

Vincentian Missionaries, Martyrs for the Faith

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INTRODUCTION

It was Blessed John Paul II who wrote: *A sign of the truth of Christian love, ageless but especially powerful today, is the memory of the martyrs. Their witness must not be forgotten. They are the ones who have proclaimed the Gospel by giving their lives for love. The martyr, especially in our own days, is a sign of that greater love which sums up all other values (Incarnationis mysterium, #13).*

Those words of John Paul II have not been forgotten by the church in Spain or by the Congregation of the Mission in Spain. Thirteen years later, on October 13th, 2013, in the city of Tarragona and at the conclusion of the laborious process of these Causes, five hundred twenty-two martyrs were beatified, men and women from various dioceses and religious congregations in Spain, victims of the religious persecution that occurred in Spain during the twentieth century.

As of now their names have been written in the *Martyrology* of the Church and they will be the object of our veneration and prayers. This day will also be written into the history of the Congregation in Spain as an historical and memorable day because eleven priests and three brothers were beatified. This day is just as memorable for the Company of the Daughters of Charity because twenty-seven Sisters and one daughter of Mary of the Miraculous Medal were also beatified. Here, I want to offer a simple homage to the fourteen Vincentian Missionaries, now blessed, and also, I want to express my gratitude for their witness to the faith.

A GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE

The Cause of the fourteen Vincentian Missionaries, headed by Father Fortunato Velasco Tobar, had been long awaited and was joyfully concluded with the decree of Pope Francis (July 5, 2013). This decree reinforces the desire of the Congregation in Spain that we do not want to forget those persons who, for the cause of Christ, suffered a violent death as they offered the greatest witness of the faith. We do not want

to forget those who so loved Christ that they poured out their blood in his name. We cannot forget these confreres who so loved God, the Church and the Congregation that they offered their very life.

Those fourteen Missionaries (Fortunato Velasco, Leoncio Pérez, Luis Aguirre, Tomás Pallarés, Salustiano González, Antonio Carmanú, Ireneo Rodríguez, Gregorio Cermeño, Vicente Vilumbrales, Narciso Pascual, Amado García, Andrés Avelino, Ricardo Atanes y Pelayo José), were martyred in distinct regions of Spain (Teruel, Seu de Urgel, Guadalajara-Sigüenza, Asturias), and died as the result of cruel and vicious torture. We must remember that their physical suffering was accompanied by spiritual suffering which was no less painful. There is no doubt about the fact that they have obtained the palm of martyrdom and that they are present to us today and will be remembered forever.

All of these martyrs were sons of families who had strong Christian roots. They were members of a people who for centuries had their feet firmly planted on the land they cultivated and their eyes firmly fixed on the heaven they hoped for. These Servants of God lived during one of the most tragic eras of the history of Spain: the revolution of 1934 and the beginning of the civil war... a war between Spaniards that encompassed the years 1936-1939. The civil war is the social/political context that resulted in the death of the majority of the confreres, but they are not the victims of the civil war. Rather, they are the victims of religious persecution, two very distinct concepts. Unfortunately, every war claims innocent victims. Mothers cried countless tears for their dead sons who died as participants in one or another faction of the conflict. Every innocent person who dies deserves our respect and our compassion.

For this group of confreres who were victims of the religious persecution, a new path was opened to them, which led to their martyrdom. They died for the faith, because they were members of a religious group. They did not die because of their political beliefs. The narrative of events surrounding their final days is truly horrifying: fugitives, hiding, denounced, tortured, and ultimately, killed. Prayer and the intercession of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal sustained them. Who can deny the fact that they never harmed anyone? Who were their enemies? These confreres were courageous Missionaries. Prayer and the Eucharist made them strong, and it was with this strength that they confronted death and spoke words of forgiveness to their executioners. It was with this strength that they entrusted their life to Our Lady, and prayed like Jesus for their executioners: *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do* (Lk. 23:34).

Martyrdom is the seal of love and commitment. Vincent de Paul referred to it in this way: *"There is no greater act of love than that of martyrdom"*. On another occasion he said, *"The salvation of people, and*

our own, is a good of such magnitude it deserves to be bought no matter what the price. It matter not if we die in the fight. Only let us die with our weapons in our hands, and happy, for by our death the Company will not be the poorer, because, sanguis martyrum, semen est Christianorum" (ABELLY II: 168).

JOY AND COMMITMENT

The celebration of October 13th in Tarragona was a joyful occasion but, at the same time, it was an occasion for further commitment, one we must continue to concretize in the various initiatives that the fruit of the Year of Faith which ended in November. The celebration of the beatification of this group of confreres has significance for the Congregation in Spain and throughout the world only if we are able to be strengthened in our own faith and take up the torch that has been lighted by their hope, and live with a charity that acts justly. This celebration will have meaning for us if in every local community worldwide where Vincentians serve we do not hide the light of faith under the table but place it on a lampstand, giving witness to the living God. We glorify our martyrs if we become ever more aware that the path along which the Congregation must travel: the way of faith, hope and service on behalf of those who are poor. This is also the path that each one of us should travel, with joy and new hearts of flesh.

In the universal Church and also in our Congregation we need the witness of the martyrs to learn anew the lesson of their sacrifice. At a time when we are surrounded by ideologies that deny the presence of the living God and are opposed to the faith, the martyrs, through their intercession and example, help us to remain strong in our faith. The Church places these martyrs before us as examples of peace, forgiveness, fidelity, and compassion toward the world. The Church does not point a finger at those responsible for their death of these confreres, but rather highlights the potential of humanity that is enclosed in those lives that were offered to God.

The martyrdom of these confreres is a gift and a grace, a grace that invites us to remain faithful. Their witness as martyrs is very important but we must recognize that their martyrdom was the result of a lifetime of on-going fidelity. Perhaps we are not called to a bloody martyrdom, but we are called to be faithful. We are called to give daily witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor. Witnesses are only credible if they live with the love of the children of God. That is what the world expects of us as Vincentians.

If the Church and the Congregation glorify these Servants of God, it is not to honor them, as they already rejoice in the promise of the Lord: *the Father will honor whoever serves me* (Jn. 12:26). Rather, we honor these martyrs in order to take up the heritage of their witness

which commits us to be the Lord's witnesses. The martyrs, however, are not only an example, but they are also our powerful intercessors in the struggle of faith and the search for peace.

CONCLUSION: blessed are you

The profound theological meaning of beatification is found in Jesus' words: *"Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* (Mt. 5:11-12). We celebrate the Lord's words fulfilled in them: *"Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for there is the kingdom of heaven"* (Mt. 5:10). The martyrs help us to be aware of the journey to the heavenly Jerusalem.

The martyrs preach silently but eloquently, enabling the Church to grow, not from a perspective of strength but one of weakness. Death, which the world views as defeat, becomes a sign of victory to the eyes of faith. Thus, the words of Tertullian's have a profound theological meaning: *"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians"*. The Church has been esteemed as a result of the admirable witness of the holy martyrs who proclaim anew Jesus' resurrection. In the last century, the Congregation has been esteemed in Spain. St. Vincent said, *"For one Missioner who has given his life for the love of God, the goodness of God will raise up many others to do the good he will have left undone"* (CCD: XI: 366) May we continue to be esteemed for our love and commitment to the poor. May the blood shed by these fourteen confreres continue to be the seed of new vocations to the Congregation.

Translated from Spanish by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.