
Over 200 priests died from COVID-19 in the first 9 months. The north of the country hardest hit, 60% more fatalities compared to 2019

March 27, 2020 was the longest day. Three weeks after the enforcement of virus containment measures that confined sixty million Italians to their homes coronavirus transmission rates finally started to stabilise, but with a dramatic death toll: in 24 hours 969 people died from COVID-19. It was the height of the first-wave carnage, the peak of the death toll caused by the new millennium plague. While an invisible enemy froze Italy in fear, on the evening of that same day, Pope Francis made a prophetic gesture, one of the most significant of his pontificate: alone in empty, rain-soaked St Peter's Square, the Pope celebrated an extraordinary moment of prayer addressed to the whole world: "It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to You, Lord, and to others. We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one is saved alone."



In that very semidarkness where a daily battle is fought against an enemy that assumed the guise of an invisible virus, hundreds of stories of priests intertwine in a maze of life and death.

A total of 206 Italian diocesan priests died from direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19 from March 1st to November 30th 2020.

Almost a third of the country's dioceses - 64 out of 225 - were hit by a silent massacre. Northern Italy recorded the highest death toll (80%), with a peak in Lombardy (38%), Emilia Romagna (13%), Trentino-Alto Adige (12%) and Piedmont (10%), followed by central Italy (11%) and southern Italy (9%). The month of March saw the highest number of deaths (99), representing almost half of the total (48%). The situation improved in April (27 deaths), with declining numbers in late spring and during the summer (5 victims in total). In October, however, the second wave began with the first 7 deaths, and rapidly escalated in November with 68 deaths (33%). *Older priests were dying in the highest numbers, with a mean age of 82 years, mirroring that of COVID-19 deaths in the general population. Sadly, the death toll was not limited to the most vulnerable priests or those in nursing homes: in fact, more than 40 of them were no older than 75 (20% of the total), the age limit set by the Code of Canon Law for parish priests.* These priests were actively engaged in the service to the community (four of them were less than 50 years-old), sharing in the daily life of the people of God entrusted to them. Even among those over 75 years of age, many continued performing their pastoral duties as parish priests or parish assistants on an optional basis. The first death was recorded on March 1 in Pesaro, the most recent in Bolzano, L'Aquila and Trento on 30 November. The most elderly victim was 105, from Cremona, the youngest would have turned 46 a couple of months after his death in Salerno. A year-on-year comparison reveals a dramatic increase in the number of deaths: 194 priests died between 1 March and 31 May 2019; 310 died in the same period in 2020, marking a 60% increase. The first section of the book is devoted to the stories of four victims of the first wave of the pandemic. They are accompanied by four testimonies of priests who continued serving others even at the height of the health crisis. The second part of the book features biographical accounts and a snapshot of each of the 206 diocesan priests killed by COVID-19 in Italy

over the past nine months. It is a tribute to the memory of those whom the Pope, in his homily during the *In Coena Domini* Mass referred to as “the saints next door.” *from the book "Covid-19: preti in prima linea" (Edizioni San Paolo)*

Riccardo Benotti