Paolo Bertetti and Jenny Ponzo

Media and Film Representations of the "Offer of Life"

Military Saints and the Relationship between Religious and Civil Institutions

Abstract

The "offer of life" is a term used to describe the voluntary sacrifice of one's life in the name of Christian charity. In 2017, the Catholic Church introduced the offer of life as a new case for canonisation, adding it to the two traditional main cases, i. e. martyrdom and the "heroicity" of virtues. In the context of the post-conciliar Catholic Church's efforts to adapt to the challenges of today's world, the new case is intended to broaden the concept of holiness and to capture exemplary behaviours that respond to contemporary problems for human society, among which is war. Two of the first causes to involve offer of life concern soldiers: the American military chaplain Father Emil Joseph Kapaun and the Italian carabiniere Salvo D'Acquisto, who embody both civil and religious values. The article analyses how the religious and civil roles relate to each other in their respective cultures. After a brief overview of the case of the "offer of life", it provides examples of how institutional sources comment on these figures before turning to a selection of media representations. Drawing on the semiotic notion of "thematization", it provides a semiotic analysis of an episode of a US television series about Father Kapaun and a television series and a film about Salvo D'Acquisto.

Keywords

Offer of Life, Saints, Catholic Church, Civil Religion, Semiotics, Thematization, Soldier, Canonization, Salvo D'Acquisto, Emil Joseph Kapaun

Biographies

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Introduction

In 2017, the Catholic Church introduced a new case for canonisation, the "offer of life". A centuries-old legal tradition was changed with the official recognition of this new model of sainthood based on the voluntary offering of life in the name of Christian charity. This fact can be read in the context of the Catholic Church's efforts since the Second Vatican Council to adapt to the challenges of today's world. The new case constitutes an effective juridical instrument to broaden the concept of holiness and to capture exemplary behaviour that is considered particularly timely in responding to the problems that plague humanity in our days. One of these problems is war.

And indeed, among the first causes for canonisation opened for the offer of life are two that concern men who belonged to the military: the American chaplain Father Emil Joseph Kapaun (1916–1951) and the Italian carabiniere Salvo D'Acquisto (1920–1943).[1] These individuals are particularly intriguing because they embodied both civil and religious values. The United States and Italy have regulated the relationship between the nation state and religion in different ways, so the portrayal of these exemplary figures provides an excellent basis for examining the relationship of each man's religious and civil roles within his respective culture.

To do so, this article will analyse the ways in which these different roles are expressed, highlighted, or overshadowed within institutional and media

1 The research presented in this article derives from a close cooperation between the authors. However, the introduction and the first paragraph can be attributed to Jenny Ponzo, and the second paragraph and the conclusion to Paolo Bertetti.

discourse relating to the two figures. After a brief overview of the case of the "offer of life", it provides examples of how institutional sources have commented on the role of these figures and then turns to a selection of media representations. In particular, deploying the semiotic notion of "thematization",[2] we propose a semiotic analysis of an episode of a US television series about Kapaun and a television series and a film about D'Acquisto. This semiotic analysis reveals the main differences between the Italian and the American institutional discourses about these exemplary figures and compares the institutional and filmic discourses within the relevant cultural context.

Religious and Civil Institutional Discourses about Key Figures

Two main paths to sainthood were officially recognised within earlier Catholic culture and became subject to progressive codification that formed the basis of the causes for canonisation. The first was martyrdom, which has its origins in the first centuries of Christianity, and the second was the "heroicity"[3] of virtues, which, after the end of Christian persecutions (IV century), recognised spiritual perfection in life. In 2017, with the apostolic letter *Maiorem hac dilectionem*, Pope Francis added *motu proprio* a third case to these two traditional models of holiness, the sacrificing of one's life for another in the name of Christian charity.[4] At and since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has tried to adapt to modernity. In this context, especially during John Paul II's pontificate, the regulation of canonisation has undergone important changes, which have been accompanied by the proclamation of an unprecedented number of new saints and blessed, who in turn have embodied an extraordinarily wide variety of saintly models. The case of the offer of life was introduced partly because some types of saints did not fit perfectly within one of the two traditional models. Such was the case, for example, for the victims of totalitarian regimes or people who died as caregivers during the spread of contagious disease *(martyrium per pestem)*. The new case made it possible to officially recognise the holiness of

2 See e. g. Greimas/Courtés 1982; Bertetti 2024.

3 The term "heroicity" is used in jurisprudence and specialist literature on canonization to indicate the heroic practice of Christian virtues, see Ponzo/Rai 2019.

4 Pope Francis 2017.

people who freely and voluntarily sacrificed their lives and died for others in the name of charity, i. e. Christian love.[5]

According to the Catholic Italian newspaper *Avvenire*, between the issuing of the apostolic letter in 2017 and February 2025, a total of 13 causes for the "offer of life" have been investigated by the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints.[6] In 2022, the first cause reached the stage of a decree certifying the "offer of life". That cause concerns the Brazilian Franz De Castro Holzwarth (1942–1981). De Castro was a lawyer and a fervent Catholic. In 1974, he began working with the Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted (APAC). On 14 February 1981, De Castro and the president of APAC, Mario Ottoboni, were asked to work as mediators in Jacareí prison, where a riot had broken out. De Castro offered himself as a hostage instead of a policeman, but when he was released, the military police opened fire, killing five rebels and De Castro. His cause, opened in 2009, was initially a martyrdom case, but when it was presented to the Special Congress of Theological Counsellors in 2017, it received only a partially positive outcome, because it was difficult to prove that the persecutors had acted out of hatred for the faith, as the case of martyrdom specifically requires. However, following the introduction of the new case, it was determined that the case involving De Castro could be examined not as a martyrdom but as an offer of life.[7]

On 24 February 2025, two further decrees were issued confirming cases of offer of life. One concerns Emil Joseph Kapaun and the other Salvo D'Acquisto. Kapaun was a priest from Kansas who joined the US Army as a military chaplain in 1941. He was characterised by the charity and courage with which he assisted the soldiers. In 1950, during the Korean War, he was captured by the North Koreans during the Battle of Unsan when he refused to flee and remained on the battlefield to help the wounded. Despite the terrible conditions in captivity, he never ceased to fulfil his apostolic mission and to help the other prisoners. When his health became very poor, his Chinese captors, who had taken over the camp from the Koreans, took him to the "House of Death", where sick prisoners were left to die without medical care, food or water.[8]

5 An in-depth reflection on the "offer of life" can be found in Ponzo 2020. See also Ciciliot 2018.

6 Muolo 2025.

7 For De Castro's biography and information about his cause, see Dicastero delle Cause dei Santi, Franz de Castro Holzwarth (1942–1981), https://t1p.de/ism7r [accessed 8 April 2025].

8 Dicastero delle Cause dei Santi, Emil Joseph Kapaun (1916–1951), https://t1p.de/mp-mwj [accessed 8 April 2025].

D'Acquisto was an Italian carabiniere (a member of the national gendarmerie of Italy) with a strong Catholic faith. At the time of the armistice of 8 September 1943, he was serving as a vice-brigadiere, roughly equivalent to a sergeant, in Torrimpietra. He could have fled, as did many military men at the time, but he stayed to protect the population. On 22 September, while German soldiers were examining stocks of unused weapons, a sudden explosion killed and injured several of them. The accident was attributed to unknown local partisans, whom the Carabinieri were required to track down by dawn the next day; if they were not found, the Germans would carry out a retaliatory action. D'Acquisto, who was standing in for his superior as head of the Carabinieri station, tried to convince the German soldiers that the incident had been an accident. The German soldiers retaliated anyway, indiscriminately arresting 22 people, who were led to an execution site and forced to dig their own graves. Knowing that the Germans were determined to kill somebody, D'Acquisto told the head of the German force that he was responsible for the incident and asked for the hostages to be freed. They were released, and shortly afterwards D'Acquisto was killed.[9]

The three saintly figures inaugurating the new offer-of-life case concretise this abstract category. By comparing their life stories and the representations of their characters in ecclesiastical documents and the wider culture, we can establish a coherent and specific model of this category. These three stories share some fundamental features: the protagonists act in a conflictual environment (De Castro dies during an uprising in a prison, Kapaun and D'Acquisto during a war) in which they play the role of peacemaker and benefactor. Moreover, their decisive action takes place in a situation in which an oppressive power threatens the lives and freedom of people: this problem is recognisable in the common theme of imprisonment. De Castro, Kapaun and D'Acquisto stand up for the weak, for the victims of such regimes. To help others, they all take on the same role by voluntarily and consciously giving up their freedom and their lives. Kapaun and D'Acquisto were military men, but even as they fulfil their civil duties as soldiers, they are described as Christians who care for others and openly profess their faith.

The Church has chosen this specific model for the first three causes for canonisation for offer of life. Evidently the Church considers this model par-

9 For D'Acquisto's biography, see Dicastero delle Cause dei Santi, Salvo D'Acquisto (1920–1943), https://t1p.de/x4j6e, https://t1p.de/u6cjv and Ministero della Difesa, Carabinieri, "Salvo D'Acquisto, Eroe e Martire Cristiano. I Carabinieri Partigiani di Fiesole", https://t1p.de/qulck [accessed 8 April 2025].

ticularly significant and timely in the current socio-political context. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has promoted an ideal of holiness as a universal vocation to be sought in everyday life, whatever one's status and whatever the situation.[10] This attitude embraces the military, who are to keep the peace at a time when war threatens many regions of the world: in 1965, Pope Paul VI recorded, "Those too who devote themselves to the military service of their country should regard themselves as the agents of security and freedom of peoples. As long as they fulfil this role properly, they are making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace."[11] Although Christian-Catholic culture has a long tradition of warrior saints,[12] the model envisaged here reinterprets this tradition to emphasise the role of the soldier not as a combatant but as a defender of peace and life.

Another feature of the offer-of-life model is that it involves a deep and complex relationship between religious and civil institutions, as is particularly clear in the causes of the two military figures, Kapaun and D'Acquisto. The exemplary nature of their sacrifice is transversal: on the one hand, their model sacrifice is officially recognised by the Church in the decrees certifying the offer of life and in the media close to the Holy See; on the other hand, the paradigmatic offering up of their lives is also emphasised in the official media of the respective government institutions.

Thus, for example, the official website of the US Army dedicates a page to Kapaun, with his biography, the citation of the text justifying the award of the Medal of Honour, and the note that "Kapaun is also lauded by people of the Roman Catholic faith. In 1993, Kapaun received the title of 'Servant of God' from the Roman Catholic Church […]. The Vatican continues investigations into possible canonization." However, the first written text to appear when the page is opened (below a banner with a photo of two soldiers rescuing a third, a portrait of Kapaun and a picture of the medal) is from a speech given in 2013 by former Secretary of the Army John McHugh:

> […] among recipients of the Medal of Honor, Father Kapaun's story is, in itself, wholly unique, wholly different. He didn't charge a pillbox; he didn't defeat an enemy battalion or brigade or division by himself. Rather, Father Kapaun's only weapons were his steely defiance that inspired his fellow

10 Pope Paul VI 1964, ch. 5.

11 Pope Paul VI 1965, n. 79.

12 See e. g. Cammilleri 2003; Corvisier 2006.

> prisoners of war; the words he spoke, which brought comfort to the soldiers with whom he served; and a simple piece of purple ribbon that he wore around his neck, a mark of his chaplaincy, his priesthood. But don't make any mistake about it; Father Kapaun was a soldier; and a soldier in the purest, in the truest sense of the word.[13]

Here Kapaun's action is recognised primarily as a model in the context of military life: he was an exemplary soldier more than an exemplary religious man. The latter characteristic is present and recognised but it is of less importance in this institutional discourse embedded within a civil context.

Similarly, the official website of the Italian Carabinieri Corps mentions D'Acquisto. The heading on the relevant page reads, "Salvo D'Acquisto, Hero and Christian Martyr. The Partisan Carabinieri of Fiesole." In fact, the story of D'Acquisto is placed alongside the stories of three other carabinieri who also sacrificed their lives in the same period to prevent the killing of hostages during a reprisal operation. In this heading, the military value (i. e. heroism) does not outweigh the religious value. They are placed on the same level, one reinforcing the other, as a common mission. This idea returns in the first and last parts of the text:

> And yet during that strange period when the entire Italian war machine fell apart, even before the country could recover from collapse, in the absence of orders and leaders, the Carabinieri were able to find in their fundamental qualities the forces that allowed a young vice-brigadiere like Salvo D'Acquisto to take on the monumental and yet humble role of a Christian martyr.
> [...]
> The two episodes [of D'Acquisto and of the Carabinieri of Fiesole] have in common the heightening of a loyalty pact between the Carabinieri and the innocent: a concept that is very close to that of the "neighbour", in the meaning it had almost two millennia ago in the most affectionate preaching of universal love that has ever been made.[14]

13 U. S. Army, Medal of Honor: Chaplain (Capt.) Emil J. Kapaun, https://t1p.de/rhbho [accessed 9 April 2025].

14 Ministero della Difesa, Carabinieri, Salvo D'Acquisto, Eroe e Martire Cristiano. I Carabinieri Partigiani di Fiesole, https://t1p.de/qulck [accessed 8 April 2025], our translation.

These discourses on the US and Italian websites must be read in light of the relationship between church and state in the respective country. In the United States, as Robert Bellah points out, there is traditionally a civil religion that differs from the religion of the churches but at the same time does not have a nationalistic character.[15] This religion does not glorify or venerate the nation *per se* but tends to interpret national history in the light of a transcendent principle. It refers to a generic and transversal idea of "God" that is compatible with the different denominations present in the national group.[16]

The Italian nation state was founded in the 19th century as a secular institution, independent of religion. Since its foundation, the separation of church and state has been clearly expressed, a product of the historical and political presence of the Roman Catholic state on the Italian peninsula and the affirmation of modern nationalism, which was based on a secular point of view. National unification was sought and realised by a cultural and social elite, with the result that the population's sense of belonging to the nation state was weak and problematic. Traces of this fragility can still be seen in Italian culture today.[17] A Christian mentality and Christian imagery have proven to be deeply rooted in Italian culture, and the civil-national discourse often integrates religious themes, even when its political ideology does not coincide with Catholicism. For example, ceremonies such as commemorations or processions traditionally juxtapose religious and civil symbols and authorities, blurring the line between secular and religious culture. This strong religious background helps explain the superimposition of military and martyr values in the Carabinieri's official discourse on D'Acquisto.

Mediatising the Offer of Life

The religious and military dimensions of Kapaun's and D'Acquisto's actions stand side by side, although they are fundamentally different. Semiotically, we can consider this dichotomy as a phenomenon of thematisation: while both Kapaun and D'Acquisto are simultaneously "soldier" and "saint", the discourse of religious and civil institutions (and secondly, the media) high-

15 We underline the term "traditionally" because the role of religion in US public and political contexts is undergoing significant changes in recent years, but an analysis of this complex phenomenon is not possible in the context of this article.

16 Bellah 1967.

17 On the issue of civil religion and national identity in Italy see e. g. Ponzo 2012; 2015; 2017.

lights one or other thematic role from time to time and segments their actions based on the prerogatives of that role.[18]

From a narrative point of view, however, the offers of life of Kapaun and D'Acquisto lend themselves to being analysed according to two aspectual configurations.[19] Kapaun's story has a more durative nature: his act of comfort, help and support for the captured soldiers was continuous and lasted until physical exhaustion and death. On that count, this action is associated with his role as "military chaplain", which Kapaun took to its maximum expression, to the point of offering his life, which enables him to be re-thematised as a "saint". In this respect, the figure of Kapaun is closer to the classical saintly status based on heroic virtues.

The sacrifice of D'Acquisto was more punctual in character. His heroic gesture did not unfold over time, renewing itself, but took place in a single moment in which the vice-brigadiere sacrificed his life to save the people of Torrimpietra. It is a final act that resolved the narrative arc that opened with the death of the two German soldiers, and at the same time it is the climax of D'Acquisto's existential story.

In cases such as D'Acquisto's, in which death follows almost immediately after the offer of life, the reconstruction of the existential journey that prepared for the gesture of self-giving for the deliverance of others is fundamental for recognising sanctity. That reconstruction is essential to understanding the nature of the heroic act, the values that underlie it and the religious inspiration of the choice; indeed, as Jenny Ponzo has proposed, "a careful analysis of their previous practice of virtues, at least at the ordinary level, can function as a guarantee to validate the system of values adopted by the future saints and plausibly motivating their choice to offer up their lives for others".[20]

The reconstruction of that existential journey is also an essential element of the narrative organisation of the storytelling in media texts, for example in the case of film or television biographies, as we will see below. Thanks to it, the motivations and value systems that support the heroic gesture are emphasised, be they civil and/or religious. It is revealing to identify the interpretative key the different texts have chosen and the thematic roles (and therefore value systems) that are attributed to the characters in each narration – "civic heroes", "witnesses of faith" (if not "saints"), or perhaps both?

18 On the thematization of saints see e. g. Bertetti 2024.

19 On the aspectual configuration see e. g. Greimas/Courtés 1982.

20 Ponzo 2020, 989.

The experiences of Kapaun and D'Acquisto have been the subject of audiovisual narratives. Kapaun's story was staged early on, in "The Good Thief", an episode from 1955 of the Crossroads television series (ABC, US 1955–1957). D'Acquisto's sacrifice was the subject of the film Salvo D'Acquisto (Romolo Guerrieri, IT 1974), based on a screenplay by the writer Giuseppe Berto and with Massimo Ranieri (in the role of Salvo D'Acquisto) and Enrico Maria Salerno. Almost 30 years later, RAI, the Italian radio and television state broadcast company, aired Salvo D'Acquisto (RAI, IT 2003), a television miniseries in two episodes, with the popular actor and showman Beppe Fiorello in the title role.[21] The three texts are very different from each other in terms of lenght, format and genre: the first is part of an anthological series of religious fiction; the others belong more to the genres of historical film and popular fiction of civil/patriotic inspiration. Together, however, they offer us stimulating examples of ways of thematising the extreme sacrifice of surrending one's own life.

The analysis that follows examines the thematic roles of soldier and believer that the three texts ascribe to the two martyrs, focusing in particular on the portrayal of their characters, and on the thematic role(s) initially ascribed to them and the variations in those roles in the course of the plot. According to Dario Tomasi, the presentation of a film character is a process that "lasts until the segments of the story dedicated to him are functional more to his representation than to the development of the story itself".[22] That presentation, he proposes, can comprise five possible phases: evocation, naming, staging, framing and enunciation of the character's proper image. The last of these consists of "that shot which gives an image of the represented character that allows us, and will allow us throughout the film, to recognize him and distinguish him from the other characters",[23] thus fulfilling the same functions as a name in a literary text.[24]

21 In its original two-episode format, the mini-series was first broadcast on Rai Uno on 21 and 22 September 2003. It was subsequently turned into a TV movie, as a single broadcast of 119 minutes. We refer here to the TV movie as only it is available on the Raiplay.it website, https://www.raiplay.it/programmi/salvodacquisto [accessed 16 May 2025]. The story of D'Acquisto also inspired the film La fiamma che non si estingue (Vittorio Cottafavi, IT 1949), which is based on the novel *Itala gens* by Navarra Viggiani. It recounts the self-sacrifice of carabiniere Giuseppe Manfredi, who takes responsibility for an attack to save ten men from German reprisals. The earlier movie is not included in the analysis in this article in light of the fictional nature of the main character.

22 Tomasi 1988, 14.

23 Tomasi 1988, 26.

24 For a general overview of characters in audiovisual texts see e. g. Bertetti 2013.

"The Good Thief"

The story of Kapaun was the subject of mediatisation early on. Just three years after his death, his sacrifice was the subject of a biography; the following year he was played by James Whitmore in "The Good Thief", a 25-minute episode of the television series Crossroads that was broadcast on 25 November 1955.[25] Crossroads was an American television anthology series that aired between 7 October 1955 and 27 September 1957 on ABC, dramatizing the experiences of clergymen of different faiths.

The episode begins with a battle scene, with a voiceover immediately explaining that the story takes place during the "Korean campaign" (spatial and temporal disengagement) and that it is about the figure of the "military chaplain" Kapaun (actorial disengagement). At the same time, the character is framed, first in long shot and then in close-up, as he comforts a dying soldier. If on a figurative level he is identified as a "soldier", from his uniform and eye patch to his physical appearance, which seems to indicate a determined and energetic man, on a thematic level his role as a "man of faith" is immediately explained not only by the voice-over, but also by the actions depicted on screen and by his comforting words to the dying man.

This dual characterisation is repeated in the rest of the episode, in which Kapaun and his comrades are captured and imprisoned in a prison camp. Kapaun is simultaneously portrayed as a heroic defender of American values who resists the communist commander's indoctrination lectures and refutes propaganda in the name of truth and also as a defender of the faith who is harshly punished "for daring to administer to the spiritual needs of his fellow prisoners" (00:05:32) and for defying orders not to hold religious services. The episode shows us how Kapaun does his utmost to help his comrades not only spiritually but also materially in a situation of hunger, cold and lack of medical care, even going so far as to steal food for them. For this reason, he is called "the good thief".

The double valorisation is maintained throughout the episode. As in the speech by former Secretary of the Army John McHugh quoted above, here too he is portrayed as an exemplary soldier, but in this case he is even more so an exemplary clergyman who cares for the bodies and souls of his comrades – his "congregation", as he says in the film – to the point of exhaustion

25 Available at Internet Archive, Crossroads: The Good Thief, https://archive.org/details/CrossroadsTheGoodThief [accessed 16 May 2025].

and starvation. This thematisation does justice to "The Good Thief" as part of a religiously inspired drama series.

Salvo D'Acquisto (television series)

In contrast to "The Good Thief", the television series dedicated to D'Acquisto belongs more to the genre of "civil" fiction, commitment and national memory, a type of production that is not uncommon on the television channels of RAI, the Italian state broadcaster. It is no coincidence that D'Acquisto is thematised as "carabiniere" in the opening credits, which specify, immediately after the title, "Freely inspired by the life of the carabinieri vice-brigadiere Salvo D'Acquisto" (00:00:19). The opening credits are accompanied by a series of archive images that place the narrative in a historical context, alternating with close-ups of two unidentified carabinieri on bicycles. The first scene after the opening credits is introduced by an inserted text giving the space-time coordinates, "Torrimpietra, 22 September 1943, 11.30 pm" (00:02:32); the images show the two carabinieri arriving on bicycles at the scene of the death of two German soldiers and seeing the bodies being loaded onto a lorry. This is where the actorial definition takes place: one of the carabinieri is called "Sergeant D'Acquisto" by the voice of the German commander, who asks D'Acquisto to show him the site of the explosion. The camera approaches D'Acquisto's face and even in the semi-darkness, the spectator recognises that D'Acquisto is played by Fiorello. This image identifies the title character in the film, who is thus also thematised diegetically as a "carabiniere".

According to the true story, the German commander orders the person responsible to be found before dawn. In the fictionalized account D'Acquisto states, "If we don't find the culprit, the … Germans will take care of it, and do you know what that means? That I can no longer do anything to defend you" (00:06:25). These meaningful words locate him in the characters' system.[26] As a Carabinieri officer, he is a mediating figure between the German occupiers and the local population, immanent in relation to the Germans and transcendent in relation to the population. The "we" can be understood as inclusive (including the person who speaks and those who listen), indicating a totality ("We Italians") in relation to the German army. His closeness (and that of the Carabinieri Corps in general) to the population is reaffirmed sev-

26 See e. g. Hamon 1983.

eral times in the series ("I know the inhabitants of Torrimpietra, one by one", 00:04:58). Proximity to the population and the responsibility to protect are values attributed to the Carabinieri Corps, and, as the fulfilment of his duty, they constitute one of the "civil" motivations for D'Acquisto's gesture.

The religious dimension of the character (his thematisation as a "believer") is only hinted at in the fourth sequence, in which D'Acquisto is shown in the church as he kneels in prayer accompanied by his fiancée. This thematisation is immediately pushed aside when the two begin to talk (in the church!) about places from their earlier lives that they will visit together after the end of the war. Here, the thematisation of "lover" immediately replaces and overshadows that of "believer". In fact, his religious faith is completely neglected, and so too – as the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* pointed out[27] – is the religious dimension of his sacrifice. The film does not quote the most famous words attributed to him – "If I die a hundred times, I will be born again a hundred times: God is with me and I am not afraid!"[28] – but it does repeatedly affirm the sense of duty associated with his thematic role as "carabiniere".

The television series conveys an image far removed from how we might well imagine a saint, even a "modern" post–Second Vatican Council saint. Fiorello's interpretation of the young Salvo is the somewhat stereotypical image of a young man who is a little pretentious and loves beautiful girls but nevertheless has a good heart and is balanced and sensitive to the needs of others. Where, as we have seen, in the case of military saints the Second Vatican Council's narrative emphasises the role of the soldier as a defender of peace and life, in this fictional reconstruction of his life, D'Acquisto not only takes part in a battle (if only to defend himself against an attack) but even kills an enemy, which, moreover, does not seem to have particular impact on the course of his life. The classic path of inner maturation through a series of trials is practically absent from the sequence of unrelated events that follows. D'Acquisto is what he is because he has been a "carabiniere" ever since he put on the uniform. His motivations and his values, including closeness to the population and its defence, are those of the Carabinieri Corps: "I was only doing my duty" (01:49:25), he will say at the moment of sacrifice.

27 La Repubblica.it, Archivio, "L'Osservatore contro RaiUno. Un D'Acquisto privo di fede", 21 September 2003, https://t1p.de/12amw [accessed 19 May 2025].

28 Wikiquote, *Salvo D'Acquisto*, https://it.wikiquote.org/wiki/Salvo_D%27Acquisto#cite_note-eroismo-1 [accessed 28 March 2026].

Salvo D'Acquisto (film)

Romolo Guerrieri's film is not a biopic, but the telling of historical facts.[29] The story is set in the historical context of the fall of the fascist regime in Italy, beginning with the arrest of Benito Mussolini on 25 July 1943 and following the vicissitudes of the population of Torrimpietra (and therefore of the whole of Italy) up to the armistice on 8 September, the German occupation and the partisan struggle, showing confusion, the bewilderment of the population and the armed forces themselves, and the difficult and divisive choices that events impose on consciences.

And it is with the depiction of the historical framework that the narration opens: the film begins with the news that the young Romano brings to the socialist barber Rubino (Enrico Maria Salerno) that the workers of the great industries of northern Italy, in Milan and Turin, have decided to go on general strike. Shortly afterwards (00:05:17), the news of Mussolini's resignation and the fall of Fascism comes over the radio, and the different reactions of the population of Torrimpietra are shown, from the socialist fighters to the fascists, from the carabinieri sergeants to the ordinary citizens. The introduction of D'Acquisto is postponed: in an alternating montage, he is first evoked ("the brigadiere") but not named (00:02:53) by a laundress who brings him clothes at the barracks, then framed (00:04:29) as he conducts reconnaissance on a boat, and only in scene six is he called "Brigadiere D'Acquisto", by a corporal who tracks him down at the harbour to tell him the news (00:09:19).

From the outset, the text assigns D'Acquisto the thematic role of "vice-brigadiere of the Carabinieri". Above all, however, it inserts his story into the more general framework of the civil war and resistance to Nazi-fascism – in relation to which various sections of the population of Torrimpietra, and of Italy as a whole, position themselves in different ways – and attempts to sketch out his role as a carabiniere. All D'Acquisto's subsequent actions are attempted interpretations of this role in a highly uncertain historical moment.

With no connection to the commands and no instructions from above, D'Acquisto's behaviour is determined only by his role as a carabiniere. According to his superior, "[For the Carabinieri], public order is one of the most

29 The movie is available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzWvqykbFd4 [accessed 30 March 2026].

important tasks. And by public order we also mean the protection of the civilian population" (00:36:48). D'Acquisto tries to maintain public order and protect the population by avoiding an explosion of violence and by striving for balance. He is not against armed resistance, but he does not join in, because he wants to remain close to the population. He talks to the German invaders but does not collaborate with them; on the contrary, he hides the weapons that were kept in their barracks. In this sense, his behaviour, and that of the Carabinieri Corps, is portrayed as a different but no less courageous form of resistance.

The film places D'Acquisto's sacrifice in the resistance movement against Nazi Fascism but anchors it in terms of values and motivations in his role as a carabiniere. Again, any religious dimension to his final gesture is ignored. There is no suggestion that he is a man of faith, and indeed the role of religion in his upbringing is diminished, at least when it comes to his anti-fascist consciousness. "Neither religion nor anyone else told me that Fascism could be wrong" (00:31:53), he states disconsolately after the armistice.

Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Church's canonising of exemplary personalities who not only professed religious values and practised Christian virtues during their lifetime, but also belonged to a military corps that served civil institutions testifies to the Church authority's efforts to promote and maintain an open dialogue with institutions fundamental in social and political life. This model of holiness is strategically important for the Church, for it is a means to show that the civil values underlying nation states are harmonious, coherent and consistent with religious values. At the same time, it offers a figuratively "thematized" response to a spiritual dilemma that believers may experience in the context of war, when they are called upon by civil institutions to fight or simply to take a moral position on the problem of harmonising the evangelical message, which is based on love, forgiveness and peace, with a reality in which these principles are overturned.

How does secular culture receive this kind of model? Our semiotic-narrative analysis of the mediatisation of the figures of Kapaun and D'Acquisto allows to identify a relevant difference between the United States and Italy. In fact, US culture has no particular problems in harmonising the dual thematisations of Kapaun as a religious man and as a military man, as he is an

exemplary figure for both thematic roles. The situation in Italy seems to be more complex. The dual thematisation is accepted in the institutional discourse of the civilian authorities, and it is not uncommon for open reference to be made to the religious value of the relevant figure, which seems to lend prestige and depth to his civilian value. The official discourse on D'Acquisto clearly shows that the religious and civil institutions recognise and respect each other: even though each claims its own specific identity and sphere of influence, they find a meeting point in figures like D'Acquisto, who embody both religious and civil values.

In media discourse, however, this dual thematisation seems more problematic. In Italy, religious films and fiction based on the lives of holy figures are widespread.[30] It would have been easy to present the life story of D'Acquisto in the well-encoded form of this genre. But the two filmic representations dedicated to him emphasised instead the thematisation of the good carabiniere, the good military man, while the religious thematisation was erased or reduced to a minimum. In these stories, D'Acquisto embodies an ideal of civilian heroism that is self-sufficient and does not presuppose any form of religious heroicity. This resistance to the double codification proposed by the Church can be seen as a sign that the idea that the civil and religious spheres are clearly separated is still firmly anchored in Italian culture, and in popular culture in particular. This distinction is perhaps exacerbated by the relationship between the figure of the soldier and the act of killing, which is deeply opposed to the typical ideal of sanctity. The magisterial and theological discourse that justifies the military action of religious people does not appear to be understood, or at least taken into consideration, by the mass of believers, who can accept and love the figure of a good carabiniere and the figure of a saint, but may find it strange (or perhaps undesirable or uncomfortable) to venerate a soldier of our time as a saint.

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30 See e. g. Perugini 2011; Fumagalli 2024.

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