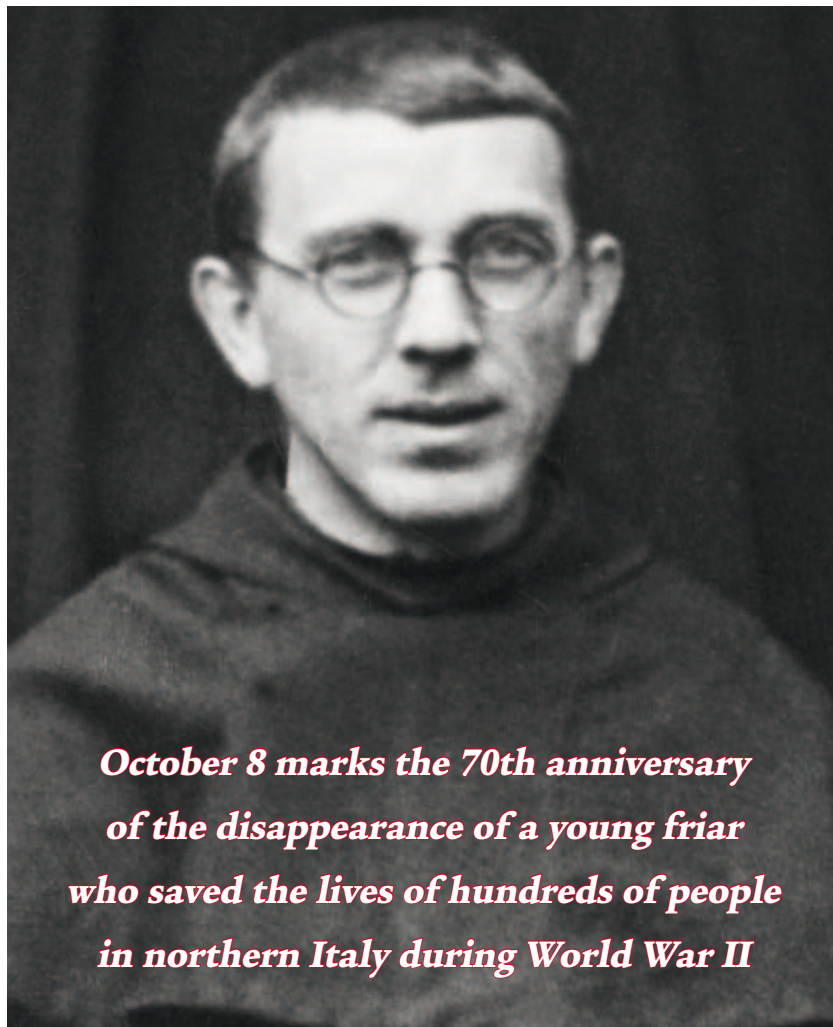


Friar Placido's Story



**October 8 marks the 70th anniversary
of the disappearance of a young friar
who saved the lives of hundreds of people
in northern Italy during World War II**

Placido Cortese, OFM Conv., was General Director of the *Messenger of Saint Anthony* from 1937 to his death in a Gestapo prison in Trieste in 1944

General Director of the Basilica's magazine, the *Messenger of Saint Anthony*. Meanwhile, the clouds of war began to gather and normal life was increasingly restricted by all kinds of new Fascist regulations. Despite the difficulties, Fr. Placido managed to maintain an independent voice and bring new life to the prestigious publication, with subscriptions increasing from 300,000 to almost 800,000, in Italy and overseas, by the spring of 1943.

But alongside his journalistic skills and passion for photography, Fr. Placido was secretly becoming involved in a much more dangerous occupation, which would bring him to the attention of the German occupying forces and would eventually lead to his death at just 37 years old.

Concentration camp

Close to the ancient city walls of Padua, an artillery barracks had been transformed into a concentration camp where, in the wake of Italy's annexation of parts of Yugoslavia, several thousand prisoners of war were being held in the most appalling, insanitary conditions. While there were no gas chambers or deliberate policies of extermination, the death toll from hunger and disease was high amongst the Slovenian and Croatian men who had been deported and the Allied soldiers who had suddenly found themselves behind enemy lines. Fr. Placido was brought directly into contact with the plight of these prisoners by three young Slovenian girls, who came into the Basilica one morning asking if he could help smuggle in supplies of food, money and

By Philippa Hitchen

NICOLÒ CORTESE, as he was originally called, was born in 1907 on the picturesque island of Cres, just off the Istrian peninsula in modern-day Croatia. At that time the region belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but in 1918 it became part of Italy, and two years later the young Nicolò, the eldest of four siblings, was sent to the Conventual Franciscan seminary in Camposampiero, not far from Padua. He took his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in October 1924 in the Basilica of St. Anthony in Padua, before going

to Venice and Rome to complete his theological training. He was a bright student with earnest blue eyes behind his round rimmed glasses and a slight limp in one leg, but he is best remembered by his peers for his warmth, his kindness and his gentle manner.

Clouds of war

In July 1930 Placido was ordained to the priesthood, and sent to work first in Padua and then in Milan, where he spent three happy years as an enthusiastic young parish priest. Returning to Padua in 1937, he received an important appointment, that of

Photo Archivio MSA



Fr. Cortese with Majda Mazovec, the Slovenian student who collaborated with him in helping war prisoners in Padua

warm clothes to save the lives of their friends and relatives held in the 'Chiesanuova' camp. Following a day of intense prayer and reflection, Fr. Placido agreed to help in this humanitarian venture, since he had been granted permission to visit the prisoners and was already a familiar figure, cycling to and from the city, bringing spiritual comfort to those trying to survive in the squalid surroundings of the camp.

While provisions were being collected and smuggled into Padua by the young Slovenian students, locals who were part of the city's resistance movement also began collecting money and other supplies for the prisoners, whose numbers would increase to 10,500 by the end of the war. As provisions multiplied, so did the dangers for Fr. Placido, despite the support of the Pontifical Delegate for the Basilica of St. Anthony, Monsignor Francesco Borgoncini Duca.

The Martini sisters

Word of Fr. Placido's charitable activities spread around the city, and the courageous friar soon came to the attention of another group of young women. The daughters of the well-to-do Martini family were organising escape routes for Allied prisoners, many of them British Eighth Army soldiers who had been fighting in the

North Africa campaign in Egypt and Libya. Trying to minimise the risks for the other friars in the Basilica, Fr. Placido met secretly in the confessional with one of the Martini sisters and received details of documents which were needed to help these former prisoners, together with Jews and others at risk of arrest, travel north to Milan, on to Lake Como and across the Alps into the safety of neutral Switzerland. Using the newspaper's facilities and photographs copied from ex-voto offerings hung at the Tomb of St. Anthony, Fr. Placido carefully produced the identity cards, in both Italian and German, which would help almost three hundred people to escape.

In March 1944 two of the Martini sisters, Teresa and Carla Liliana, were betrayed by a former prisoner and arrested, along with two other girlfriends who had been part of this underground solidarity network. They were jailed in Venice and moved to different death camps in Nazi Germany just before the end of the war. Unlike Fr. Placido, however, they would escape with their lives and it was Carla Liliana – together with another sister, Lidia – who decided, many decades later, to tell the story of the heroic Franciscan friar whose fate had remained unknown.

The trap

As more people were arrested, Fr. Placido took increasing precautions to protect himself and those most closely involved in his clandestine activities. He rarely left the friary, which, as part of the Pontifical Basilica, enjoyed special extra-territorial status. But the Germans knew that if they could get their hands on the fearless

Fr. Cortese with a copy of the *Messenger* and the symbols of his martyrdom on the floor; 2007 painting by Silvano Vecchiato

young friar, they would have a good chance of unmasking the whole chain of undercover contacts in and around the city. Therefore an SS agent was sent to the Basilica to make enquiries and shortly afterwards two other armed officials forced their way in to the friary to arrest the young priest who was praying in the chapel at the time. Fr. Andrea Eccher, provincial of the Conventual Franciscans during the war years, immediately protested to the local German military authorities, insisting that if Fr. Placido was not released, the Vatican would be informed of their intrusion, provoking an international diplomatic scandal. After a few hours of interrogation, Fr. Placido was allowed to return to the Basilica – yet he surely must have sensed that the noose was beginning to tighten around his neck.

A few days later, Sunday October 8, two men called at the friary gate, telling the gatekeeper they needed to speak urgently with Fr. Placido Cortese. One of them identified him-



Cristina Sartori is a journalist who has authored an Italian language biography on Fr. Placido Cortese

self as Mirko, though no one has ever discovered what his real name was. Over the previous months he had infiltrated the underground aid network, posing as a friend who was keen to help those in need. He had clearly gained the unsuspecting friar's trust, because when Fr. Placido was informed of his visitors, he immediately walked down the friary stairs and outside to greet Mirko and his companion, who got into their car with him and drove off at great speed. It was the last time any of his fellow friars would see him alive.

Gestapo headquarters

It is hard to know exactly what happened to Fr. Placido from that moment on, despite the best efforts of those who tried to piece together the details of his mysterious disappearance. All efforts by the Rector of the Basilica to find out where he had been taken were in vain, and it was widely suspected that he had wound up in a German death camp and been tortured into revealing names and details of others in the Italian resistance movement.

Yet there was no sudden round up of those who had shared his clandestine activities. Several people who were imprisoned in the feared Gestapo headquarters in Trieste have recently testified that they saw or heard of him being interrogated there. Ivo Gregorc, a former driver for the Slovenian Red Cross, recalls that while he was being questioned there, he caught sight of Fr. Placido, who had been beaten and burnt so badly he was barely recognisable and hardly able to speak. Other ex-prisoners testified that their guards were both angry and amazed at the inner strength of a young Franciscan friar who refused to give anything away, despite the extreme torture methods he endured. And another English prison-



Photo Nicola Bianchi

er, Sergeant Ernest Charles Roland Barker, reported that he too had seen the dying priest, his hands and legs crushed and broken, before he was shot and his body burnt in the nearby San Sabba concentration camp. It is believed that Fr. Placido died around 15 November, 1944.

Cristina Sartori

One person who has worked hard to piece together the events surrounding Fr. Placido's short life is Italian journalist Cristina Sartori, who served for a decade as press officer for the Basilica of St. Anthony. She says she was "very struck" by his story as she visited familiar sites in the city and worked in the same offices of the publication that Fr. Placido had helped to build up. "I was almost the same age as he was when he died," she reflects, "and as well as a profound admiration for him, I developed something like a debt of gratitude for his generosity... which was so great it cost him his life."

Cristina started collecting eye-witness accounts from those who had been in direct contact with him – very elderly men and women who were willing to share painful memories of those terrible wartime events. She also began talking to local school children about the legacy of Fr. Placido and those who had shared his conviction that putting faith into action meant



Photo Archivio MSA

From right: Carla Liliana Martini, Lidia Martini and Delfina Borgato at a 2008 commemoration of Fr. Cortese

trying to save innocent lives. For a couple of years she was accompanied each January, as Italy marks its Holocaust Remembrance Day, by one of the surviving Martini sisters, Lidia, who spoke firsthand about her family's experiences. But Lidia died in 2012, and very soon there will be no one left with direct links to the gentle friar with the limping gait and loving heart.

That's why Cristina is even more convinced of the need to share Fr. Placido's story with the younger generations who live and study close by the places where he lived and worked. Though a diocesan process for beatification in Trieste has already declared him a martyr for the faith, Cristina hopes that Pope Francis may learn about his life spent in the service of others, and speed up the process to proclaim him a saint for the universal Church. "Our history," she insists to school children, "is not something detached and distant from us, but rather we continue to walk in the footsteps of those who've gone before us. History tends to repeat itself, so we have to look back at what happened in order to understand better what lies ahead of us and avoid making the same mistakes." ♦