

3/2017

In memoriam

Xaverian biographical profiles



Fr. Lorenzo Caselin

5 September 1923 ~ 31 January 2017

In memoriam

Fr. Lorenzo Caselin

Santorso (VI – ITA)
5 September 1923

Parma (ITA)
31 January 2017

«Not everyone in the community of Pegli (GE) knows that they have a special friend in the heart of Africa, who prays to Our Lady every evening at nine o'clock for the people of this corner of the Liguria region.

We are referring to Fr. Lorenzo Caselin who came to Pegli, his first mission field and, as he called it, his “first love”, in 1962. From the house of the Xaverian Missionaries in Viale Modugno, he immediately established contact with the local parish youth organizations, conquering them with his charisma as a man of God.

The young people were struck by his vitality, his ability to read situations, his wise interventions in the groups, speaking to the heart of each person. However, Fr. Lorenzo was fascinating especially when he spoke about God and his love for the missions [...]».¹

Fr. Lorenzo Caselin's existential journey was characterized by his joy at “falling in love with God and His Word”, a joy that was born of his encounter with Jesus and that made him a tireless servant of the Gospel and the Church.

¹ *Notiziario della Parrocchia S. M. Immacolata – Genova Pegli – anno VI, n.3.*

He was born in Santorso, Vicenza, Italy, on 5 September 1923.

Fr. Faustino Turco writes: «What a unique life this was! His *curriculum vitae* has several special events that distinguish him, such as two years of military service during the Second World War, his experience of the harsh reality of the concentration camps, then his liberation and return home, which he saw as a miraculous intervention of Our Lady of Czestochowa; his ordination to the priesthood at the age of 39, his first arrival in the Congo at the age of 46 and his record presence in the Congo, since he is, to date, the first Xaverian who has been in the Congo until the age of 90».

In the heart of his family, the first school of social virtues, Lorenzo from an early age learned «to perceive God and venerate Him and to love his neighbors in accordance with the faith received in baptism». In connection with this, on 15 February 1963, he wrote in the magazine *Rocca*: «I was born and grew up in a modest family of workers; my mother taught me to practice the virtue of charity and my father, a socialist mayor who was persecuted for his political beliefs, taught me rectitude and to have faith in ideals that go beyond life and the hunger for justice».

His sister Virginia recalls two episodes from his early life that reveal something of his character:

A first disappointment

Once, when he was already five years old, Beppino was waiting excitedly for the Befana² to arrive. Suddenly, he heard a baby girl crying and ran up the stairs to the bedroom where, to his great disappointment, instead of the sweets he was expecting from the Befana, he saw a dark-haired baby girl. He immediately decided to set things right.

He hurried to the local sweet shop and proposed an exchange to the owner: he would give him a bag containing the new-born baby in exchange for a large container of sweets. The shop owner pretended to accept, but immediately informed Beppino's mother.

The mother and an uncle waited for the boy to return, they climbed the stairs silently and saw Beppino with an open bag ready to place the baby inside. They put the little scoundrel inside the bag and took it to the kitchen. In spite of his howls and tears, Beppino was freed only after promising that he would never try to do such a terrible thing ever again.

An affectionate help

Giulia, his sister, was preparing for her first day at work in the Tax Office in Schio, which was 4 kilometers from their home. For the occasion, her

² In Italian folklore, the Befana is an old woman who delivers gifts to children throughout Italy on Epiphany Eve (the night of 5 January) in a similar way to St. Nicholas or Santa Claus.

aunt had given her an old bike, but the front tire was down and no one had money to replace it.

Early in the morning, Giulia was getting ready to walk to work along the unpaved road in the rain. Suddenly, in the courtyard, she noticed the bike to which Beppino, who was then almost 18 years old, had attached the wheel of his beloved racing bike. Her brother had not hesitated to help her.

Giulia left for work happy, but without a mudguard all the dirty water from the street soaked her face.

That evening, only an affectionate embrace could console the truly poor brother and sister.

After attending primary school in Santorso, Beppino studied at the Istituto Tecnico in Schio (1936–39).

He lived his youth during the Second World War and served in the army with the Alpini from January 1943 until 15 July 1946. He thus described his “unforgettable military experience”:

At the age of nineteen I began my military service. I spent four months in Naples in the anti-aircraft battalion from February until June 1943, and three months in Albania on the banks of the river Vojussa in daily battles with the Albanian partisans [...].

We escaped through Montenegro. In Belgrade, we had our first contact with the partisans of Tito who offered me the opportunity to enlist with them in their clandestine struggle. We were captured by the Germans, who took us by train in cattle wagons via Vienna-Berlin to Poland. In October 1943 I entered the concentration camp Oflag 64/Z, in Schokken (Poznam), in Poland.

I was twenty years old: I had suffered and was very disgusted by people and things, and I was even more saddened by the harsh life of a prisoner, in the cold and with a tormenting nostalgia.

The unending days, weeks and months wore me down in body and spirit. We had to face mortal danger even just to obtain a potato or hard turnip, yet in that forced separation from everything I felt a very powerful need for God.

There were no priests in the camp and I, with a great hunger for God, perhaps even greater than my ferocious hunger for bread, was very unhappy [...].

On 24 January 1945 I fell into the hands of the red army and they took me from the camp of Schokken to the one in Ljubotin, near Charkow [...]. The following day, a Cossack official wanted to kill me just because I was wearing the hat of the Alpini. He had sworn to kill all the Alpini because, along with the Germans, they had destroyed his home village in 1943. He grabbed me by the chest, took out his pistol and pointed it at the nape of my neck, pushing me against the pillar at the entrance to the concentration

camp. Above my head there was a majolica of Our Lady of Czestochowa. He saw it and stopped. He put down the weapon back into its holster and slapped me, causing me to fall on the frozen snow. I am convinced I escaped death thanks to Our Lady of Czestochowa.

During my time in Russia, I had the opportunity to pray and reflect, and I was greatly edified by the natural kindness of the ancient religious peoples of Ukraine.

On my return from Russia in 1945, on the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, I thought about my financial situation and about finding a beautiful and good girl who would be my life companion; to keep my conscience quiet regarding my debt of gratitude to God, I also decided to commit myself to the apostolate in the ranks of the Catholic Action.

Fr. Faustino Turco writes: «Caselin's experience as an artilleryman in the Alpini left a profound mark on him. As soon as he joined them in 1941, at the age of eighteen, he was sent to Albania, where he was taken prisoner by the Germans and taken to Germany, where he spent several weeks in a concentration camp. He came out from prison to continue the war and fight under General Luigi Reverberi, the commander of the Tridentina brigade and famous condottiero of the bloody battle of Nikolayevka (January 1943), which dismantled a Russian position, but at the cost of many fatalities among the Alpini, who died in dreadful conditions as a result of the harsh climate, hunger and a lack of available weapons. Those who have never experienced such suffering can barely imagine the dangers and the indescribable hardship, along with the group spirit, mutual support, the emotions of the survivors even decades later; just ten percent of the young Alpini who fought in Russia managed to make it back home to Italy. In January 2011, during the annual Xaverian Assembly in Bukavu, Fr. Caselin briefly explained what his long experience in the Alpini meant to him: "It was a lesson in courage, spirit of sacrifice and sense of duty". Courage, sacrifice, sense of duty: three characteristics that always accompanied Fr. Lorenzo, who loved to say to everyone with his typical enthusiasm: *Viva l'Italia!* He had fought and risked his life for his homeland, he had seen his friends die and, during this atrocious experience, he discovered his vocation».



Caselin joined the Xaverian Institute on 1 September 1956. He wrote: «I was thirty-four years old and I faced many difficulties, not least the problem of study, which I had interrupted many years before. I coped very well also because I was able to enter the house for adult vocations, which the Xaverian Institute had opened about ten years previously in Nizza Monferrato (AL).

Here I met others who were in the same situation, though they were younger than me.»

He was admitted to novitiate in September 1957 and made his First Profession on 15 September 1958. He completed his High School studies in the Xaverian community of Nizza Monferrato, the Introductory Year in Piacenza and Theology in Parma, where he made his Final Profession on 23 September 1961³ and was ordained priest on 28 October 1962, at the age of thirty-nine, by Cardinal Cushing, the archbishop of Boston. Among the 22 new priests, ten belonged to the “Adult Vocations” group, among them were accountants, teachers, university students, professionals and workers.

On 17 August 1958, Caselin sent his application for admission to First Profession to the Superior General, Fr. Giovanni Castelli:

At the end of this year of probation and grace, and fully aware of what I am leaving behind and what I am about to undertake, I, Lorenzo Giuseppe Caselin, aged 35 years, wish to give myself totally to the service of God in the religious-priestly-missionary life and I therefore ask you to admit me to the Religious Profession in this Congregation.

I intend to consecrate myself forever to the Lord, binding myself with the three religious vows, combined with the vow to dedicate my entire life for the salvation of the infidels.

I know that I do not deserve such an honor; I am aware of my great weakness, but I trust in the protection of Our Lady, St. Joseph, St. Francis Xavier and our Venerated Founder, and I therefore hope to obtain from Jesus the necessary graces to become a saint and to be truly of benefit to the Congregation that accepts me as a son.

Fr. Dante Mainini, the rector of the Xaverian Theology community, thus presented Caselin for ordination to the priesthood:

He is a typical late vocation. He joined the Institute in 1956 and has completed the *curriculum studiorum* in seven years. His academic performance does him credit. Nevertheless, he still lacks some fundamental notions of philosophy and humanism.

He has an excitable, active and primary temperament. He is cordial, helpful, determined, practical, resourceful, dynamic and tireless. He is also impulsive, impetuous and irascible.

³ On 10 August 1961, the rector of the theology community, Fr. Martino Cavalca, declared: «Caselin Lorenzo possesses a good degree of practical intelligence and a very open character. He is resourceful and stands out for his rectitude, strong will, spirit of sacrifice and missionary zeal. I am very favorable to his admission to Final profession».

The formation he received in the period prior to religious life has left a profound mark on him: the necessity of earning his own keep forced him to face considerable sacrifices and to consider work as a serious daily duty for everyone. This leads him to be quite severe in his judgment of those who love the quiet life, and he is sometimes excessively demanding of others, which causes clashes and drives some people away from him.

His qualities far outweigh his defects. His interior vitality, generosity, rectitude and zeal give us the moral certainty of his suitability for the missionary priesthood.

If we also add the fact that the “world” he left behind when he was thirty no longer attracts him, the vote on his application for admission to Orders is very favorable indeed.

Fr. Lorenzo wrote to his friends on 15 February 1963: «Now I am a missionary priest and in a few months I will be leaving for our mission in Pakistan and I am very happy about this.» Instead he was assigned to the Xaverian Region of Italy, where he carried out the following tasks: ministry in Genova-Pegli (July-November 1963) and treasurer in Tavernerio (CO) [1963–1968]. These were difficult years for Fr. Caselin, who spent much time travelling around parishes looking for the resources to feed the Xaverian students.



In August 1968 Fr. Caselin was assigned to the Xaverian Region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he arrived in January 1969, after one semester studying French in Brussels.

He worked in the pastoral ministry in Fizi — South Kivu — from 1969 until 1971. He returned to Italy in 1972 on health grounds and he was assigned to the minor seminary in Udine, where he worked in the pastoral ministry (1972–74).

He returned to the Congo in June 1974, where he remained almost uninterruptedly until June 2013, with a wide range of tasks that he fulfilled as a “tireless worker in the Lord’s vineyard”: chaplain in Kamituga (1974–77), treasurer in Mungombe (1977–85), chaplain and treasurer in Luvungi (1985–88), chaplain in Mulenge (1988–92), treasurer of the Xaverian House in Uvira (1992–93) and Kavimvira (1993–95), chaplain in Kasongo-Ngene (1995–97), procurator of the Mission (1997–2002) and treasurer in the Regional House in Bukavu (2002–04), chaplain in Bukavu-Cahi (2004–2013).

During his missionary life, Fr. Caselin was absent from the Congo only for brief stays in Italy for rest, aggiornamento, ministry and treasurership work.

Fr. Lorenzo's agora were the thirty-four villages in the forest, families in distress, sick people who were unable to pay for medical treatment, the small polio patients of the Heri kwetu Center who offered their sufferings with love and, in the Xaverian communities, the service of treasurer, which Fr. Gabriele Ferrari says was carried out «in a unique style, made up of witness, joy and faith in his mission, in the protection of the Lord and Our Lady, attachment to the people in the midst of which God had called him to live his faith, in which he was always very joyful and generous, enthusiastic and 'contagious'».

Fr. Giuseppe Veniero informs us of the apostolic interests and struggles of Fr. Caselin in the Congo:

I spent three years with Fr. Caselin in the Mission of The Congo. I remember especially his apostolic zeal.

He organized a wide network of benefactors who helped him with considerable sums of money for the upkeep of the Center for the physically and mentally handicapped people in Bukavu, and the pediatric department of the General Hospital in the same city. It is worth pointing out that this department functioned exclusively with this help. Two nuns who were nurses also worked there.

Fr. Lorenzo, who was then over eighty, was beginning to find it difficult to move around the mountainous territory on foot to attend to the priestly ministry in a parish of several thousand faithful.

Fr. Caselin visited his Center for sick children every day. He prayed at length with them after doing four kilometers on foot.

Fr. Faustino Turco informs us of Fr. Lorenzo's "energy in doing good":

Fr. Lorenzo used to visit the center for the disabled and the mental health clinic, travelling in his small, white Suzuki, at full-throttle in first gear, along the non-asphalted roads of Bukavu. It was his weekly apostolate in a period of insecurity and war.

The people awaited him and he prepared well for this meeting. He distributed envelopes containing money to hundreds of families, of whom he kept the identities, recorded the help he had given out and he gave the financial report to the superior.

He helped hundreds of families in distress and, above all, dozens of sick people who had no way of paying for their medical treatment. He also knew that some people took advantage of him by inventing problems in order to receive money. When Caselin found out, he would shout and slam doors in protest against the lies and deceit. But he calmed down quickly and forgot all about it.

In November 2010, his health began to cause him some problems. He was admitted to hospital in Bukavu for anemia. After three transfusions,

they ran out of blood and did not know where they could find a donor since Fr. Lorenzo had a rare blood group..

Thanks to friends of friends, a donor with the same blood group was found in the person of a young university student, who was a Protestant. He agreed to give his blood to Fr. Caselin and said: "Evil separates Christians whilst good works unite them".

The conviction of the young Congolese man coincided exactly with what Caselin believed when he helped the poor, without any distinction between tribes and religions. He taught the spirit of sharing and he lived it out in his own life. We are convinced that Caselin lived as long as he did thanks to this "ecumenical" blood transfusion.

On 7 October 1996, Fr. Caselin wrote to his friends and benefactors:

One of my most beautiful experiences here in Kasongo, where the good Lord has called me to serve, is visiting the sick. They are about sixty in number and live in their huts, where they lie on a mat and pray the Rosary as they wait for the Eucharistic Lord. They confess their sins, receive Holy Communion and then converse with me.

They do not ask for anything (even though they possess nothing) and I ask them to offer their suffering, tears and acts of love to Jesus for the salvation of sinners.

Along with them, I too offer myself as a voluntary victim for the redemption of souls.



On 9 June 2013 Fr. Caselin returned to Italy, to Parma, where he was taken into nursing care in the Mother House. In November 2016, he wrote to his friends and benefactors:

I apologize for not writing to you for some time. I had to return to Italy on health grounds.

Now I am in Parma, in the Mother House, where I am being well looked after in a loving and fraternal manner. My 93 year-old body rejoices. I can still live as a missionary, not physically, but spiritually.

I have understood the great intuition of our Founder, St. Guido Maria Conforti: consecration is mission. Until now, I have tried to exercise the missionary identity in activity, like St. Francis Xavier our patron saint. Now I am a missionary with the act of love that is expressed in silence, contemplation and prayer.

My heart, however, is always in the Congo, where my little children affected by polio offer their suffering with love. Every evening they pray the Rosary for me and for their benefactors.

I still receive many letters from suffering families, who make me share in their distress. I entrust all of them to our Heavenly Mother.

I am happy that here, now more than ever, I feel the need to pray and to suffer for love: love will bring the True Faith to birth! I know that I will have to answer for all that I have not given, but now, through the hands of Our Lady, I give everything and leave everything in Her hands. It is wonderful to feel loved by Her.

At dawn on 31 January 2017 the Lord called Fr. Lorenzo Caselin to Himself. He was 94 years old and had spent 59 of them as a religious.

On 7 October 1996, he wrote to his friends:

Today, the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, is the 51st anniversary of my return from captivity and I wish to thank our Heavenly Mother who brought me back to Italy, after 25 months in concentration camps in Poland and Russia.

I also ask the Queen of Love to teach me and you to love as she loves. People who love are the ones who make the world beautiful. In order to love life as Mary did, we must see God in all and in everyone: those who are far from God are nothing!

Everything has a purpose in God. Creatures are the breath of God, His whisper, His perfume, the discrete, sweet, joyful and loving sign of His Presence.

We must learn to live better and suffer more for love. If we love everyone, forget ourselves and put others in the first place., we will make God's presence visible and we will create a "civilization of love".

Fr. Domenico Calarco S.X.

IN MEMORIAM: PROFILI BIOGRAFICI SAVERIANI

Direttore Responsabile: Javier Peguero Pérez
Redazione: Domenico Calarco
Impostazione grafica: Gian Paolo Succu

Edizioni: CDSR
(Centro Documentazione Saveriani Roma)

Pubblicazioni: Missionari Saveriani
viale Vaticano 40 – 00165 Roma

Roma 2018

Digital Edition Only

EDITED / PUBLISHED: 12 APRIL 2018

Profili Biografici Saveriani 3/2017

CDSR Centro Documentazione
Saveriani Roma

