a life of its own. He was murdered together with Fr. Elia Comini, SDB, and they are linked to the names of those three diocesan priests from Bologna, whom we mentioned earlier, parish priests of the various towns in the Monte Sole area: Don Ubaldo Marchioni, Don Ferdinando Casagrande, and Don Giovanni Fornasini.

But was it a martyr's death? We know that after September 29, 1944, there were no longer any partisans in the Monte Sole area, but that everything was occupied and controlled by the SS. We also know that there were not many casualties among the ranks of the SS, nor among those of the partisans. Nor were there any acts of sabotage during those specific days. Therefore, we cannot fail to affirm that there were no strategic, military, or political reasons that justified that massacre of the population.

Moreover, returning to Fr. Martino's personal adventure, how many kilometers did he walk through those mountains? How many times could he have been the

victim of an Allied bombing raid? How many times could he have been arrested in a raid? How could he not have stepped on a mine that would have blown him up? How many times could he have had the misfortune of witnessing one of the many indiscriminate and cowardly killings carried out by those beings in black uniforms, as black as their souls, and thus been eliminated? None of these possibilities occurred... And all this leads us to believe that the motivation for his strange execution was his personal status as a troublesome and dedicated Catholic priest.

We can find the source of his dedication in his values, as well as in the ministerial duties of the priesthood. But we can also find it in the elements that define a Christian life which, based on love of God and neighbor, is expressed as mercy, that is, as love in action toward those in need. And so, Fr. Capelli is a Dehonian who:

- took in the displaced and welcomed them into the parish church of Pioppe di Salvaro
- fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty, caring for them and comforting them in their afflictions
- did not leave his fellow captives “naked,” abandoning them when they feared being left to their fate
- visited the sick, as when, on the morning of September 29, he brought Communion to a sick woman in Casellina
- visited prisoners, even though he himself was a prisoner, going from cell to cell where his fellow prisoners were held
- He buried the dead at great risk, to the point of becoming the reason for his capture.
- as a courageous and available preacher, we can say that he taught those who perhaps did not even know how to deal with a situation such as the one that was unfolding in those dark days of human history
- He admonished sinners when he rebuked the partisans or stood between the German firing squad on July 18 to confess some young people who had been arrested
- Moreover, he comforted them before their certain death and, although this is only a supposition, he had a word and many gestures of comfort at the bottom of the “botte” shortly before he died.

That is why we are faced with a small story of mercy. His own. Thus, Fr. Capelli demonstrated his fidelity to the vocation he had received. He achieved the

spiritual goals of his Dehonian consecration, which are evident in his willingness even to give his life, in his full acceptance of his own destiny, in his case adding the awareness of his more than probable death as a result of his search for God's will.

And this prevails over distortions and ideological rhetoric. Everything we have recalled about Capelli speaks of clearly ministerial and faith-based objectives and goals. And we can compare how two other young men in a similar situation face the supreme moment. The young man murdered on July 18 cries out: "I die for an idea. Avenge me!" The young Dehonian murdered on October 1 exclaims, "My Jesus, mercy!" And in unison with his companion in martyrdom, "We forgive."

21. A COMPLEX SCENARIO

Given what the SS did throughout Europe, did what happened to Fr. Capelli occur because of an explicit hatred of the Catholic faith? This is the great debate that historians, theologians, and bishops of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints have faced. But Pope Benedict XVI left us the key to understanding in a letter he wrote on April 24, 2006. In it, he speaks of the Nazis' "strategies" to hide "their explicit aversion to the Christian faith or to behavior connected with Christian virtues, but to simulate different reasons, for example, of a political or social nature" (AAS 98 [2006], 400).

Nazism did not express its hatred of the Christian faith and the Catholic Church publicly and openly as a matter of strategy, but today the anti-Christian and anti-Catholic component of National Socialist ideology, particularly rooted in the SS, is accepted in the scientific community. The same can be said of the theoretical approaches, at least, of Italian fascism and even early Spanish Falangism. This is an important element, given that the perpetrators of the martyrdom were the SS and that two of them boasted and said publicly: "Due Pastoren kaput."

And then there is the Italian context. The Nazis considered Catholicism, in the case of Italy, to be an "instrumentum regni," that is, one of those institutions, ideologies, or mechanisms that a political power uses to maintain and legitimize its authority over society. Knowing the moral values proposed by the Catholic Church, it is obvious that the effective contempt for all moral or positive law, human or divine, was present, but perfectly hidden, in Nazism, covering this truth under hundreds of bureaucratic procedures.

In this context, the murder of a priest was usually planned meticulously. Fr. Martino Capelli and Fr. Elia Comini were captured while on a mission of consolation with the sacraments; they were forced to perform heavy labor; they were chained; they were not reunited with another group of priests who had also been captured; they were added to the group of unfit prisoners, even though a few hours earlier they had proven that they were not; the religious were killed by firing squad and then with hand grenades; their death occurred along with that of 43 other people; the bodies were not allowed to be recovered. Everything was done intentionally with a view to a strategy of suppression: they wanted to explicitly suppress them by not letting them go to Bologna to report to the Archbishopric; they wanted a quick death; they wanted a painful and certain death.

All these actions were concealed for years for strategic and military reasons, which remain very convincing to this day for many deniers. However, current historical research allows us to recognize in murders such as that of Fr. Capelli the application of a strategy of elimination, typical, incidentally, of contemporary persecutions. Fr. Martino was guilty of only two things: being an exponent and minister of the Catholic Church and, in the exercise of his apostolate, showing love for people oppressed by fear and anguish in during those months of terror, acts consistent with the Christian faith. This was enough to inflict on him a death that found its reason in hatred of faith in Jesus Christ.

On that dark and muddy night, the light of a young Dehonian shines again, now for all eternity, who, abandoned in the hands of his God, was a good shepherd according to the Heart of Jesus. May his blessing continue to reach the many victims that the mud of history continues to cover under the days and hours. May his blessing heal the hearts filled with hatred, which hide and flee from the truth. May his intercession reach everyone and show the ways of love for one's neighbor that he left behind. Pray for us, Blessed Martino Capelli!

ANNEX

PHOTOGRAPHIC
RECORD
OF FATHER
MARTINO
CAPELLI, SCJ



Portrait of Father Martino Capelli, by Brother Michele Tapparo, SCl.

Manu huiusmodi propria

Albisola sup. 23-9-1930

Formula Professionis

Ad pedes Domini Nostri Jesu Christi prostratus,
Immacolata Virgine Maria duce et auspice,
sanctorum Patronorum totiusque Curiae
coelestis auxilio fretus; ad gloriam et hono-
rem amantissimi Cordis Jesu, ego Martino
Maria Capelli vota simplicia annualia
obedienciae, castitatis et paupertatis, secun-
dum Constitutiones Societatis Presbytero-
rum a sacro Cordi Jesu, Omnipotenti Deo
et in manus tuas, Pater, Reverendissimi
Patris provincialis, delegate, emitto.

Sicut miserimus, adprecor te, Omnipotens Deus
ut infinita bonitas tua haec mea vota sicut
holocaustum in odorem suavitatis acci-
piat mihi que gratiam, ut ea fideliter
custodiam, largiri dignetur. Amen
f. Martino Maria Capelli.

Bologna 27 - 3 - 1930

Consacrazione di tutto me stesso
alla Vergine Addolorata

Io, Martino Capelli dell'Addolorata, alla presenza tua, mio Dio, e alla presenza del Cuor. Sano di Gesù e di tutta la corte celeste, oggi rinnovo la mia donazione alla Vergine Addolorata.

A Lei consacro tutta la mia persona: la mia anima, la mia intelligenza, la mia memoria, la mia volontà; il mio cuore, i miei sensi, tutti i miei pensieri, affetti, parole, tutte le mie orazioni, preghiere, sacrifici, consolazioni; ogni palpito del mio cuore.

Gli consacro i miei studi, la mia vita futura, accettando tutto ciò che è mio vantaggio spirituale; il mio futuro apostolato missionario.

Le offero anche la mia morte e qualunque genere di morte.

Ti supplico, o Mamma mia, di
 farmi da Madre. quidarmi per la
 via del Cuor di Gesù, rendermi forte
 di anima e di corpo, un zelante e
 santo missionario. Un giorno
 poi ricevi mi nel Santo Paradiso.

O. Martino Capelli dell'Add.

Maria mi mhi propria.

Albino 8- XII - 1931

" O Madre, poiché' sono religioso per grazia vostra, importa ora moltissimo che col vostro aiuto io sia tale in realtà e sempre. Fate, o Madre, che io possa comprendere quanto grandi ed estesi siano gli obblighi e i doveri del religioso.

Voi mi avete dato quel Gesù, quel Gesù che si degnò discendere nel mio povero cuore, insequalemi a circondarlo d'amore, di venerazione e di adorazione. Fatemi bene comprendere che Gesù è la Vittima, il sacerdote, il Mediatore, il Salvatore. Fatemi conoscere il suo amore, il suo zelo per le anime, ed io, o Madre, per dimostrarvi la mia riconoscenza, oggi stesso, mi dono, mi voto e mi consacro a voi come vostro servo; affinché' formandomi voi stessa sul vostro esempio, mi facciate quale mi vuole Gesù: santo sacerdote, santo missionario e martire del suo Divin Cuore.

Tutto io ti consacro, o Maria, rinunzio
 a ogni diritto che io possa avere nelle mie opere,
 affinché le offriate alla maggior gloria di Dio,
 quale è nota a Voi, e così, quando vorrò pregare per
 qualcuno, mi rivolgerò alla vostra carità, perché
 gliene facciate grazia, non potendo disporre
 di nulla. D'ora innanzi, o Madre, è mio
 proposito di far tutto per Voi, con Voi e in Voi, af-
 finché tutto sia meglio fatto per Gesù, con Ge-
 sù, in Gesù. Mi unisco in tutto a Voi per an-
 dare, per vostro mezzo a Gesù.

fr. Martino Maria Capelli

8- XII- 1931 - festa dell'Immacolata Concezione

Festa di Guadalupe. 12. XII. 1931

O Vergine, regina dei martiri messicani,
 concedimi che un giorno sia anch'io martire
 di Cristo Re e di Te, Vergine Immacolata.
 O Madonna ti serivo ancora commosso
 dall'esperienza dell'altro giorno sul martire
 messico. Sono sicuro che per intercessione
 dei tuoi martiri me la concederai.

tuò figlio

fr. Martino M. Capelli

Bologna 8. XII - 1932 festa dell'Immacolata

Consacrazione di tutto me stesso
alla Beata vergine Immacolata

Io (L. Martino Maria Capelli) dono
 e consacro tutto me stesso: l'anima mia è il corpo
 mio, il mio intelletto, la mia volontà, la mia
 memoria, il mio povero cuore, i miei sensi: gli
 occhi, le orecchie, la bocca, le mani... tutto ciò
 e consacro irrevocabilmente alla mia santissi-
 ma Madre Immacolata Maria. In Lei pongo tutta
 la mia fiducia, speranza ed amore; in Lei mi
 voglio gettare con tutti i miei dubbi, affanni e do-
 lari; solo da Lei aspetto ogni bene: Lei ha ottenuto
 da Gesù la vocazione religiosa e sacerdotale (mi)
 sacerdote, e mi ha quindi mi stesso, la grazia di
 essere sacerdote missionario. A Te consacro i miei
 studi: non voglio studiare che per Gesù e per Te.
 Non voglio dubitare o Mamma mia perché sarebbe
 la più grande ingiuria; tu me lo perdoni: un
 giorno sarò sacerdote, missionario, martire.
 Ti consacro pure o edario, tutte le mie debo-
 lezze, i difetti, le pigrizie: tu sei mia Madre, vera
 Mamma mia, anzi mi sei due volte Mamma;
 ebbene malgrado sempre quando cado, di piedi
 mi sempre dimentico i miei torti e costumi
 sei mi sotto il tuo manto. O Mamma mia,
 tu mi conosci: mi conosci fin che non mi sappia
 io stesso; tu vedi tutto: il mio cuore e tutte
 le mie miserie. Il mio cuore non deve battere che per
 Te, non devo agire che per Te con Te fin che
 per Te devo andare, a Gesù per il quale solo
 devo vivere, agire, soffrire, morire
 un giorno o Mamma, ci rivedremo sul alto
 di gloria del mio martirio.

Sì! Sarò sempre tuo, tutto tuo.
 tuo figlio
 Martino Maria Capelli

8 - Dicembre - 1932

Conservation of his whole being to the Immaculate Virgin Mary. Bologna, December 8, 1932.

Studentato delle Missioni Pentecoste - 28-5-1939

dei SACERDOTI DEL S. CUORE

Via Derna 45 - BOLOGNA

Io, Martino Capelli, dopo aver considerato ogni cosa davanti al Signore e con il permesso del mio Confessore e Direttore, faccio domanda alla P. V. P. ma di essere mandato subito nella nostra Missione dell' Sumau.

In fede mi firmo

M. Martino Capelli

Bologna - Pentecoste 28-5-'39

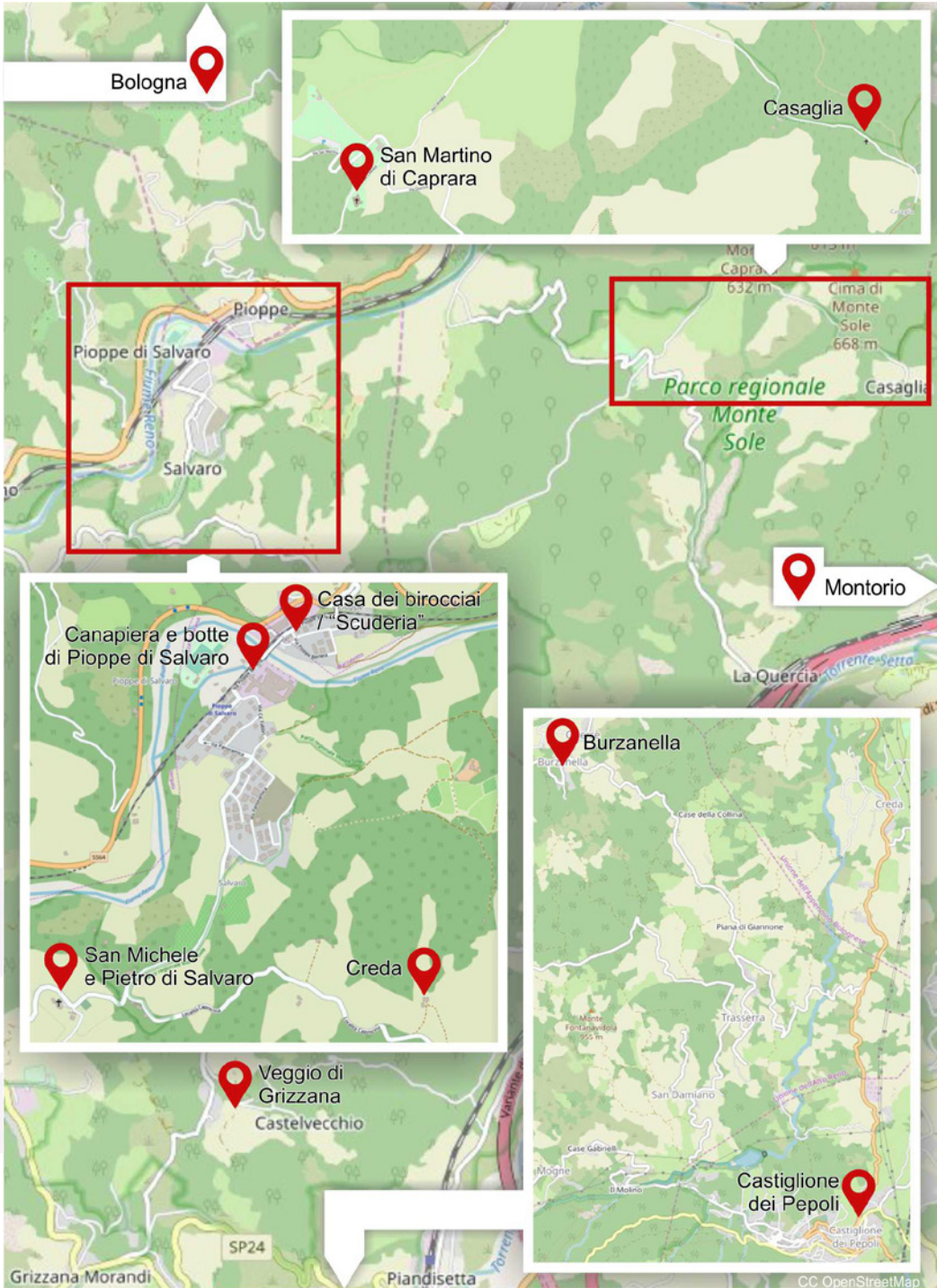
Al Rev. mo P. Provinciale
P. Giovanni Zagaria
Studentato per le Missioni
Bologna



Statue of Our Lady of Sorrows venerated at the Shrine of Zucarello, in Nembro.



Original photograph of Father Martino Capelli at the SCJ Scholasticate in Bologna.



Map of the most significant places where Fr. Martino Capelli spent the last months of his life (July 6 – October 1, 1944).

BRIGATA „STELLA ROSSA“
comandante: Mario Musolesi (lupo)

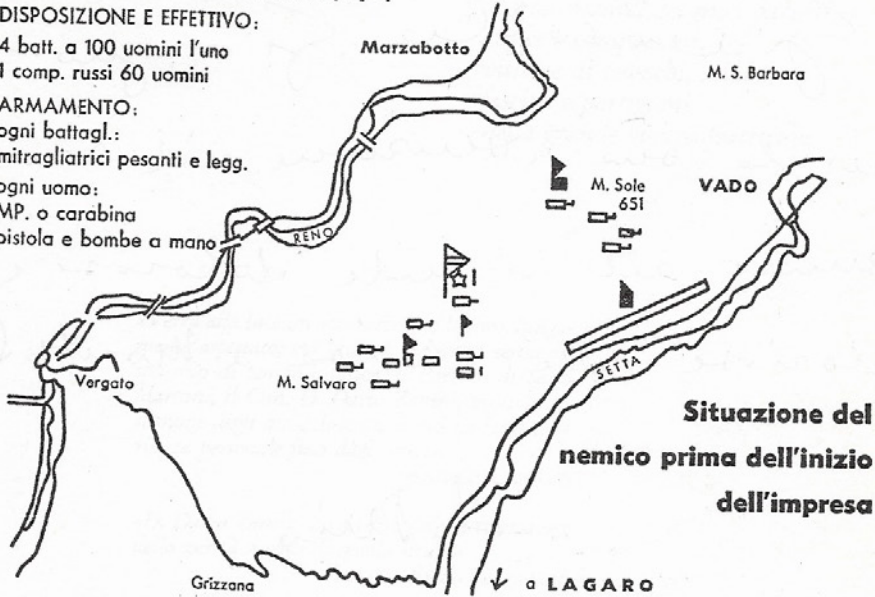
DISPOSIZIONE E EFFETTIVO:

4 batt. a 100 uomini l'uno
 1 comp. russi 60 uomini

ARMAMENTO:

ogni battagl.:
 mitragliatrici pesanti e legg.

ogni uomo:
 MP. o carabina
 pistola e bombe a mano



Impiego fanteria:

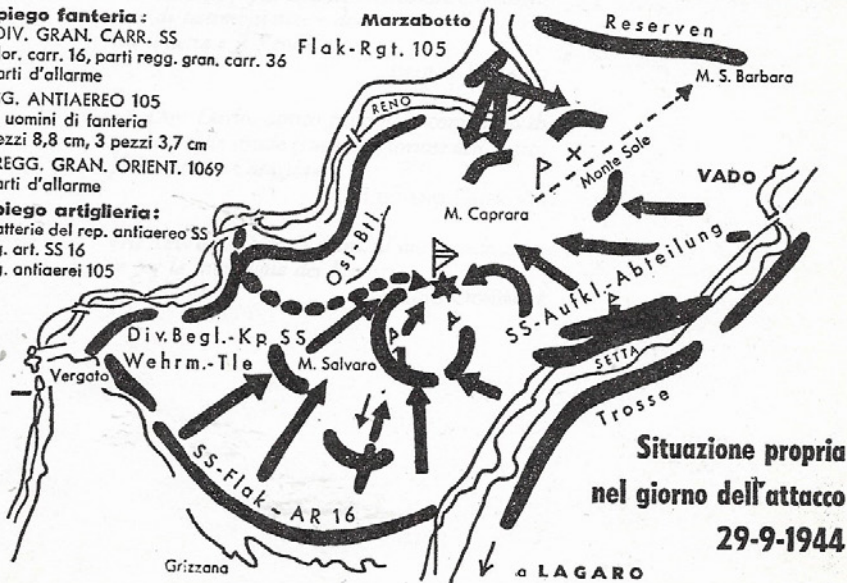
16 DIV. GRAN. CARR. SS
 esplor. carr. 16, parti regg. gran. carr. 36
 reparti d'allarme

REGG. ANTIAEREO 105
 130 uomini di fanteria
 4 pezzi 8,8 cm, 3 pezzi 3,7 cm

IV REGG. GRAN. ORIENT. 1069
 reparti d'allarme

Impiego artiglieria:

3 batterie del rep. antiaereo SS
 regg. art. SS 16
 regg. antiaerei 105



Map of the Nazi soldiers attack on September 29, 1944, taken from the book "Marzabotto and Surroundings" by Don Dario Zanini.



Church and rectory of *San Michele di Salvaro* where Father Martino lived the last months of his life.



Panoramic view from the cart drivers' house. In red, the hemp factory; in blue, *San Miguel de Salvaro*; in yellow, the road to La Creda.



Cart drivers' house. Pioppe di Salvaro.
Father Martino Capelli was imprisoned here.



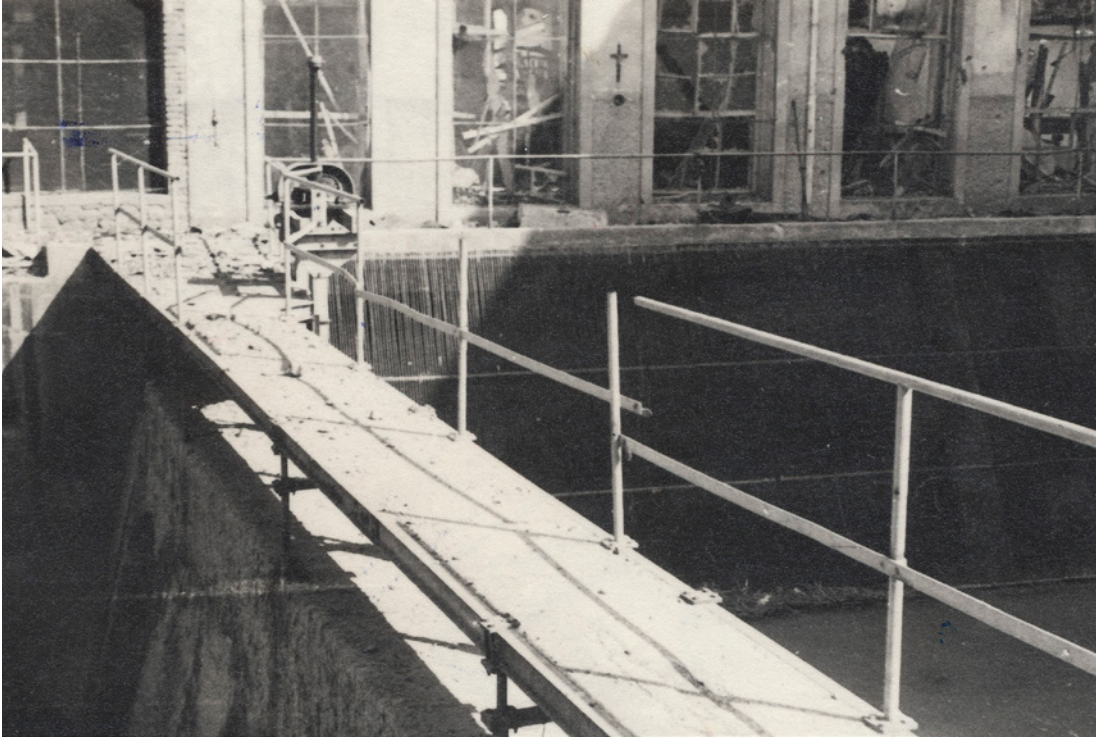
House at La Creda.



La Creda, the porch-shed of the massacre.



The woods surrounding La Creda, descending towards Salvaro.



Old black and white photograph of the footbridge of the “small dam” at Pioppe di Salvaro, where Father Martino Capelli and Don Elia Comini were martyred, along with so many other victims.



Current photograph of the small dam at Pioppe di Salvaro.



The factory reservoir, where Father Martino Capelli was machine-gunned.



Inscription of Father Martino Capelli, placed by his family at the Salvaro cemetery.



Monument in memory of Father Martino Capelli and Don Elia Comini. Pioppe di Salvaro, next to the place of martyrdom.



Eucharistic celebration at the former hemp factory of Pioppe di Salvaro on October 12, 2019, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the martyrdom of Father Martino and Don Elia.



Father Martino Capelli's prayer cards in several languages.



Various monuments on Monte Sole. The poem "The Holm Oaks of Monte Sole" by the Bolognese priest, Luciano Gherardi, stands out.



View of the Monte Sole area.



Photo – composition of the painting by Father Martino Capelli.

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