

# Stumbling Stones

*Last January, a stolperstein was placed in front of the Basilica on the exact spot where, in 1944, Fr. Cortese's martyrdom began*



By Dan Vatamanelu & Mike Dean

SUNDAY, 8 October 1944: a man rushes into the Magnolia Cloister of the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua and asks for Father Placido Cortese at the entrance of the friary. Not an unusual occurrence by any means, because as the gatekeeper knows, the friar is secretly involved in rescuing Jewish and other persecuted people from the hands of the Nazis. Thanks to his position as General Director of the *Messenger of Saint Anthony* magazine, and a whole network of associates, Father Placido has been able to procure documents and money to help countless people flee to a safer place.

Some friars of the Basilica and Church authorities have urged him

to stop his activities and leave Padua, but his conscience won't let him rest until all those in need have been helped. Everything takes place with the utmost caution and secrecy, and Placido knows the risk he is taking by continuing – possible capture and death. But this particular Sunday a trap has been set . . .

Emergency relief is needed for some refugees, or so a 'friend' tells him, and so Father Placido crosses the threshold of the Basilica's churchyard. Within that boundary he has enjoyed immunity from any political interference due to it being Vatican territory. Now, though, he's handed over to two SS agents just outside the boundary and bundled unceremoniously into the waiting black car. A friar sitting on the

doorstep of the cloister realises the significance of the betrayal, and testifies to having seen Father Placido's face covered with sadness. It is plain that he knows that not only does it mean the end to his rescues – but also of his life.

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## No trace

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Father Placido is taken to the Gestapo headquarters in Piazza Oberdan, Trieste where, even though he's interrogated and tortured, he does not reveal the names of his associates. Fellow prisoners realise that this man, who has been put through enormous suffering, is a priest, and his continuous prayers have kept him faithful and strong. Unable to get any information from him, the SS agents kill him, and his body is cremated in the Nazi concentration camp at Risiera di San Sabba, Trieste. They hope to leave no trace of his name.

History, however, does not always record things the way those who believe themselves victors would have us believe, but in a different way – one which gives more space to remembrance than to violence.

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## Stolpersteine

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If you've ever walked down some particular streets in Europe, you might have noticed some brass plates in the pavement. About the size of small cobblestones, ten-centimetre cubes with a brass plate attached, each is engraved with the name of a victim of Nazi extermination or persecution. These *Stolpersteine*, or 'stumbling stones', are the



Photo/Archivio MSA

Fr. Oliviero Svanera, Rector of the Basilica, left, and Fr. Giorgio Laggioni, Vice Postulator of the Cause of Fr. Placido Cortese, during the uncovering ceremony of the Stolperstein on 21 January, 2021

work of the German artist Gunter Demnig, and have been placed in front of significant locations marking the place where a victim lived or where they were taken prisoner. The stones represent a new and different vision of the victims of the Holocaust, focusing on the individual tragedies of those who were reduced to a mere number.

Embedding these stones into places where they can be encountered in everyday life gives people the opportunity to stumble upon them – and, in a way, to make that event of remembrance something that simply cannot be avoided. The brass plate is engraved with the person’s name and date of birth, the date and location of deportation, and, where known, the date of death. Restoring a victim’s individuality, this visible sign of identity is intended to fight the passage of time, and their memory being consigned to oblivion. A verse of the Talmud (a commentary on Jewish oral law) states that “a person is only forgotten when his or her name is forgotten.”

### Martyr of charity

Servant of God Father Placido Cortese was born on 7 March 1907 in Cres (Croatia), an island which

was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His baptismal name was Nicolò Matteo. He was ordained as a priest in Rome on 6 July 1930. Called to Padua in early 1937, he occupied the position of director of the *Messenger of Saint Anthony*. For almost seven years he devoted himself with great commitment to the promotion of the magazine dedicated to the knowledge and devotion of the Saint of Miracles through his many writings and letters. During the years of World War II he assisted people in the Chiesanuova concentration camp in the outskirts of Padua and in other parts of Italy. After the collapse of fascism in Italy and the consequent German occupation, Father Placido directed his charitable work towards the politically persecuted, Jewish people and military allies who were prisoners or wanted, becoming the most important reference point in the Padua area.

In doing so, he and his associates put their lives in danger in order to rescue those persecuted by the political forces. This gesture shows his passion for people and for Christian values like charity, love and peace.

On 21 January, in the days leading up to 27 January, the Day of Remembrance which recalls the breaking down of the gates of Auschwitz, a Stolperstein was placed in front of the Basilica of Saint Anthony on the

Fr. Placido Cortese with a child in the cloisters of the Basilica of Saint Anthony

spot where on that 1944 October afternoon Father Placido was bundled into a black car and taken to the Gestapo building in Trieste.

### Everlasting memory

This stumbling stone makes us stop and reflect on Father Placido’s care for those who were suffering, for those forced to flee because of their identity, social status or ideas. Placing this block of recognition is a sign of sincere gratitude for what he was able to accomplish by making the light of God’s love shine in the darkness of his time.

After the placement of Father Placido’s block, there are now 28 Stolpersteine in Padua. Among the thousands of others spread all around Europe, this brass covered block is just a small token which honours him and all those who died under that same wave of darkness.

Both in life and in death, similar to another Conventual friar who was a victim of the Nazi regime, Father Placido’s remembrance block is near to the little square dedicated to Saint Maximilian Kolbe. In this way their memory, as well as that of all the other victims of hate and ideology, will be a continuous stumbling stone against violence, denial, and most of all against being consigned to oblivion. ♦

Photo/Archivio MSA

