
Missionaries, new martyrs on the frontier of COVID-19. Three stories from Africa

These missionaries who fought alongside the sick and died of COVID-19 are the modern-day martyrs, as Pope Francis has defined them on many occasions. Missionaries are dying every day in a silent massacre. Their names must not be forgotten for it is through their lives that the Gospel is being kept alive among the people. Even when their mission country becomes their burial place. The Church today is marking the [Day of Missionary Martyrs](#), a day of prayer and fasting promoted by the Youth Service of Fondazione Missio, the pastoral agency of the Italian Bishops' Conference.



[... a Comboni missionary from Villaverla \(province of Vicenza, Italy\), was buried in Matola, Mozambique, where he died from COVID-19 on 9 March. Born into a large family, with seven siblings \(including three Combonians like himself: Celina and the twins Rinaldo and Sergio\), Father Giocondo had been serving in Mozambique during the critical years that saw the country gain independence from its former Portuguese colony status. After a lifetime in Africa facing countless difficulties, he succumbed to the virus, even though he had survived an assassination attempt, as recounted by his sister Flavia: "He missed 'his vocation as a martyr'", she said. In 1983, after Mass, robbers entered the chapel and one of them shot him in the neck. He fell to the ground in a pool of blood. The robber plundered the mission, and assuming him to be dead, snatched the watch off his wrist. But he was still alive. "Fortunately, the bullet had spared the spinal cord, and after a period of rehabilitation he returned to his duties, completing a translation of the Bible into Cindau in five years.](#)



[... whom everyone called Pino. He was a 73-year-old Comboni missionary in Malawi for 40 years. He died in Lusaka on 2 February last. He was a good man, loved by the people, with a warm, friendly smile that shone on his face, even when he was completely absorbed in the sufferings of the people", that's how his confrere Antonio Giannini remembers him in a video uploaded by Fondazione Missio. "He was fully devoted to the mission - recalls Father Guarino - highly recognised and appreciated by the local clergy. We exchanged messages every day for the past month. The mission also requires these martyrs: those of us who are closest to the people are the most exposed. We don't remain on the sidelines, we have the people at heart." Father Guarino, speaking from Lusaka, the capital, epicentre of the epidemic that infected over 84,000 people and claimed 1,164 victims in the country, underlined the shortage of healthcare facilities and medical equipment as the country is facing the second wave of the virus, aggravated by the so-called "South African variant." "As missionaries, we are just as exposed to the virus as the rest of the population... All we can do is to be close to the people, we are not disheartened nor discouraged."](#)



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from an early age, listening to the stories of priests arriving in Moena, in the heart of the Dolomites mountains, from distant lands. After graduating as a qualified mechanic and attending a course with the Comboni Missionaries, Brother Elio moved to the country known as 'the pearl of Africa' shortly after the coup d'état by the bloodthirsty despot Idi Amin Dada. He spent the first part of his 45 years in Uganda at the small hospital of Kitgum, where he served as technical director. In 1985 he was transferred to the Lacor medical unit and in 1986 to the small northern city of Gulu. Wherever he went, he devoted himself to helping the Acholi people, travelling across the savannah to build hospitals, wells, technical facilities and crops. *He always carried with him basic equipment in case of emergency: his passion was building and doing it well.* Nothing stopped him, not even during the most violent years of the guerrilla warfare, when Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels led by Joseph Kony, spread terror in the villages, raiding and killing, including children who refused to be recruited as soldiers. Brother Elio was not afraid. His mission was to defend the powerless, to protect the children from being kidnapped, the girls from being raped by the rebels, the villages from being raided. He would take on the wounded in his old Toyota, constantly covered in red mud, and provide shelter to orphans in St Jude's House, at the Consolation Home for handicapped children, the farm in Lacor, facilities mostly built under his technical supervision, thanks to the support of benefactors, especially Italians. A few months before succumbing to the virus, he said: "My 'children' are now grown up. With the ongoing pandemic, they are the ones helping out at the orphanage." Brother Elio, the courageous friend of the Acholi people, has left a valuable legacy that many will treasure over time. But above all, he left behind his testimony, his untiring desire to work for the good of others, as a true, tireless missionary in love with the Gospel. **Missio Webinar, focus on Ethiopia.** "Intertwined Lives" is the slogan chosen for the Day of Missionary Martyrs of March 24, as well as the overarching theme of two webinars promoted by Fondazione Missio for this occasion. After the session held on Sunday 21 March, focused on a Catholic mission in Brazil, today it is the turn of Ethiopia. The online event at 7 p.m. will be chaired by Giovanni Rocca, National Secretary of Missio Youth chapter. Participants include Don Stefano Ferraretto, Elisabetta Corà, fidei donum laywoman, Don Nicola De Guio from Ethiopia, and Don Giuseppe Ghirelli, from the diocese of Anagni-Alatri, who has just returned from Ethiopia. The meeting will be streamed live on the Cisco Webex platform and on Facebook and Instagram by Fondazione Missio.



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[to build a computer lab for young people in Robe, Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in the world. "This initiative - said Giovanni Rocca, secretary of Missio Youth chapter, coordinator of the project – "is to set up a computer lab and offer IT courses in collaboration with the fidei donum of Padua, who are working in the area." "The laboratory we are planning to set up in the premises of the Christian community of Dodola will be used to provide computer courses for local 16-25 year-olds." \(*\) editorial staff of "Popoli e Missione"](#)

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