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The Voice of Maria Dolens

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SPECIAL EDITION

100 years 100 tolls

The first one hundred years of Maria Dolens have been a ride that started from the idea of a visionary, Don Antonio Rossaro, and has led to a Foundation strongly rooted in the Trentino region, but with a strong international vocation. The idea of melting the cannons of the First World War to forge a symbol of Peace was truly prophetic, and the aim of the founder's successors has been to continue promoting dialogue over the use of arms. From Father Antonio Iori to Pietro Monti, from Alberto Robol to the incumbent

Marco Marsilli, all the Presidents, each with their own approach, have looked to Pius XII's admonition, inscribed on the mantle of the Bell, as their guiding star: "Nothing is lost with Peace. Everything can be lost with war". In the pages that follow, the reader is offered a bird's-eye view of a path rich with surprises, difficulties, failures, and triumphs. Those who wish to learn more can do so by reading this monthly geopolitics magazine, which has been offered free of charge in Italian and English on the Foundation's website since November 2020.

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Don Rossaro's idea

Afterwards, once everything was accomplished, it all seemed natural, almost taken for granted. Yet beforehand, no one had even considered it. This little publication is about how ideas become reality. The creativity, commitment and effort needed to convince everyone, the difficulties one encounters, the mistakes one makes and the satisfaction of hearing the Bell of the Fallen ring for the first time. But it doesn't end there because from that moment on the story that leads to us begins — to the Maria Dolens we know today, to its relations with the United Nations and the Council of Europe, to the long line of Presidents, to the passion of those who work there every day, to the wonder of visitors hearing for the first time the emotional power of its chimes, and to the 'Avenue of Flags', continually enriched by the banner of yet another nation that believes in this mission — a nation taking one more step towards Peace, because there is no alternative to dialogue.

The first tolling of the world's largest Bell was heard on 4 October 1925. It could all have stopped on that day and this would already have been a great story. Yet it is important to understand what that event meant for the decades that followed — to determine whether the vision of a provincial priest who, in the aftermath of the Great War, sought to create a symbol of

Peace by melting down cannons once used by opposing armies, remains relevant today. Let's start from the beginning, from the sunset of 5 May 1921, when Don Antonio Rossaro had the idea. He himself tells how it happened, under the pseudonym Timo del Leno, a fictional character who, on that day, found himself standing under the Arch of Peace in Milan. His tone is emphatic, almost fairy-tale-like, perhaps a little naïve. But we must grant that much, at least, to a visionary.

"It was sunset on 5 May 1921, and he [Timo del Leno] had lingered over a newspaper article describing how, at that very hour, thousands of cannons across France would be fired to mark the centenary of Napoleon's death. Under the vault of the historic Arch, absorbed in the splendour of that epic, he looked up to see a blazing sunset over the Resegone, and was suddenly struck by the sound of "Ave Maria" coming from a nearby Convent. His heart was at once overwhelmed by a tumult of arms and monastic hymns, torn between two colliding worlds — the world of war and the world of Peace. Far away, the rumbles of the cannon faded into the immensity of the horizon; close by, the ringing of the bell strayed into the mysterious regions of his heart. And the idea of Peace triumphed and rejoiced in the merry flutter of swallows darting beneath the tender reawakening of the stars.

Beyond the imaginative style, wrote historian Armando Vadagnini, "one can perceive the spirit of the period following the end of the conflict: on one hand, the restless memory of those who had survived such a ferocious war; on the other, the deep longing for reconciliation of hearts before the reconciliation of nations through treaties and political compromises. Hence the dream that the priest from Rovereto nurtured day after day: to create a "monument that was not the usual cold allegory cast in bronze or marble, but one that, with a living voice, would resonate and move hearts in honour of so many fallen heroes, of so many victims left without the solace of tears or flowers".

The Bell, therefore, was born on solid local foundations, creatively interpreting the long history of Trentino and drawing its lifeblood from the spirit of solidarity that has long defined, and still defines, Rovereto. The ethical foundations of the project are, first, to honour the victims of war, and second, to inspire humanity to pursue the paths of Peace as the basis for the renewal of civil life and human progress. Maria Dolens draws its inspiration from the Franciscan spirit: a concrete vision of humanity scarred by the ravages of war, urging a return to cooperation to make Dante's "flowerbed that makes us so fierce" a more habitable world.



Don Antonio Rossaro with his 'creation'

The Bell of Peace in times of war

Once the Bell was cast, it was placed on the castle's tower, which seemed destined to be its permanent home. 4 October 1925 was the date set for the first chiming. The guests included Victor Emmanuel III, who asked to postpone the engagement. "I set the date in honour of St Francis, the Saint of universal brotherhood, I would rather forgo it than compromise this highly significant date," Don Rossaro replied to Prefect Guadagnini, who had made the request on behalf of the sovereign. The king was disappointed, but honoured his word. At the first toll, Vittorio Emanuele stiffened in a military salute, and General Pecori Giralaldi turned to Minister Celesia, requesting that Don Rossaro be awarded the rank of Commander in recognition of his service. But the priest

was not pleased: 'Frankly, the sound was not good,' he wrote in his diary, 'with each toll my heart shuddered, as if pierced by a poisoned blade. Not one joy in my life was spared from poison. Even this had to be tainted. Calm yet troubled, downcast yet resolute, I stood there while everyone applauded, thinking: 'I will recast it.'"

The first Bell was destroyed. But preparations were already underway to cast the second one. On 12 October 1938, a large crowd assembled at Luigi Cavadini's foundry in Verona. Stefano Zuech was tasked with creating the exterior bronze decoration. However, this time there was no applause, because the molten metal poured into the mould exerted such intense pressure that it tore it apart. It took almost a year before another attempt could be made. The new casting was

poured on 13 June 1939. Quicker than the first, it took six minutes and thirty-five seconds to complete. The test run had still to be performed, successfully taking place the following August, while its creator was already engrossed in planning the celebration of its first toll.

Certainly, inaugurating a Bell commemorating the fallen of the First World War while the Second World War was about to begin could not have been easy. That monument to Peace, over 16,200 kilograms in weight, standing 3 metres high, with a diameter of 3 metres and a six-quintal clapper, was intended to "battle" symbolically against too many armies.

Hitler's Germany had already invaded Poland when Don Rossaro decided to involve the embassies of all the countries that had participated in the casting of the first Bell, asking them to send an ampoule with the waters of their country's most significant rivers, which would then be used for the 'baptism' of the new symbol of Peace.

Behind that initiative lay



A scene from the casting of the Bell

both hope and a resolve that the priest courageously conveyed to foreign ambassadors in a letter written in his characteristic style—rhetorical, yet unmistakably clear: “Even above the murky clouds that obscure the sky, the stars continue to shine; likewise, above and beyond the storm that troubles our horizon, the ‘ideal’ endures supreme”. And it is precisely for this reason that I am honoured to participate with Your Excellency as the monumental Bell of the Fallen -recently recast using cannons from nearly all the nations of the World War-has been marvellously completed.” Yet his vision extended even further, foreseeing the need to promote dialogue at the close of a war that had only just begun: “For the moment, the fate of humanity remains uncertain, and conse-

quently, the programme for the grand inauguration celebrations has been temporarily suspended. The glorious Bell of the Fallen, a monument to genuine Peace and human brotherhood, which belongs to all the nations of yesterday’s war, will remain unwavering in its Charter, regardless of the fate of the peoples emerging from this dark storm. Rest assured, this majestic Bell will perpetually celebrate the glorious Heroes of the Great Nation you so nobly embody”. Don Rossaro passed away on 4 January 1952. Rovereto, by his initiative, had been filled with statues, plaques, busts. Characters and episodes that were not to be forgotten. Yet while it had all begun within that territory, the idea of the Bell projected the city and its people far beyond the limits of the municipality.

Father Eusebio Iori

After the death of Don Rossaro and a year of vacancy, on 15 May, 1953, the Opera Campana dei Caduti appointed Capuchin Father Eusebio Iori as President, at the request of the Municipality of Rovereto and the Military Ordinariate for Italy. This choice stemmed from the help he had provided to prisoners freed from concentration camps, including not only essential goods but also job opportunities. More pragmatic than his predecessor, Father Iori, born in 1918, was a man of action with a concrete social approach. He entered the Capuchins at a very young age, becoming a priest in 1942 and military chaplain the following year.

One of his first initiatives, rich in symbolism, was the Christmas Mass of 1953 held in the small church at the Brenner Pass, attended by soldiers from armies that had once been enemies. The aim was to overcome national barriers, and as the celebration was repeated over the years, it spread a message of peace that earned Iori international accolades, including honorary citizenship of Innsbruck and the Cross of Merit of the Austrian Republic. His religious calling constantly found expression in action rather than words. The restoration of the basilica of San Lorenzo in Trento, a Romanesque jewel abandoned for two centuries that some wanted to demolish, is emblematic of his efforts.



Iori involved the municipality and authorities. The funds arrived and in 1955 the work was completed. The basilica became a civic temple for the fallen soldiers of all wars.

He used the same method to found the Alcide De Gasperi Centre on Bondone in 1958: first an international colony for young Europeans, it was later used as a care centre for sick Trentino children, and finally as a school for the children of emigrants. They called it the "house in the clouds": a place where great aspirations took tangible form through care for marginalised children — the first building block of a united Europe.

This was also his approach to managing the Bell of the Fallen: concrete action, lofty principles, and innovative ideas.

He focused on the casting of a new clapper and on finding a more appropriate location for Maria Dolens, but also on a universal vision of the Bell as a symbol of global peace. He set up a press office, organised group visits, and leveraged modern tools to foster dialogue, coexistence, and appreciation of diversity.

On 7 June 1962, the Presidency unanimously decided to purchase a plot of land on the slopes of Castel Dante Hill, later renamed Miravalle — a symbolic and strategic choice to renew the mission of Maria Dolens, relocating it from the Malipiero bastion. The decision sparked controversy: some viewed it as a betrayal of Don Rossaro's original plan, which had envisioned the Bell at the heart of the city. Undeterred, Iori steadfastly defended his vision: the creation of a "Piazzale delle

Genti", a meeting place for peoples and a lasting symbol of Peace and brotherhood. In the meantime, the second Bell also had to be decommissioned. On 1 October 1964, the third casting took place at the Capanni foundry in Castelnuovo. The bronze was cast in absolute silence: there had been too many disappointments in the past. Eventually, a giant bell emerged: weighing 22,639 kilos, it stood 3.36 metres high and 3.21 metres wide, and featured a 600-kilogram clapper and a 10,300-kilogram yoke. The new Bell, the largest in the world capable of ringing in full swing, still bore the bas-reliefs by Stefano Zuech but with a more restrained appearance: the internal inscriptions had been removed, leaving only the words of Pius XII, John XXIII, and the poetic verses of the founder. A new era had begun. Ours.



The Bell today

The 'modern' era of the Bell began with Pietro Monti, President since 1984 for almost twenty years. His vision was clear: symbols only exist if they can address the people of all ages. The Bell of the Fallen, under his presidency, learned to speak not only to battle veterans, but also to NGO workers everywhere, to peace mediators in the Balkans, to leaders of all religions, to young people who saw globalisation as a challenge and a risk. Since then, the daily tolling of the Bell is no longer just a reminder of the past, but an invitation to interpret the present in the light of human rights, dialogue and coexistence between peoples.

After Pietro Monti, it was Alberto Robol's turn. Elected on 10 July 2003, he stayed in office until 2020, further broadening the international perspective of the Bell, by obtaining observer status at the United Nations and the Council of Europe, and building the location that currently houses Maria Dolens. He himself summarised his vision: "If the Bell is the Bell of Peace, Peace also means justice, defence of human rights, international solidarity, cooperation.

The Bell is not merely a nostalgic reminder of the city of Rovereto; it is the very essence

of the community as it develops, the symbol of a city that has grown through the power of spirit, continuously seeking progress in both human and cultural dimensions. The Bell also embodies the continuous pursuit of knowledge and ideals, always oriented toward higher values and a universal vision, guided by the dual principle of memory and hope".

The current President of the Foundation is Ambassador Marco Marsilli, who draws on decades of diplomatic experience in various countries to guide the organisation with a pragmatic approach—grounded in careful, in-depth analysis of international issues and the formulation of concrete proposals for resolving crises. At the same time, he has strengthened relations with local institutions to ensure a greater and more active presence of the Foundation within the community. This dual path of international engagement and local commitment is also reflected in the editorial direction of the monthly magazine "La Voce di Maria Dolens". Strongly supported by the President, the magazine is published online free of charge in both Italian and English, with the aim of sharing what takes place on the Miravalle Pass while also offering reflections on global crises.

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