



A Light in the Darkness

This month marks the 80th anniversary of the martyrdom of Father Placido Cortese, the former director of this magazine who sacrificed his life during WWII

By Mike Dean

THIS YEAR marks the eightieth anniversary of the death of Venerable Father Placido Cortese, a man whose heroic actions during World War II left a lasting impact through his compassion, sacrifice, and resistance. On October 8, 1944, Father Placido was betrayed and handed over to the Nazi Gestapo. His unwavering dedication to saving lives, despite the constant threat to his own, made him a symbol of selfless courage. As the anniversary of his death passes, commemorations in his honour remind us of his example and the sacrifices he made.

Born Nicolò Matteo Cortese on March 7, 1907, on the island of Cres – now part of Croatia – he felt a calling to religious life from a young age. He entered the Franciscan Minor Conventual College in Camposampiero in 1920 at the age of 13, where he began his journey toward becoming a Franciscan friar. Upon entering the novitiate, he took the name Placido, committing himself to the Franciscan way of life. A few days before professing his first vows at the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua in October 1924, he shared his thoughts in a letter to his family: “I will profess my vows at the tomb of Saint Anthony... I will vow obedi-

ence, poverty, and chastity, and you can believe I am content.”

In July 1930 he was ordained a priest in Rome, marking the culmination of his early religious formation and his readiness to begin his spiritual mission.

Director of the Messenger

After his ordination, Father Placido Cortese took on several important roles within the Franciscan community. His first assignment was at the Basilica of Saint Anthony where he served the local community and began his pastoral work.

In 1937 Father Placido was appointed director of the *Messenger of Saint Anthony*, a role he held until 1943. During his tenure, the magazine’s readership grew significantly. Through his writings and work with the publication, he promoted devotion to Saint Anthony, but the arrival of World War II drastically changed the course of his life.

As the war intensified and Nazi forces took control of Italy, Father Placido felt compelled to act. With the German occupation spreading and persecution increasing, he became involved in a secret network that helped Jews, Allied soldiers, and

political refugees escape the clutches of the Nazis. Operating quietly from his confessional in the Basilica of Saint Anthony, he and his collaborators used coded messages to coordinate the production of fake documents and organise escape routes. Thanks to this clandestine effort, countless individuals were saved from certain death.

Horrific torture

Despite the escalating risks, Father Placido would not abandon his mission even as fellow friars urged him to stop for his own safety. The network he ran was remarkably effective for a time, but the Gestapo eventually became aware of his efforts. Even knowing he was under surveillance, he pressed on, committed to helping those who were persecuted. His capture was inevitable.

On October 8, 1944, a trap was set. Under the guise of needing emergency assistance for refugees, a man he trusted lured him out of the Basilica's grounds. Just beyond the protective boundary of papal territory, he was handed over to waiting SS agents. A friar who witnessed the betrayal later recalled seeing the deep sadness on Father Placido's face as he was forced into a black car, fully aware that this was the end not only of his rescue work, but also of his life.

Taken to Gestapo headquarters in Trieste, Father Placido endured horrific torture at the hands of his captors. Despite their brutal methods, he never revealed the

names of his collaborators. Fellow prisoners reported that he remained prayerful and composed, drawing strength from his faith even under the worst possible conditions. Unable to extract any useful information, the Gestapo ultimately killed him in November 1944. His body was cremated at the Risiera di San Sabba, a concentration camp in Trieste, where the remains of many victims of the regime were disposed of in the same manner.

Memorial events

In early October of this year, a three-day pilgrimage took place to mark the 80th anniversary of Father Placido's death. The journey began in Trieste, where he was imprisoned and killed, and continued to his birthplace in Cres, Father Placido's birthplace, where the group visited the Church of Saint Francis, Father Placido's childhood home, the monument in his honour, and the parish church where he was baptised. Led by Franciscan communities from Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia, the pilgrimage included prayers, Masses, and reflections on the significance of Father Placido's life.

On November 23, a special exhibition will be unveiled in honour of Father Placido's work during

World War II. The exhibition will focus on the Chiesanuova concentration camp, where Father Placido extended his charity to Slovenian and Croatian deportees. The exhibit, based on research by Professor Antonio Spinelli, will open with a public event, and will initially be displayed in the Basilica's Magnolia cloister before being made available to schools and public institutions in Padua. On the following day a special memorial Mass, coinciding with the anniversary of Father Placido's death, will be presided over by the Secretary General of the Slovenian Episcopal Conference.

Poignant tribute

In 2021, a particularly poignant tribute to Father Placido was placed in front of the Basilica of Saint Anthony – a *Stolperstein*, or “stumbling stone.” One of 28 in Padua and thousands across Europe, these small brass plaques, embedded in the pavement, commemorate victims of Nazi persecution. Father Placido's *Stolperstein* marks the spot where he was taken by the Gestapo – a daily reminder of the cost of resistance and the moral courage required to stand against oppression.

The commemorative events this year, and the reflections they inspire, offer not only a way to honour Father Placido's memory, but are also a reminder of the ongoing fight against hatred, persecution, and the erasure of history. As we mark his martyrdom, we remember a man who showed that individual acts of compassion can make an enormous difference, even in the darkest times. His life reminds us that courage and charity have the power to change the world.

MSA

Ruben Ferreira's painting of Father Cortese during his interrogation, in which he steadfastly refused to reveal the names of his collaborators



Courtesy of Ruben Ferreira