

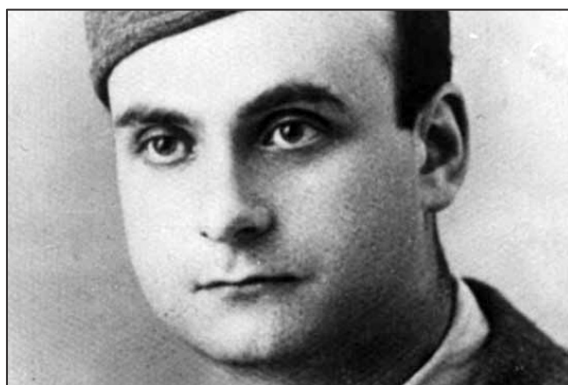


Giuseppe Morosini, C.M. Executed 1944

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Abstract:

Giuseppe Morosini, a Vincentian priest, was executed by the Nazis on April 3, 1944, for his involvement in the Italian Resistance during World War II. Born in 1913, he pursued his religious vocation with a deep passion for music and youth ministry. As a military chaplain, Morosini extended his patriotic zeal to assist partisans and Jews, forging documents, hiding weapons, and relaying critical information to the Allies. His covert activities led to his arrest and execution, but his legacy lives on as a courageous patriot and a compassionate “angel” who risked his life for others. Despite the brutal conditions and torture, Morosini's faith and dedication remained unshaken, reflecting his profound spirituality and commitment to justice.

Giuseppe Morosini, prêtre vincentien, a été exécuté par les nazis le 3 avril 1944 pour son engagement dans la Résistance italienne pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Né en 1913, il a poursuivi sa vocation religieuse avec une profonde passion pour la musique et la pastorale des jeunes. En tant qu'aumônier militaire, Morosini a étendu son zèle patriotique pour aider les partisans et les Juifs, en falsifiant des documents, en cachant des armes et en transmettant des informations cruciales aux Alliés. Ses activités secrètes ont conduit à son arrestation et à son exécution, mais son héritage demeure celui d'un patriote courageux et d'un "ange" compatissant qui a risqué sa vie pour les autres. Malgré les conditions brutales et la torture, la foi et le dévouement de Morosini sont restés inébranlables, reflétant sa profonde spiritualité et son engagement en faveur de la justice.

Giuseppe Morosini, sacerdote vicenciano, fue ejecutado por los nazis el 3 de abril de 1944 por su participación en la Resistencia italiana durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Nacido en 1913, siguió su vocación religiosa con una profunda pasión por la música y la pastoral juvenil. Como capellán militar, Morosini extendió su celo patriótico para ayudar a partisanos y judíos,



falsificando documentos, escondiendo armas y transmitiendo información crítica a los Aliados. Sus actividades encubiertas condujeron a su detención y ejecución, pero su legado perdura como patriota valiente y "ángel" compasivo que arriesgó su vida por los demás. A pesar de las brutales condiciones y la tortura, la fe y la dedicación de Morosini permanecieron inquebrantables, reflejo de su profunda espiritualidad y su compromiso con la justicia.

Keywords: Giuseppe Morosini, Patriotism, Vincentian Priest, Martyrdom.

Most members of the Vincentian Family have never heard of Giuseppe Morosini. Eighty years ago, on April 3, 1944, a firing squad, under the command of the Nazis, executed him at Forte Bravetta, just a mile and a half from the present-day General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission.

If the usual norms for beatification and canonization are followed, he will surely never be declared a saint. Rather, when history recalls him years from now, I suspect that it will be more for his patriotism than for his holiness. But at the time of his death, many Jews, partisans, and invading Allies regarded him as an "angel" who hid them, rescued them from death, forged papers for them, obtained secret Nazi military plans, and worked for the liberation of Italy.

Giuseppe was born on March 19, 1913, in Ferentino, near Frosinone, a little more than an hour south of Rome by car. His parents were Giuseppe Morosini and Maria De Stefanis.

He was a lively child with an avid interest in music. When he was eight years of age, his brother Salvatore, who was twenty years older, introduced him as an "aspiring member" to the Fortes in Fide group of the Italian Catholic Youth Society, which had recently been founded in Ferentino. He went to school as a day student at the episcopal seminary in his hometown. While there, he started to think about becoming a priest. Eventually, he entered the novitiate (called the internal seminary) of the Congregation of the Mission. From 1930 to 1932, he studied at the Collegio Leoniano on Via Pompeo Magno in Rome. Then he continued his studies at the Collegio Alberoni in Piacenza. While there, he deepened his passion for music, studying at the Giuseppe Nicolini music school (later a conservatory) and composing his first pieces, including some concerts. He returned to Rome to complete his theological studies and was ordained a priest in the Basilica of St. John Lateran on March 27, 1937. The next day he celebrated his first mass in Ferentino.

Initially, Giuseppe engaged in youth ministry. He had an outgoing, cheerful way that made him good at that. He was named an assistant chaplain at the Marcantonio Colonna Naval Technical Institute, where he befriended Marcello Bucchi, with whom he would later be linked in the Resistance. Meanwhile, his focus on music developed further. He composed pieces for the 1937 Eucharistic Congress in Ceccano, as well as for the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Quadraro Parish in Rome in 1939.

At the end of 1939, he returned to Piacenza as assistant for youth work at St. Vincent's College. In November 1940, he organized a concert to help support his Congregation's missions in Albania. Like many other priests at that time of war, he volunteered to become a military chaplain so that he could remain in direct contact with young men who were being sent to the front. In early 1942, he was assigned to work in what was then Yugoslavia, where he served with the Bergamo Division of the 4th Carnaro Artillery Regiment. He was stationed first in the Rijeka area and then near Split during the Axis Powers' invasion of Yugoslavia and the subsequent occupation.

In the fall of 1942, his superiors recalled him to Italy and sent him to do pastoral work in the mountain regions of the Abruzzi, with his base in Avezzano. Moving between the various towns during the wartime winter, he faced considerable difficulties in carrying out this work. Back in Rome, following the bombing of the capital on July 19, 1943, he was assigned to run a shelter for orphaned or homeless children set up at the Ermenegildo Pistelli elementary school in the Della Vittoria neighborhood.

Following the armistice of Sept. 8, 1943, and the German occupation of Rome, he assisted the wounded who fought at the Porta San Paolo. He used the facilities of the Collegio Leoniano, where he himself lived, to take in survivors and to hide Italian servicemen. There too, he hid weapons that were recovered or bought. He was in frequent contact with the growing Italian Resistance organization put together by Fulvio Mosconi.

He also had direct connections with the clandestine Military Resistance Front led by Colonel Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo and the so-called "Fulvi gang," which came to number about 1,300 members. It operated mainly in the northern part of the capital, in the Monte Mario area, not far from the Collegio Leoniano.

Morosini initially played a spiritual role in Mosconi's organization, serving as their chaplain, but within a very short time, driven by a deep sense of patriotism, he broadened the scope of his activities. Among other things, he oversaw the production and distribution of false documents, the clandestine storage of weapons, and the gathering of information that would be helpful in the struggle against the Nazis. His nephew, Virgilio Reali, who was then a university student, assisted him in obtaining information. They carefully observed whatever was happening along the Via Casilina, which led not only to Ferentino and Frosinone, but directly behind the Gustav Line, where the Allied armed forces were blocked. The information that they uncovered was then transmitted to Allied commanders in the South through radio links set up by the so-called "X Center." Morosini's greatest success was to obtain a copy of the plan for the German army's deployment at Monte Cassino, which an Austrian officer hospitalized in the military hospital at the Collegio Leoniano gave him.

To save people in danger, Morosini took advantage of a wartime arrangement in which his religious community and a military hospital resided in the same building at the Collegio Leoniano. His confrere, Fr. Giuseppe Menichelli, later testified that "Don Giuseppe used to move patriots, Jews, and others from the military hospital to the community wing of the building to hide them from the Nazis." He added, "Our religious community kept its distance from Fr. Giuseppe's activity, but he was allowed to do it."

His nephew, Virgilio Reali, testified that Morosini, shocked by what was being done to Rome's Jewish community, became personally involved, together with Marcello Bucchi, in rescuing Jews. After many had been rounded up in the Roman ghetto on October 16, 1943, numerous Jews took refuge in the nearby church of S. Maria in Campitelli. With the complicity of several police leaders, their safety was entrusted to Mosconi's partisan group. Some Jews were hidden in the Collegio Leoniano. Reali stated that, in those months, his uncle also placed himself at the disposal of a secret organization set up within the Holy See by an Irish priest Hugh O'Flaherty, an official working in the Vatican. He came to be called "The Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican" for his work behind the scenes in rescuing Jews, military prisoners, and persecuted civilians. From this relationship, Morosini obtained funding for his many initiatives.

Gradually, the Gestapo and their fascist collaborators began to focus on him. They prepared a trap, with the help of a police officer, Domenico Campani, and a baker, Dante Bruna. Morosini believed that both were his accomplices within the clandestine

organizations to which he belonged, but they were playing a double game. On the morning of Jan. 4, 1944, Morosini arrived back at the Leoniano from Bruna's house, where he had been sold weapons and ammunition at a low price. There, he was caught red-handed by the SS and arrested, along with Bucchi. A search at the Leoniano turned up more weapons. Meanwhile, Bruna, whom the Nazis paid 70,000 lire, put together more evidence against Morosini.

He was taken to the German war tribunal on Via Lucullo and then transferred to Regina Coeli Prison, where he was locked up in cell 382 on the third wing. He endured violent interrogations at a German tribunal set up in the Pensione Flora and at the Gestapo offices on Via Tasso.

At Regina Coeli, he was forbidden to say Mass, but he recited the rosary aloud with other inmates. His passion for music was unabated. He composed a *Country Fantasy* dedicated to his friend Bucchi and a *Lullaby for soprano and piano* for the baby that the wife of a cellmate was expecting.

The cellmate wrote to his wife:

"Dear Giovanna,

In my cell there is a very dear friend. You will be surprised to hear that he is a priest and is the author of the Lullaby below. My friend, Peppino, has promised me that he will do the baptism and will conduct the orchestra when the baptismal celebration takes place, if some trouble doesn't happen."

Those were the words of Epimenio Liberi, a partisan who had participated in the fighting against the Nazis at Porta San Paolo in September 1943 and whose wife Giovanna was expecting their third child. The priest whom Liberi called Peppino was Giuseppe Morosini.

Giuseppe had written this tender lullaby:

*"There's a fairy castle by the sea. / There is a king's castle above the earth. / There's a blonde queen among the handmaids. / There is a sweet Madonna among the stars. The king's castle is your cradle. / And the blonde queen is your mom. / Who with the fairies repeats to you in chorus / the most loving and sweet lullaby. / Sleep, darling, above your head is Our Lady, / above your heart is my heart."*¹

¹ The Italian text is as follows:

*Sopra la cuna del bimbo adorato
Una giovine madre canta beata
Al suo pargolo biondo la ninna nanna
C'è un castello di fate in riva al mare
C'è un castello di Re sopra la terra
C'è una bionda Regina tra le ancelle
C'è una dolce Madonna tra le stelle
Il castello del Re è la tua cuna
E la bionda Regina è la tua mamma
Che con le fate ti ripete in coro
la più amorosa e dolce ninna nanna
Ninna nanna, ninna nanna
Dormi tesoro dormi amor
Sopra il tuo corpo c'è la Madonna
Sopra il tuo cuor c'è il mio cuor.*

A choral version can be found on YouTube at [Morosini Ninna nanna per soprano e pianoforte - Google Search](#).

Sandro Pertini, later the President of Italy but a Regina Coeli inmate at the time, remembered Giuseppe in this way: “I met Don Morosini one morning. He was coming out of an SS ‘interrogation.’ Blood was dripping from his swollen face. He reminded me of Christ after the scourging. With tears in my eyes, I expressed my sympathy to him. He made an effort to smile at me and his lips bled. A living light shone in his eyes, the light of his faith.”²

On Feb. 22, an SS court tried him along with Bucchi. They competed with one another in trying to shoulder the responsibility for what had been done. The charges were heavy, including espionage and illegal possession of weapons. Morosini, who despite torture had not revealed the names of his comrades, was sentenced to capital punishment. The Holy See began feverish negotiations to free him, but an appeal for pardon was rejected by General Albert Kesselring, on orders coming directly from Berlin.

Ten days before Morosini’s death, the Fosse Ardeatine massacre took place in Rome. On March 24, 1944, 335 civilians and political prisoners were killed in reprisal for an attack the previous day along Via Rasella in central Rome on an SS Police Regiment. The SS decided that 10 Italians should be killed for each of the 33 German lives lost. In 1949, a monument was built to commemorate the victims. Among them were Morosini’s friends Marcello Bucchi and Epimenio Liberi.

After the war, General Kesselring was convicted of war crimes and sentenced to death for the murder of 335 Italians in the Ardeatine massacre and for ordering his troops on various occasions to kill civilians as part of reprisals against the Italian resistance movement.³

Early in the morning of April 3, 1944, Morosini told the chief chaplain at Regina Coeli, Cosimo Bonaldi, who was preparing him for execution, “Monsignor, it takes more courage to live than to die.” After that, he went to confession and was allowed to celebrate Mass. Assisted by Bonaldi and Bishop Traglia, who had become the vicar of the Diocese of Rome, he was taken to Forte Bravetta and executed.

Ten of the twelve members of the firing squad refused to kill him. They fired in the air. Subsequently, the commanding officer finished him off with two shots to the back of the head. It was Easter Monday.

No official announcement of his death was made.

On Feb. 15, 1945, when the Nazi occupation of Rome had ended, Morosini was awarded the gold medal for military valor. The decree read: “A priest with a high patriotic sense, he carried out, after the armistice of Sept. 8, 1943, a zealous apostolate among the disbanded soldiers, attracting them to the group of which he was chaplain. He carried out delicate secret missions. He also purchased and hid weapons. Denounced and arrested, he underwent long, grueling interrogations. He proudly rejected flattery and threats aimed to make him reveal the secrets of the resistance. Celebrating with sublime calm the divine sacrifice, he offered his young self to death. A luminous example of a Soldier of Christ and of the Fatherland.”

² A. Cedrone, *Don G. M.: ricordi e testimonianze di chi l’ha visto da vicino* (Ferentino 1994), p. 43.

³ Amid much controversy, he was released in 1952, ostensibly for health reasons. He died in 1960.

In the same year, Roberto Rossellini, inspired by the example of Morosini and Don Pietro Pappagallo, portrayed them as Don Pietro, played by Aldo Fabrizi, in the award-winning film *Roma città aperta*.

On April 11, 1954, Morosini's remains were solemnly transferred to Ferentino and placed in a chapel for war victims in the church of S. Ippolito. In 1997, the Italian Postal Service issued a commemorative postage stamp in his name.

An afterthought: In war, moral ambiguities abound: to bear arms or not to bear arms; to tell the truth or not to tell the truth; to kill or not to kill. From the earliest times, Christians have struggled with those dilemmas. Theologians have formulated theories and principles to deal with these complex situations: self-defense; the just-war theory; the mental reservation; the principle of double effect. Sometimes these were helpful; sometimes, not.

That was the context in which Giuseppe Morosini lived. made judgments and died. He was surely a courageous patriot. But was he also, for many in Rome during World War II, the “saint next door” – to use Pope Francis’ phrase⁴ – who rescued them from death by giving his own life?

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[Archives and Historical Documents:]

- The National Archives of Italy, records on WWII and the Italian Resistance.
- Vatican Archives, particularly documents related to the Vatican's involvement in rescuing Jews and aiding the resistance during WWII.

⁴ *Gaudete et Exsultate*, March 19, 2018, paragraphs 6-9/

- Military archives in Italy for records on Giuseppe Morosini's activities as a military chaplain and his award for military valour.

[Film and Media:]

- *Roma città aperta* (Rome, Open City), directed by Roberto Rossellini. [Available on various streaming platforms and historical archives]

[Music and Compositions:]

- Morosini, Giuseppe. "Ninna nanna per soprano e pianoforte." [Available on YouTube and other music archives]

[Testimonies and Personal Accounts:]

- Testimonies from Virgilio Reali, Giuseppe Morosini's nephew.
- Testimonies from Sandro Pertini, President of Italy, regarding Morosini's time in Regina Coeli Prison.
- Accounts from survivors and participants of the Italian Resistance.