

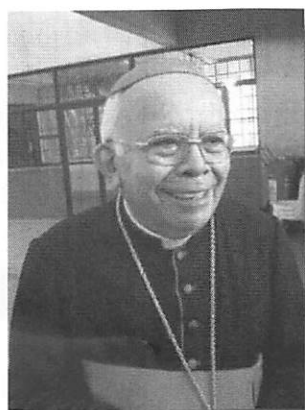
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## Special Interview

### **A Life of Daily Fidelity**

#### **Bishop José Carlos Melo, CM**

Vinícius Augusto Teixeira, CM



On 30 May 2017, shortly before his 87<sup>th</sup> birthday, our confrere and Archbishop Emeritus of Maceió, in northeastern Brazil, José Carlos Melo, died. It was not a great surprise because we already had news of his delicate state of health.

José Carlos Melo was born on 4 June 1930 in the small city of Codo (Maranhao). He began his studies in the archdiocesan seminary of São Luis, directed at that time by the Vincentians. Much taken by the virtues of his formators, he asked to be received into the Congregation

of the Mission. He was then sent to the apostolic school in Fortaleza (Ceara) to finish his basic formation. Immediately afterwards he left for Petropolis (Rio de Janeiro) where he was admitted to the Internal Seminary. There he also did his studies in philosophy and theology, preparing himself for his priestly ordination, which took place on 31 July 1955.

During the early years of his ministry, Father José Carlos worked in the formation of the diocesan clergy filling various posts in the seminaries of São Luis, Brasilia, and Assis. He was at different times professor, spiritual director, and disciplinarian. For a while, he was involved in the formation of our own seminarians in the Apostolic School at Fortaleza where he himself had been formed. In 1969, after the post-conciliar turbulence which brought about so many ruptures in the structure of the province, he participated in a course for theological and pastoral updating in Rio de Janeiro, a far reaching ecclesial initiative, coordinated by his ordination classmate, Father Hugo Paiva (+2008). Gifted with great pastoral zeal, he was designated by the Visitor as pastor of Campina Verde (Minas Gerais). Some years later, he became pastor at the Saint Vincent de Paul Sanctuary in São Paulo. In both assignments, he distinguished himself for his pastoral charity and exemplary dedication to his ministry. He left behind him wonderful memories among the faithful. In 1981, the Superior General, Richard McCullen, named him Director of the Daughters of Charity in Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais) and he proved to be outstanding for his wisdom, prudence, and good sense in the accompaniment of the Sisters. After finishing his term as Director, he was allowed to respond to the petition of the new Archbishop of São Luis who wanted him to be a formator in his seminary. In 1990, he was named Director of the Daughters of Charity in Recife (Pernambuco). He thus filled two roles: formator in the seminary and Director of the Sisters.

In 1991, Pope John Paul II named him Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Salvador (Bahia), where he remained for nine straight years and was widely recognized for his tireless availability and care in the face of any kind of need in that local church. There he was much appreciated for his minute dedication to his work, always complemented with his joy, his simplicity, and his gentle discretion in his dealings with the people; qualities which won for him the esteem and respect of all, including the clergy. His pastoral concern was perfectly in line with the motto on his episcopal coat of arms, an expression of his identification with Christ, the Good Shepherd: "He came to serve." In 1999, with the transfer of the Metropolitan Archbishop of Salvador, Bishop José Carlos was designated as Archdiocesan Administrator and, shortly afterward, he received the unusual title of Auxiliary Archbishop. In the Jubilee year of 2000, the Holy Father named him Coadjutor Archbishop of Maceió. A short time later, he took possession as titular archbishop. He tenaciously dedicated himself to the restructuring of the formation of the seminary, provisionally taking upon himself the function of rector. He erected some parishes, especially in the peripheral areas. He managed to bring the Congregation to the archdiocese, confiding to the confreres a vast mission area that was later elevated to the level of parish. In 2006, when the Holy Father accepted his resignation, he became Archbishop Emeritus, preferring to remain in Maceió. There, fragile and reserved, the Lord took him as mature fruit for eternity, granting him the consolation and the vigor of a happy resurrection.

Very appropriately, *Vincentiana* wants to honor the figure of this Vincentian bishop, recalling his example of rectitude and generosity. As the one in charge of this task, I have asked a confrere, with whom I have the joy to live and work and who knew Bishop José Carlos well, to relate to us some of his recollections. Here we have them:

“I met Bishop José Carlos Melo when I arrived at Petropolis to begin the Internal Seminary. He was “Brother” José Carlos who was already in his second year at the seminary. At that time, I could not imagine that I would be giving this testimony about the life of our dear Archbishop Emeritus of Maceió. For me, knowing Brother José Carlos, then Father José Carlos, and Bishop José Carlos Melo was a grace from God. We enjoyed living in the same house in 1969, 70, and 71 in Campina Verde, where he was pastor. Together we initiated different pastoral works in the city, which remain up to the present. I met him again when, in 1981, the province sent me to substitute for him as pastor in the Shrine of Saint Vincent in São Paulo. We remained together a few months. Before coming to Belo Horizonte as Director of the Daughters of Charity, he remained in São Paulo until the feast of the fourth centenary of the birth of Saint Vincent (1960). How well Father José Carlos organized that celebration! There his qualities and virtues as a future bishop were manifest. I also could see his valuable work as pastor, carrying forward his initiatives especially with families and the branches of the Vincentian Family. I accompanied, although at a distance, his work and pastoral zeal as a Bishop in Salvador as well as in Maceió. It makes me very happy to be able to affirm today, when he is already in heaven, that it was truly a grace and a blessing from God to know and live with him and admire his human, Vincentian, and priestly virtues. Bishop José Carlos was a humble pastor, very valuable in the eyes of the Good Shepherd” (Father Luiz de Oliveira Campos, CM).

The second testimony I have asked for is from a bishop who was a priest in Maceió in Bishop José Carlos’ time.

“I formed part of the presbytery of Maceió during the short time that was left in the episcopal ministry of Bishop José Carlos in the archdiocese. The bishop was a simple man, with whom it was easy to get along. He had a good sense of humor and was very courteous. He

did not have an active social life; he was rather modest, completely dedicated to the activities of his episcopal ministry. As a Vincentian, he had a great love for the seminary, always very concerned about vocations. When he arrived at Maceió as coadjutor archbishop, he humbly took on the job of rector of the seminary with a great zeal for vocations. Sometimes I saw him weep because of the economic difficulties of the seminary. At times, to overcome them, he made use of the savings he had in reserve for his old age. As archbishop emeritus, he humbly withdrew, never interfering in the pastoral work of his successor for whom he always had great respect. Memories of his presence remain in the history of the church of Maceió: the priests he ordained and, above all, what he loved, what he welcomed, what, with deep faith, he tried to carry out in his daily life to make the church grow in the love of God and neighbor. May Christ the Lord grant to Bishop José Carlos the reward of good and faithful servants” (Henrique Soares da Costa, Bishop of Palmares (Pernambuco)).

To remember the person of Bishop José Carlos with gratitude and appreciation is the least those of us who received so much encouragement from him in the discernment of God’s call can do. Personally, I had the satisfaction of knowing him in Salvador in the beginning of the decade of the 90s, in his status as auxiliary bishop. Once a month he would come to our parish to celebrate the 7:30 a.m. Sunday Mass, at which I was an altar server. His goodness attracted us, as well as the attention he gave to everyone who approached him. It was no different when our pastor presented me, telling him of my liking for Saint Vincent de Paul. He promised me a book and he asked me to visit him in his residence next to the seminary. I did so with an adolescent’s enthusiasm for new things. From that first visit, he spoke to me many times of the veneration he had for our Founder and of his happiness in belonging to the Congregation of the Mission. In this way, the bishop became the privileged mediator

of what the Lord had in store for me. I know wherever he went as priest or bishop, his jovial personality and his spiritual fatherliness always encouraged countless others in the following of Christ.

In 2010, I, together with another confrere, received diaconate ordination at the hands of Bishop José Carlos; the celebration required great effort from him, most of all because of the limits imposed by old age. That occasion was also his last encounter with the confreres of the province and he greeted with fraternal affection his companions from his early years: Father Getulio Grossi, for the help he gave him in his studies in Petropolis; Father João Saraiva (+2011) for the example of a holy life; Father Luiz Campos for their good times together in Campina Verde and São Paulo; Brother Miguel Generoso for many shared joys, etc. When he became archbishop emeritus, he was invited by our Visitors to return to the province so he could receive all the necessary care for his health, but he wished to remain in Maceió until the end.

In this moment of saying farewell to Bishop José Carlos, we can do nothing better than manifest our gratitude for what was perhaps his “trademark”: everyday fidelity. He certainly was not the most eloquent preacher, the most skillful writer, the most innovative bishop, the ablest manager. He was much more. He was the good and faithful servant who did his best to do everything well: to be upright in all the tasks that were part of his ministry, to be always present in what he was supposed to carry out, to be understanding without failing to be wise, always moved by his deep love for Christ and the Church. He demonstrated that he had learned from Saint Vincent “not only to do good, but to do it well (...) in the Spirit of Our Lord, in the way Our Lord did it on earth, and purely for the glory of God” (CCD XI, 389; Conference 177, Repetition of Prayer, 25 November 1657). On the day his eyes closed upon this world,

we heard in the liturgy this forceful affirmation of the Apostle Paul, so well etched in the life and pastoral work of Bishop José: “Yet I consider life of no importance to me, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to bear witness to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24). I thank our Lord for the opportunity of knowing Bishop José Carlos Melo and for having the seed of the Vincentian vocation tended by his hands as father, pastor, and confrere. To these words of thanks doubtlessly are united those of everyone who recognized his modest and persevering everyday fidelity.

Translated: Joseph V. Cummins, CM