

Biography

Father Nicola Martino Capelli, SCJ (1912 – 1944)

“Missed missionary, Fulfilled martyr”

Introduction

“Oh Virgin, Queen of the Mexican martyrs, grant me that, one day, I too will be a martyr of Christ the King and of You, Immaculate Virgin. Oh Mother... I am sure that through the intercession of your martyrs, You will grant it to me.

Your son, Fra. Martino Capelli.”

(Albino, 12-12-1931).

These words, taken from his Spiritual Writings, are known as the ‘Martyrdom Request’ that Father Martino Capelli wrote on the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, after being astonished by a lecture on the Mexican martyrdom. They sum up his life and spirituality: a life lived and given for others, following in the footsteps of Jesus himself. In these words, we perceive his martyrdom vocation, in the deepest sense of the term and to the extreme consequences: sacrificing himself to the end for the love of his brothers and sisters.

Childhood

Father Martino Capelli was born in Nembro (Italy) on September 20, 1912 to Martino (1862-1925) and Maria Teresa Bonomi (1873-1931). This was his father’s second marriage which took place in 1902. Together, they had six children, the last of whom was the future Servant of God. Martino was baptized with the name of Nicola Giuseppe (Nicholas Joseph). He attended elementary school in Nembro (1918-1922) where he remained until his required basic education was completed. His confirmation coincided with the anniversary of the crowning of the Sorrowful Madonna at the Shrine of Zuccarello on August 8, 1920.

At the age of twelve, Martino entered the nearby Apostolic School of the Sacred Heart in Albino, where the Dehonians had founded a religious minor seminary in 1907. There, Martino received his high school education.

Religious and priestly vocation

From Albino, he went to Superior school at the Dehonian novitiate of the Marian Shrine of Peace in Albisola. He made his first profession on September 23, 1930, and chose his religious name after his deceased father, Martino Maria. His religious and scholastic formation continued in Bologna, where he took three years of philosophy.

After graduation, Martino was transferred to Albino. During that year, he had a few special spiritual moments, including a conference given by Father Luigi Ziliani, who had fled Mexico due to the persecutions in that country. It was under those circumstances that the young religious prayed, “To the Virgin of the Mexican

martyrs, grant that, one day, I too will be a martyr of Christ the King and of You, Immaculate Virgin... I am sure that... You will grant it to me.” (December 12, 1931). A few days later, his mother passed away and he chose Our Lady of Sorrows as his new mother. He prayed: “Now, Oh Mary, be my earthly mother too”.

Returning to Bologna, he continued his philosophical studies. On September 23, 1933 he made his perpetual vows, consecrating himself to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. After a year spent in Trento as “prefect” (1934-35), he began his theological studies in Bologna at Benedict XV regional seminary. He remained for the next three years at the Scholasticate where he received minor orders and, in 1938, the priesthood. He celebrated his first solemn Mass in Nembro, in the Shrine of the Madonna of Zuccarello.

Formation in Rome

During his formation years, Martino expressed his desire to become a missionary and a martyr. At the end of the fourth year of theology, he asked his superiors to be sent to China. However, due to the upcoming war, he was sent to Rome instead, where he attended the Biblical Institute for two years. In his third year, he enrolled at the Athenaeum of *Propaganda Fide*, obtaining a licentiate in theology, graduating *cum laude*.

Horrors of war

Father Martino wanted to finish his studies and complete his thesis, but because of the lack of professors at the school, his superiors decided to transfer him temporarily to Castiglione dei Pepoli. Meanwhile, the war in Italy was getting closer and more intense. In the summer of 1944, the Germans requisitioned the school with the intention of turning it into a hospital. Thus, he was displaced for a second time to the town of Burzanella. After three weeks of preaching, Fr. Martino arrived in the new community. However, on July 18, the Germans surrounded the village, burned its houses and captured five people. Fr. Martino himself witnessed the execution of two partisans in the church square.

Pioppe di Salvaro

A few days later, Fr. Martino went to Salvaro to help Msgr. Fidenzo Mellini, who had invited him for the holidays. There he found a good friend who supported him as a brother, the Salesian Fr. Elia Comini. They shared a strong bond of priestly brotherhood, taking care not only of ordinary pastoral work but also helping the most vulnerable people of that place. One can say that, in the summer of 1944, Fr. Martino Capelli was a true missionary, preaching the word of God.

Fr. Martino committed himself to taking personal care of God’s suffering people with ardent charity, lively hope, and a firm understanding of the priestly ministry and its demands. Although he spent the last months of his life far from the Dehonian community, in Salvaro he was able to make himself available to the pastoral needs of the people with self-sacrifice, helping, supporting, guiding, encouraging and

consoling them. Together, Fr. Martino and Fr. Elia lived the triduum of their martyrdom.

The Martyrdom Triduum

On Friday, September 29, rumors spread that the German SS units were combing the area. The rectory and church of Salvaro were immediately filled with terrified people. The first thought of the two priests was to safely shelter men, who were usually more exposed to reprisals. After they had celebrated Mass, a breathless man came warning them that entire families had been killed in Creda. Resisting the women's attempts to dissuade them, Fr. Martino and Fr. Elia decided to go to those people to bring them help and religious comfort. However, as soon as they arrived, the two priests were arrested by the German SS and forced to carry ammunition all day long. Around sunset, they were taken to the stables of the hemp farm (a hemp fiber processing plant) in front of the church of Pioppe di Salvaro.

On Saturday, September 30 around noon, the German SS and a Republican official, accompanied by a traitor partisan, assembled a summary interrogation to obtain information from the detained individuals and to sort out men suitable for work in Germany. Fr. Martino was accused of having been seen in San Martino, at the home of Fr. Ubaldo Marchioni, and this was enough to consider him a partisan. The same happened to Fr. Elia Comini. The two priests, locked up in a small security room, understood what fate would now be theirs. Someone could see them from the window: Fr. Elia was gazing into heaven while Fr. Martino bowed in prayer; but no one will ever know how they lived that night of Gethsemane.

After two days of cruel imprisonment, on Sunday, October 1, Dina Pescio a teacher from Pioppe di Salvaro, was able to communicate with the two priests. Fr. Elia tried to give her comfort and then blessed her. Fr. Martino was speechless, but made a sign of blessing and continued to pray. That afternoon, the prisoners were taken to the so-called "barrel", which regulated the water for the electricity for the hemp mill. At the time, it was full of slime. Machine guns were in place; a few meters away, forty-four victims were immolated. Fr. Martino, once shot and fallen into the barrel, stood up, spoke a few words, and made the sign of the cross. Tracing his last blessing, he fell with his arms outstretched. He was 32 years old. No one could approach to bring help or to bury the dead. They remained there until the waters were released into the canal and all bodies were swept away by the Reno River. Recalling December 8, 1932, when Martino was twenty years old, he had written this invocation to Our Lady: "One day, oh Mother, we will meet again on the deathbed of my martyrdom. Yes, I will always be yours, all yours!". Fr. Martino's deathbed was the muddy floor of the Pioppe "barrel". At that sad place, Our Lady of Sorrows waited for him, and finally took him with her into the light and peace of the Risen Lord.

Witness to love and reconciliation

At the Salvaro's cemetery, there are two gravestones dedicated to Fr. Elia and to Fr. Martino. The latter summarises the testimony of the shepherds of Monte Sole:

"No one has greater love than he who gives his own life.

Father NICOLA MARTINO CAPELLI.

He revealed his life in the greatness of his death.

Simply a martyr”.

Through his martyrdom, which took place on October 1, 1944, he also manifested his ability to inspire others to do good, even if it meant risking himself. As he was captured, humiliated, imprisoned and killed, Fr. Martino Capelli maintained an attitude of composed meekness, which above all demonstrated the high quality of his prayer. He kept alive the hope of Heaven. While dying, his last gesture was to bless those who, along with him, had been wounded and killed by the German SS. That was the final act of a life entirely spent, firstly in formation for the priesthood, and then in pastoral ministry.

Fr. Martino is clearly relevant today as an example of a Dehonian religious who embodied his vocation in the deepest sense of the word and to extreme consequences: sacrificing himself for the love of his brothers until the end, even when his life was threatened and then taken away on account of his embodied priesthood.

He is a role model. An example of Dehonian life, he poured out his blood for love of the Risen Lord as his witness. He offered his whole life, giving himself as a good shepherd of the Heart of Jesus. Finally, Fr. Martino teaches people today a lesson of forgiveness, so that we can be “prophets of love” and “servants of reconciliation”.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, good Shepherd,
we thank you for calling
Father Martino Capelli
to live in your Church
as a religious priest,
consecrated to your divine Heart.

We ask you through his prayer
to be confirmed in faith,
strengthened in hope,
and rooted in charity,
so that our life too
can be a service
of love to you
and to our brothers and sisters
for the joy and glory of the Father.

Heart of Jesus, in your infinite love,
grant us the grace ...
that we confidently ask of you,

through the intercession of Father Martino,
devoted son of Mary of Sorrows,
and ardent apostle of reconciliation
and peace. Amen