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Special Interview



A Profile of Bishop Jorge García Isaza, CM (1928-2016)

By: Mario García Isaza, CM

For nearly two weeks, I, in close union with my brother confreres, lived an experience of pain and faith, of love and solidarity, and of incredible helplessness in confronting the advance of the inevitable future. Yes, as confreres we lived an experience in which we came to a deeper and clearer understanding of the meaning of life and death. At the same time, we all stood in admiration for the words that were spoken, not only verbally, but more significantly “spoken” in the attitude of an individual who was aware that he was living his “Passover” event. Those words and attitudes impacted us because they were spoken by someone who was our brother. I have just experienced the prolonged agony of Jorge and his passing over to the Father’s house.

This experience culminated with our coming together to celebrate Jorge’s funeral rites – a celebration that no one will forget because it was an authentic Paschal feast in which our sadness was mingled with the joyful resurrection acclamation: Alleluia. The Eucharistic celebration proclaimed the comforting certainty that for those who believe, death is not the end, but a new beginning; death is not a leap into emptiness, but a movement and a passing over to true life; death is not a dark, inescapable tunnel, but a door that opens to light; death is not a departure, but an arrival.

Thank you, a thousand thanks to all of those individuals who accompanied us during the time of this profound experience. We felt as though the whole Church accompanied us, as though the whole Congregation of the Mission and the entire worldwide Vincentian

Family were gathered together with us. We felt as though the poor, our friends, our lords and masters, and all those other individuals with whom our brother shared his life, his love and his joy – we felt as though all these persons – were present with us.

As we think about drawing a portrait of Jorge, it seems to be both a difficult and an easy task. Difficult, because certain lines could never express in a satisfactory manner the wonderful, rich, admirable, and multifaceted life that he lived. Easy, because there are so many memoirs and so many wonderful things that we know about this man and, therefore, we would just have to let the memories flow and, in turn, those memories come to life.

Let me highlight some dates, which I believe are milestones in Jorge's personal story (leaving aside many other less relevant dates):

2 July 1928 – birth of the fourth child of a blessed and admirable family.

7 July 1928 – through Baptism Jorge was gifted with a supernatural life.

15 August 1934 – received Jesus into his heart for the first time – Jesus whom he already loved and would continue to love for the rest of his life.

15 September 1940 – entered the Minor Seminary and began to walk in the footsteps of Vincent de Paul. He showed his brothers the path to follow and who could have any doubts about following him. So his brothers, Alberto, Octavio, Germán, Samuel and I followed along the same path (after some time, Octavio saw that such was not his calling and he became a doctor).

14 February 1954 – was ordained a priest by Bishop Tulio Botero Salazar, CM. Our parents and all the members of our family were filled with emotion during the celebration of the event.

5 May 1989 – was appointed by John Paul II to replace his brother, Germán, as Apostolic Prefect of Tierradentro.

17 February 2000 – became the first Apostolic Vicar of Tierradentro.

26 March 2000 – was ordained a bishop; the ordaining bishop was his brother, Germán (the first bishop of Caldas). This was certainly a unique situation and perhaps the first time in the history of the Church that a younger brother ordained his older brother as bishop.

25 April 2003 – the Pope accepted Jorge's resignation which was presented at the time prescribed by law. He comforted and edified all of us when he then dedicated himself to care for his mother (our mother) who was now more than 100 years old. At the time of mother's death, in a gesture of love and humility for the Congregation, he placed himself at the service of his superiors and accepted the ministry that was asked of him.

14 December 2015 – Jorge suffered a heart attack and thus began the final phase of his life, which ended with his death and his arrival into the kingdom on 16 August 2016.

Within that timeframe, a Vincentian, priestly, and missionary life was enriched by events, accomplishments, and virtue. Jorge engaged in various forms of ministry and, at all times, served the Church, the Congregation, and the poor by placing at their disposition all his abilities, his creativity, and his apostolic zeal.

As a person, Jorge revealed some extraordinary values. I would highlight three significant human virtues (other individuals might recall different aspects of his personality): his goodness, his joy, and his generosity. Jorge was a good man even though, by temperament, he was naturally impulsive. He revealed his goodness in his respect for others and in the manner in which he inspired confidence. Many people have spoken about his goodness, especially poor and humble men and women.

If there is some trait that distinguished Jorge, then it was certainly his joy. His joy was contagious and that created calmness even in the midst of very tense situations. His jokes and his ability to laugh at himself were well known by everyone. He was even able to bring levity into the midst of situations that others might have seen as tragic or as events of great concern. At the time of his heart attack in December 2015, he stated that he had arrived at the gates of heaven

but had been turned away because he was ugly. During the time of his agony, I asked him one day if he had slept well; he responded: yes, I closed my left eye and then my right eye became jealous. During family gatherings, which were filled with joy and celebration and love, Jorge always seemed to be the one who could make us laugh and have fun together.

Jorge's generosity knew no limits. Many people were the beneficiaries of his kindness. Jorge possessed nothing for himself; what was his belonged to everyone, especially those who were most in need. As Prefect and later as Bishop, he used great discretion in distributing the goods that he had. He assisted poor families, employees, students. No one was able to guess who the people who were aided by his generosity were. As soon as he became aware of someone in need, he reached out to that individual. He wanted no one to be lacking.

We could say many things about Jorge's priestly and Vincentian virtues. He was zealous and self-sacrificing in his ministry; he never measured the cost. During the last phase of his life, we often chastised him because, even though he was very aware of his limitations, he never refused anyone who asked for some pastoral service, although doing so might prejudice his health. When speaking among ourselves, we stated that the word "no" did not exist in his vocabulary.

I had the privilege of accompanying Jorge during the time of the tragic earthquake that occurred in Tierradentro in 1994. During the years that followed, Jorge dedicated himself completely to the task of rebuilding the area, humanly, socially, spiritually, and materially. He did so with much care and initiative and in a way that perhaps many people were never aware. The recovery process would probably never have been achieved but for the efforts of our confrere Jorge. We should remember that he was a member of the Nasa Quiwe Cooperative that was established by the national government, precisely for the purpose of rebuilding the area. I have been told that Jorge was a protagonist and a guiding light in that cooperative. I will never forget his words and tears and attitude (at that time he was both my pastor and my brother) when, during the evening hours

of 7 June 1994, the first helicopter arrived at the place where we had gathered with the students of the indigenous seminary and with many other indigenous people who had survived the destruction of the village of Irlanda. It was very difficult to convince him to leave us and that we would wait until the next day (or until whenever) to depart from that place. He wanted to remain with us and made a decision to leave only when he was told that his presence was more necessary in Belalcázar.

Jorge's pastoral zeal was a courageous zeal – courageous in the sense that he said what needed to be said and spoke with charitable clarity; courageous also in the sense that he was willing to take the risks that were demanded by his ministry. For some time he had to administer the affairs of the Prefecture from the town of La Plata and he agreed to that situation only because the national army asked him to do so (the army was aware of the threats and assassination plans that the FARC had directed against him). Father's pastoral zeal was nourished by and rooted in the Church's doctrine and that zeal was strengthened by his faithful adherence to the Magisterium. Certainly one of the most fruitful periods of his priestly ministry was the time that he ministered as a parish priest in Medellín. Bishop Tulio Botero Salazar had asked the community to take charge of the administration of a parish in a marginalized area of the diocese. Thus, the parish of Saint Vincent was established in the neighborhood of Córdoba. There, Jorge not only revealed his generous dedication in serving the community, but also manifested his visionary and administrative abilities as he put into practice the orientations and guidelines of Vatican II. As a result of his ministry that was supported by his confreres, (José Manuel Segura, Álvaro Quevedo, and others), the parish became known as a "model parish" in Colombia. In that parish, the Council's guidelines regarding the participation of the laity, liturgical renewal, and the organization of apostolic groups became a reality. Saint Vincent's parish was a place that many priests visited because they wanted to see how the teachings of the Council could be implemented in their own place of ministry. The parish became a true pastoral laboratory. The parish

community was composed of very Vincentian groups of persons: men and women who were marginalized, men and women who were the most abandoned members of society. Yet Jorge reached out to all those individuals with the spirit of Saint Vincent and, at the same time, dedicated his time and his effort to their human and Christian promotion. The archbishop affectionately and lovingly called Jorge, *the slum priest*.

Jorge's simplicity and austerity were a manifestation of his piety. He was not pompous nor did he accumulate superfluous material goods. It would be difficult to find another bishop who, at the time of his death, left the assets that my brother left, practically nothing.

His love for the Congregation was both profound and endearing and was expressed in a thousand different ways. Indeed, one of those most profound expressions can be found in his gesture at the time when he had completed his ministry as bishop and after he had cared for his aged mother – that gesture of placing himself in the hands of his superiors and a willingness to do whatever they requested. That love was expressed in his unrestrained obedience – something that was not always easy because much was asked of him. He was a member of the provincial council and assistant provincial during the time that Luis A. Mojica was Visitor; he was also a formator and in charge of parish missions; he ministered in Bolivia and in the Montería Province of Colombia. During the final months of his life, he accepted the decisions of his superiors even though those decisions were difficult. There are some documents that reveal his concern for the present and the future of the Congregation and the province. He was pained by the abandonment of our ministry of popular missions. On more than one occasion, I had the opportunity to dialogue with him and, therefore, became aware of his concerns. I was impressed, when, two or three days before his death, he spoke deliriously and without coherence and repeated for many minutes the words: “the seminary, the seminarians, they are in the seminary but they are not of the seminary....” I wondered and I keep wondering what pastoral, priestly, and Vincentian concerns about formation could have been going through my brother's exhausted mind.

Jorge was a man of faith, but a faith that went beyond words, a faith that informed his whole being and all his activity. During the long and painful days of his final illness, he edified people with his attitudes and words, which expressed a total abandonment into the hands of God. Everything could be summarized in an event that for us, his seven brothers who accompanied him, was shockingly distressing. When a combination of severe cardiac, renal, and pulmonary complications produced a serious situation with regard to his health, we listened to the suggestions of one of his doctors who offered three distinct procedures: intubation, open-heart surgery, or dialysis. The first option would have prolonged his life in an almost artificial way; the second option entailed the almost certain risk of death (the other doctors had assured us that, in his condition, Jorge would not be able to endure surgical intervention and, therefore, his chances of survival were minimal). The third option was not only as risky as surgery but, given the condition of his heart, if he survived, would mean that during the time he had left, he would have to undergo dialysis three times a week (and each session would be a four-hour procedure). We had to make a decision and so while we were all gathered beside his bed, Jorge, still lucid, told us categorically: look, I learned from Saint Vincent that, during times of illness, the will of God is expressed through the members of the medical profession. I accept with absolute tranquility, and as the will of God, whatever the doctors decide.

During the funeral celebration, as I thanked all those individuals who had accompanied us, I said that Jorge, my dear brother, was a just man in the fullest sense of that biblical word – and here I repeat those words, *Jorge was a just man!*

All that I have stated here is but a small example of what Jorge might have said or written. These thoughts have flowed from my heart. As a homage to my brother, I share these words in a loving manner with the members of my family, with my confreres, and with all the members of the Vincentian Family.

Translated: Charles T. Plock, CM