

Five Snapshots of Lesser-Known Vincentian “Saints”

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In 1918 the historian, Lytton Strachey, stated that, when writing history, less is often more. In other words, true selectivity is much more important than volume. He wrote: “It is not by the direct method of scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict a singular epoch (or person). If he is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy... He will row out over the great ocean of material and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket which will bring to the light of day some characteristic specimen... to be examined with a careful curiosity.”¹

Surely few events say more about a person than his death. Death not only closes life, it defines it. Christians have always regarded martyrdom as the preeminent form of the following of Christ. From the earliest time, martyrs captured the Christian imagination and inspired in others incredible heroism in living the gospels even to death.

Some, of course, renounce their faith rather than die a martyr’s death. But for others, even sometimes for people whose lives up until that time seemed mediocre, death is their finest hour. Shakespeare says of Macbeth: “Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it. He died as one that had been studied in his death to throw away the dearest thing he owned as ’twere a careless trifle.”²

In this brief conference, I offer a snapshot of the death of five lesser-known martyrs in our Vincentian Family. As the author of the second letter of Peter puts it, each of them, in times of persecution, was like “a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”³

¹LYTTON STRACHEY, *Eminent Victorians* (1918), as cited in JOSEPH ELLIS, *Founding Brothers* (New York: Vintage, 2000), ix.

²*Macbeth*, Act. I, Scene IV (Forres. The palace).

³2 Peter 1:19.

1. Thaddeus Lee

We know very little of Thady Lee and some of what we do know is uncertain. In the writings of St. Vincent he appears only once, in a postscript to a letter that Vincent wrote to Lambert aux Couteaux, the superior in Poland, on March 22, 1652.

Poor Brother Lye, who was in his native place, fell into enemy hands. They crushed his skull and cut off his feet and hands in the presence of his mother.⁴

Thaddeus Lee was born in 1623 in Tuogh, Ireland (near Adare, in County Limerick). He entered the Congregation of the Mission in Paris on October 21, 1643, and took his vows on October 7, 1645. While still a student (for that reason St. Vincent calls him "Brother"), he was sent to Ireland. He was probably among the eight missionaries whom St. Vincent mentions in his letter of October 15, 1656, to Edmund Dwyer, the Bishop of Limerick.⁵ Unfortunately, the list of those who comprised this group is incomplete, though St. Vincent mentions that five were Irish. What is certain is that Thady Lee was in Ireland in 1651, when one of Cromwell's generals, Henry Ireton, laid siege to and captured Limerick. At first, St. Vincent thought that most of the confreres were among those "whom the English put to death at the capture of Limerick,"⁶ but afterwards he received news that several had escaped. It was in this context that he announced to Lambert aux Couteaux the martyrdom of "poor Brother Lye."

In 1747, Pierre Collet wrote this about Lee's death:

Of the three missioners who had remained in Ireland only two returned to Paris, after having passed at Limerick through all the terrors of pestilence and war. The third finished his course there: the others disguised themselves and escaped as they could. One of them retired to his own country with the Vicar-General of Cashel. The other found in the mountains a pious woman who concealed him for two months. A brother (Thady Lie) who waited on them was less fortunate, or rather more so. The



⁴SV IV, 343.

⁵SV III, 79-80.

⁶SV IV, 341.

heretics having discovered his retreat massacred him under the eyes of his mother. They smashed his head, after having cut off his feet and hands, an inhuman and barbarous punishment which served to show the priests what they might expect should they be captured.⁷

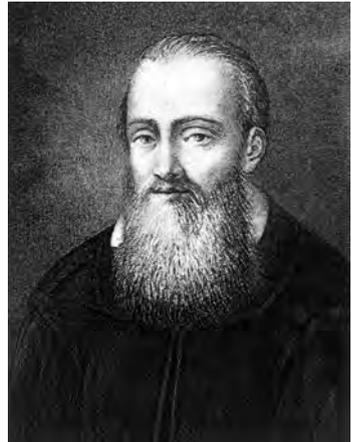
At a Provincial Council meeting, held in St. Joseph's, Blackrock, on November 7, 1917, this terse decision was made: that the case of Brother Lee, martyred near Limerick, be taken up and further investigations be made in order to promote his beatification. But Thaddeus Lee will probably never be beatified, since we know too little about him.

So, the first martyr in our Vincentian Family was a seminarian whom St. Vincent had known personally in Paris. He died isolated from his companions, tortured as his mother looked on.

2. Jean Le Vacher

Many also doubt whether Jean Le Vacher will ever be beatified, even though in 1885 the Superior General, Antoine Fiat, wrote: "Fr. Jean Le Vacher was a true saint and a glorious martyr. How I would like to introduce the cause of his beatification! Among the sons of St. Vincent it seems to me that there is no one more worthy than he."

Jean was born in Val-d'Oise, France, on March 15, 1619, and entered the Congregation of the Mission with his brother Philippe on October 5, 1643. He was ordained a priest in 1647 and went to Tunis almost immediately. Within a year after his arrival, the superior of the mission there died, as did the French Consul. So Jean, at the age of 29, became head of the mission and French Consul. Two years later he also became Vicar Apostolic. In 1666 he returned to France, but two years later was sent to Algiers as Vicar Apostolic of Algiers and Tunis. In 1673 he became the French Consul in Algiers. That is the root of the problems surrounding his beatification. Jean was a zealous missionary, working especially among the slaves in the capital, whom he estimated to number about



⁷PIERRE COLLET, *La Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*, Nancy 1748, II, 471-472.

15,000. But he was also the Consul, a difficult political position at a time when relations between France and Algeria steadily worsened.

In late June 1683, fighting broke out as the French fleet began to bombard Algiers. At the same time a plague raged within the city. The Turkish forces sent Le Vacher to mediate peace. He, two Turkish diplomats, and an interpreter arrived under a white flag at the French admiral's ship. Admiral Duquesne was inflexible in negotiations and yelled at Le Vacher with disdain: "You're more a Turk than a Christian!" The French were deceived by one of the Turkish diplomats, called Mezzomorto, who promised to work with them, so that they could regain control in Algeria. But, once back on land, he himself seized power and began to fire at the fleet again. When the French retaliated, he arrested Le Vacher and the few other French citizens who remained in the capital.

Le Vacher's martyrdom took place on July 16, 1683, toward sunset, on a small pier in the port. He was asked to renounce his faith and declare himself a Muslim. Instead, he bid farewell to the Christian slaves in a loud, clear voice and exhorted them to remain firm in their faith. He was tied to a wooden frame which was then attached to the mouth of a cannon. Then there was a touching moment which I find encouraging to recall in the midst of all the strife in the Middle East and North Africa today. Witnesses state that none of the Muslims present was willing to light the fuse. A group of Jews were present also, but none of them was willing. Finally, a renegade Christian did the job. Le Vacher was blown to pieces. Ten other Frenchmen followed him to the same type of death.

The French Campaign was ultimately unsuccessful since Admiral Duquesne had to return to France because of a lack of supplies.

Actually the cause of Jean Le Vacher's beatification did begin in 1923, but little progress has been made.

Because of his political role, some question whether he was really a martyr. Reading the accounts of his death, I have little doubt myself. He died professing his faith courageously and encouraging others to profess it too.

3. Sr. Marguerite Rutan

Marguerite Rutan was born in Metz in 1736. There, at the age of 20, she began her postulancy in a hospital as a Daughter of Charity. A year later, on her birthday, she entered the Seminary in Paris and just five months later she was sent to serve in a hospital in Pau. She had the happiness of seeing her two sisters enter the Company shortly after her and the sadness of seeing both of them die at a young age. From Pau she moved to several other hospitals, finally arriving in Dax, where she became Sister Servant in 1779.

Ten years later, with the outbreak of the Revolution, life became increasingly difficult for the sisters. Resources for the running of the hospital were scarce. The government provided fewer and fewer funds. After October 3, 1793, all sisters employed in running hospitals and schools had to choose between taking the oath or leaving the institutions where they served. Sr. Marguerite and her companions refused the oath. From then on they were constantly under surveillance, but their services in the hospital were so needed that they were allowed to continue. Finally, however, Sr. Marguerite was arrested on December 24, 1793, on charges of "corrupting and slowing down the revolutionary and republican spirit of the military who went into that hospital." What had happened in fact was that a group of soldiers, to express gratitude for the care given in the hospital, returned to play some songs for the sisters. Sr. Marguerite stopped to listen to them, gave them some refreshments and also some money. That was her crime. She was taken to the prison at the Carmelites'.



At the beginning of March 1794, a guillotine was constructed in the Place Poyanne in Dax. Simultaneously, most prisoners were transferred to Pau, making the journey on foot, but Sr. Rutan was left in the Carmelite prison, a sign that her fate had already been decided.

After a brief trial, her name was placed upon the list of those to be guillotined. An extraordinary commission arrived in Dax to review the cases of those facing capital punishment. On April 9, after a brief hearing in which the same charges were repeated, Marguerite was condemned to death. The sentence was to be carried out immediately. She and the Curé de Gaube, also condemned, were tied back to back, placed on a cart, and, surrounded by soldiers, rushed to the execution place to the sound of tambourines. Having first witnessed the death of the Curé, she asked the executioner not to touch her as she herself removed the shawl from around her shoulders. She then placed her head on the guillotine and was executed.

What I find most remarkable in reading the accounts of Marguerite's death was her dignity. She seems to have been undaunted, treating others gently, speaking her mind clearly and unflinchingly right to the end.

4. Sr. Martina Vázquez Gordo

Sr. Martina was born in Segovia, Spain on January 30, 1865. She entered the Daughters of Charity in February 1896. Martina was highly respected by her peers. As a young sister she was named superior of the Colegio of the Milagrosa in Zamora. Afterwards, she was superior of the hospital in Melilla. She returned to Madrid as a member of the Provincial Council and Assistant at the Provincial House. On various occasions the Queen sought her advice. Finally, she became superior at the hospital in Segorbe, where she initiated many works.



Those who lived with her attest that she was very intelligent and utterly absorbed in her works with the poor. They state that she was quite direct, even with those in authority. Her relatives wrote about her human qualities with great admiration.

After the breakout of the Civil War in Spain, the sisters remained in the hospital in Segorbe, where Sr. Martina, now 71 years of age, continued to serve. On July 27, 1936, militia men stormed the hospital with guns drawn and expelled the sisters, leaving them on the street. They sought refuge with a former student from one of their schools, staying there in seclusion until October.

Then one night, militiamen entered the house suddenly and went straight to Sr. Martina's room where she lay in bed. Ironically, she had recently cared for one of the group's leaders, called "Marchen," in the hospital. They shouted: "Get up. Get dressed, and come with us to make a declaration." She replied: "Did you come to get me to make a declaration or to kill me?" Martina's farewell to her sisters was simple: "Good-bye. See you in heaven." She was pushed into a car.

When they reached the main highway outside town, Martina said to her escort, "Are you going to kill me? If so, there's no need to go any further. Do it right here." They stopped and tied her to a tree. They wanted her to turn away from them so that they could shoot her in the back, but she refused. Rather, she said, "I want to see the face of those who kill me because they are the same faces of those whom I have fed so many times to kill their hunger." After blessing herself, she stated, "You can shoot now." They shot her. It was the 28th of October 1936.

What struck me most in reading the accounts of Sr. Martina's death? It was utterly senseless. She was killed by fanatics, whose

relentless promotion of their own ideals led them to combat, even hate, those who had other ideals. Martina's ideals as a Daughter of Charity, serving the poor each day, were quite clear to her. She was ready to die for them.

5. Joseph Chow Tsi-Che

Did you ever want to be pope? I have heard Catholics say, usually with a little bit of frustration and a little bit humor: "If I were pope for a week, here is what I would do...!" Of course, none of us is ever offered that opportunity!

But actually, one of our Vincenians was asked.

Joseph Chow was born in 1891 in Shijiazhuang. He made his vows in the Congregation of the Mission in 1915 and was ordained to the priesthood four years later. After serving as a professor in the minor seminary in Shijiazhuang and then as a philosophy professor in the major seminary of Chala, Beijing, he was ordained a bishop in 1931 and served initially as the Vicar Apostolic in Baoding, not far from his birthplace. In 1946, he was named the Archbishop of Nanchang, much further to the south, a city I stopped in a number of years ago.

In 1950, soon after the establishment of the revolutionary government in China, Joseph Chow received his invitation to become pope. A delegation from Beijing came to visit him. A writer of the time describes their conversation as follows:

- "You are so talented, you are just right to become head of the 'Chinese progressives.' Would you not like to become the pope of China?"
- Do you believe that I have the qualities necessary for that?
- Of course.
- In that case, I would prefer to become the pope of the whole world."

The delegation left, furious at his refusal. From then on, he was under constant surveillance. In May 1951, he was arrested, tried, found guilty, and thrown into prison. The charges against him were



that he had listened to the *Voice of America*, had opposed the reform of the Church, and had recruited members for the Legion of Mary. He remained in prison, condemned to forced-labor, for 22 years. Just before his death, he was released (so that he would not die in prison) and carried to the home of a Christian in Nanchang. There he died.

What strikes me about Joseph Chow is this. He renounced a very prestigious offer: he could have been the pope of China. Consequently, he died a long, arduous death. In the end, the government, by freeing him from prison several days before his death, wanted to deprive him of the title of martyr, but we recognize today that he was precisely that.

Tertullian tells us that "the blood of Christians is seed."⁸ The martyrs encourage us. Their strength germinates in our hearts. They demonstrate that some things are worth dying for. By their witness they proclaim that fidelity to one's commitments is more important than life itself. In the darkness of persecutions, or of oppressive regimes, martyrs are like bolts of lightning that illuminate the nighttime sky. They are like a surge of electricity that energizes those of us who continue to live on. Our Vincentian Family has been blessed by many such martyrs, from the time of St. Vincent right up to the present. Today I pray that this great "cloud of witnesses"⁹ will strengthen all of us to be faithful, no matter what the cost, even to the end.

⁸ *Apology* 50, 13.

⁹ Heb 12:1.