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Martyrs in Asia

edited by
Fabrizio Meroni



*They Crowned their Apostolate
with the Glory of Martyrdom*

Pope Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*



P E R C O R S I C U L T U R A L I



Fabrizio Meroni (edited by)
Martyrs in Asia

Percorsi culturali (n.s.) 27

ISBN 978-88-401-5053-6

© 2019 Urbaniana University Press
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Pontifical Missionary Union
Via di Propaganda, 1C – 00187 Roma

www.october2019.va

Front Cover

Three missionary priests of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Jean Wauthier, Louis Leroy, and Michel Coquelet (from right to left), in Nam Lieng (Laos), 1960, at the side of the Apostolic Vicar of Vientiane, Mgr. Étienne Loosdregt. They will be martyred shortly thereafter. The picture has been granted by the Oblate Postulation for the Martyrs of Laos.

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Finito di stampare nel mese di aprile 2019



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Preface

Fabrizio Meroni

To reignite in the People of God the baptismal awareness of the mission of the Church, Pope Francis designated an Extraordinary Missionary Month for October 2019. This event is to occur in conjunction with the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Pope Benedict XV's Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, addressing the activity of the Catholic missionaries in all continents.¹ The theme provided by the Pope for the Extraordinary Missionary Month is *Baptized and Sent: the Church of Christ on Mission in the World*, a theme which combines the pastoral concern of Pope Benedict XV with the missionary vitality expressed by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "Missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church's activity" (EG 15).

The aim of Pope Francis is to reinvigorate the *missio ad gentes*, in order to fulfill with new enthusiasm Jesus Christ's command to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Mission makes the Church,² and every baptized person is an Apostle sent to proclaim Jesus Christ and His Word of salvation "to the ends of the earth" (Ac 1:8). Witnessing Christ, transmitting the Christian Faith, and sharing the Good News of the Gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit is the very essence of the missionary identi-

¹ The designation occurred during the Angelus Prayer on World Mission Sunday, October 22nd, 2017. The speech given by Pope Francis is available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2017/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20171022.html.

² F. MERONI (ed.), *Mission Makes the Church*, Aracne Editrice, Canterano (Roma) 2017.

ty inherent to all Christians in any time, yesterday as much as today and always.

However, “for the man who enters upon the apostolic life there is one attribute that is indispensable. It is of the most critical importance [...] that he has sanctity of life. For the man who preaches God must himself be a man of God” (*Maximum Illud* 26). In that respect, Martyrs stand out as the highest example of missionary disciples of the Cross and the resurrection of Jesus, and thus hold a central place in the celebrations of the Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019. As living witnesses of the Church’s Faith in Christ, their acts and deeds were God’s hands and feet, in carrying forward the work of evangelization throughout the world. They made Jesus known to those who had never encountered Him, and “they crowned their apostolate with the glory of martyrdom, entrenching the Faith at the cost of their blood” (*Maximum Illud* 5).

Martyrs are indeed the seed³ from which the Church has flourished throughout the history of salvation, and today their memory continues to guide the faithful wherever the Christian mission is challenged by hardships, injustices, and suffering. The case of Asia is paradigmatic. The accounts of the life and death of hundreds of Martyrs over the past centuries and in more recent times, are the bedrock of the missionary baptismal identity of millions of Christians, who are called to bear testimony to Jesus’ teachings amid extremely adverse circumstances.

Here is why the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU) devoted this editorial endeavor to “Martyrs in Asia,” as a contribution to the Pontifical Mission Societies’ engagement in laying the groundwork to the Extraordinary Missionary Month October

³ “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Christians”. See TERTULIAN, *Apologeticus*, 50,13 – CCL 1,171.

2019 upon request of the Holy Father.⁴ The book features an introduction by Archbishop Thomas Menampampil SDB, India, and describes the path to martyrdom of Christians, both missionary religious and lay, in selected Asian countries, namely Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar.⁵ Furthermore, it provides theological and pastoral reflections with the aim to inspire the work of evangelization of the local Churches and their faithful.

“Martyrs in Asia” originates from a Study Seminar organized at the Vatican by the International Center for Mission and Formation (CIAM), in June 2018. The Study Seminar convened a group of prominent scholars and experts on the history of the mission in Asia, and was coordinated by the journalist and writer Paolo Affatato, responsible for the Asia Desk of “Fides”, the news Agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies. The editorial work concerning the publication was taken care of by Emiliano Stornelli, Chairman of RSC Religion & Security Council.

“The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission” (*Redemptoris Missio* 42). The meaningful stories of the “Martyrs in Asia” tell us about a testimony that – by

⁴ On the same day of the Angelus Prayer on World Mission Sunday, Pope Francis sent a letter to Cardinal Fernando Filoni, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and President of the Supreme Council of the Pontifical Mission Societies. He entrusted him with “the work of preparing for this event, especially by raising awareness among the particular Churches, the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and among associations, movements, communities, and other ecclesial bodies”. The letter is available at <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2017/10/22/0727/01588.html#ing/>.

⁵ *Omnis Terra* – PMU CIAM Publications is not responsible for the content of any translation into English of texts and quotations from other languages included in the chapters of this book. All chapters will be available in open access on the website of the Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019 (www.october2019.va/en.html/).

...serving the neighbor through the language of God's mercy and truth – succeeded to move millions of hearts and minds to “open wide the doors for Christ”.⁶ Jesus was with them (cf. Mt 28:20) in the supreme moment of the martyrdom, materializing through the Paschal mystery to seal their achievement of a fully divine life. Blessed and Saints, they established a solid platform for the announcement of salvation to all the Asian people. They still intercede for their Churches, fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, called to witness the same Gospel today so to share the same divine life offered by the Church in the Sacraments, in the proclamation of God's Word, and in the Christian charity of her sons and daughters.

Vatican City
January 25th, 2019

Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle

⁶ “Homily of His Holiness John Paul II for the Inauguration of His Pontificate”, 22nd October 1978, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1978/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19781022_inizio-pontificato.html/.

Introduction

Thomas Menamparampil

Martyrdom is mysticism, it is ecstasy. Usually we concentrate on the painful side of martyrdom, but its most significant dimension is the martyr's intimate experience of Christ at the moment of his self-giving. It is an ecstatic surrender to the Lord whom he loves. It is the peak moment of his life-choice. It is saying 'Yes' to the Master that sums up his life. It is not a dreaded moment, but a coveted one. So we see people in the early Church handing themselves over to the executioners by their own choice, fearlessly welcoming the ecstatic experience, which necessarily involves a supreme sacrifice. So we see the early Christian community celebrating the 'birth' of the victim who enters into a new life in the company of Christ.

It was this understanding of martyrdom that strengthened fidelity in the believing community. And the Christian community grew. As Tertullian cried: "The blood of the martyrs is the *seed of the Christians*" (*Apologeticus*, 50,13). So it happened that, in conjunction with the increasing number of martyrs under the Roman regime, the Christian faith spread from end to end of the Empire and beyond. Christians also suffered from severe persecution in Persia, Ethiopia, and elsewhere; but, the Christian flock expanded in all directions. On the Eastern Continent, new Christian communities arose in Central Asia, China, South India, and Sri Lanka.

One thing it is to study martyrdom from a believer's point of view, another to look at it with the eye of a casual observer. We have described the *believer's vision*. A fellow citizen could only see a group of stubborn dissenters who refused to perform a

harmless symbolic gesture, accepting the Roman authority and acknowledging their common heritage. However, for the faithful it was a matter of rejecting their own basic beliefs.

This distance between the believer's lived experience of a profound spiritual reality, and the neutral observer's difficulty in understanding his unbending determination, would remain down the centuries to our own days. An Emperor who felt slighted could go to any length in inflicting pain, as the records show. But it is not the pain that makes a martyr, but the believer's *motivation*. Augustine said: "Martyrem non facit poena sed causa" (*Epist.* 89.2). In Christian vocabulary, this is the *Faith*. Tacitus speaks of an "ingens multitudo" (*Annales* XIV, 8) that opted to perish rather than oblige the Roman authorities. Some place the numbers at 10,000, others at 100,000. In any case, immense numbers opted for Christ, especially during the period of Decius and Diocletian.

Let us return to Asia. In the year 635, a Christian monk by the name of Alopen set up a monastery in Changan, the capital of the Middle Kingdom, as China was then known. The western records describe him as a Nestorian, while in eastern memory he belonged to the Eastern Church. In a short time, several monasteries were built in different parts of the empire, and the monks translated 530 Christian books into Chinese. The Emperor approved these initiatives and Christianity flourished.

Subsequently, a revival of indigenous loyalties in the country brought along a rejection of everything that had an *alien origin*. Buddhism and Christianity were suppressed by an imperial edict in 845. Since then, this form of xenophobia has troubled the life of the Christian communities in Asian countries all through history. In the majority of cases, the persecutions of Christians in Asia were driven by the alleged *otherness* of Christianity. The Church was favoured in Persia as long as it was persecuted in Rome, but it was hunted down from the time Christianity became the official religion of Rome during Constantine's era.

Between the eleventh and thirteenth century, there was a revival of eastern Christianity in China. Christian communities spread especially among *ethnic minorities* like the Keraites (about 200,000 Christians), Uighurs, and Ongut Turks. Mongol rulers inter-married with these communities. Kublai Khan wrote to the Pope asking for a hundred missionaries. By the time Fr. John de Montecorvino OFM arrived in China in 1294, the Emperor was already dead, but the Franciscan friar managed to lead an Ongut Turk prince to the Christian faith, and gave him the name of George. Soon enough the number of Christians increased to about 6,000. Marco Polo met many of them in different parts of China. The New Testament was translated into Uighur. By the 14th century, the number of Christians in China had risen to 30,000, but shortly thereafter the situation turned hard again for them due to a new *national awakening*.

From this brief account of the early period of mission history in Asia, we can draw important conclusions. First of all, ethnic minorities are usually open to foreign ideas (ideologies, religions, cultural trends), which help them to assert their individual identity as distinct from the dominant community. As a consequence, every national awakening straight away seeks to cut off any foreign influence, especially amongst ethnic minorities. If the first tendency opened the door for Christianity into many Asian countries, the second slammed the same door shut with a bang. Similarly, since foreign ethnic groups like the Mongols and the Manchus welcomed Christianity when they ruled China, their overthrow meant a rejection of the Christian religion. Christianity was yet to find a welcome among the Han Chinese.

In this respect, let us compare the Christian missionary styles to the Buddhist approach. It is said that Buddhism, which also was a foreign religion in China, developed early enough the *skill to adapt itself* to the Chinese ethos and religious psyche, and so it emerged more successful than Christianity. Even today we no-

tice an eagerness in China to transform anything they take from outside (for instance, communism, capitalism, religious beliefs), imposing upon it what they call 'Chinese characteristics'.

To be sure, all great societies and civilizations found it very hard to give up the core assumptions of their heritage, and could not immediately embrace Christianity. The Roman elite could not yield to what it was considered an eastern superstition, as in later times the Chinese and Indian elite could not accept the superiority claims of a religion with marked western traits (though Christianity was of Asian origin, when it was brought to Asia it was in a Hellenized-Westernized form).

Accordingly, the Jesuit Visitor-General Alessandro Valignano suggested that Christianity had to be presented with Chinese characteristics from the beginning, to make it meaningful in the local context. The challenge was accepted by Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci in 1583, who decided to make themselves Chinese in language, culture, dress, style, attitude, and mentality, so that they could be understood and become acceptable. Therefore, many walls were tore down and many bridges built. This made it easy for the Han Chinese to accept a foreign idea, as they found it so Chinese. Over 2,500 people became Christians in a short time, and some even entered the Jesuit Society.

I will not go through the history of successive events and decisions that sought to reduce the 'Chinese characteristics' of Christianity, causing major troubles that the Christian community had to go through. However, it is possible to notice that, in various periods of history, persecution was associated with an *image of Christianity's alienness*. Apart from that, Christians were often caught amidst other troubles as well: clashing vested interests, political tensions, rebellions, responses, suspicions, fears, xenophobia. But no matter what the external cause, for the individual Christian believer it was a question of fidelity to the definitive choice he/she had made. This fidelity had only 'Christian

characteristics, namely generosity unto the end. There is no way of counting the number of Chinese Christians who died during the final stages of the colonial era, and in the early days of the Communist regime. Our deepest veneration goes to each one of them, as much as to all martyrs in Asia. Their sacrifice will be recounted in the chapters of this book, which will preserve their memory.

The history of martyrdom in Asia is rich in examples regarding also other countries, such as Vietnam. Though the first Vietnamese mission run by the Jesuits opened in 1615, the arrival of Alexandre de Rhodes in 1624 made a big difference. He strongly believed in the *adaptation* of the missionary team to *cultures and contexts* and in the importance of lay collaborators. The Church grew to 300,000 by 1658 in Tonkin alone. A seminary was opened in 1666 by the Foreign Missionaries of Paris (Société des Missions étrangères de Paris, MEP).

As the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Christians, the growth of the Church paves the way for more martyrs. “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” too (Jn 15:20). Persecution has not always been for reasons of alienness. A reaction always comes when *vested interests* are threatened. Jesus was persecuted, not because he had done something wrong but something right, something good. He had healed a sick man (Jn 5:16). Those with vested interests can find a ‘technical reason’ for finding fault with even some good deed. That is what is happening in many missionary contexts today.

The Church in Vietnam went through severe persecution for generations, which intensified under the Communist regime. It was an ongoing collective experience of martyrdom. But the Word of God did not remain “in chains” (2 Tim 2:9), and the Christian community grew precisely in troubled times. Of late, their generosity has taken Vietnamese missionaries to the ends of the earth.

When a Chinese priest James Chu entered Korea in 1794 he found 4,000 Catholics. It was not a priest who had evangelized these people; they were the *fruit of lay evangelization*. This model remains today even in the most challenging situations anywhere in the world, even where the situation has turned anti-Church and anti-religious. Chinese books had gone ahead of the missionary, which proved to be a great help. By the time that Chu was killed along with 300 companions, the number had gone up to 10,000. Tertullian was being proved right again and again.

In 1845 Andrew Kim, the first Korean priest, reached Korea from Japan. He too was to offer his life for Christ. In spite of persecutions, by 1866 the Christian numbers had risen to 23,000. The Church in Korea was to experience *several rounds of persecution*, with several MEP fathers losing their lives. Of late, freedom has come to South Korea, while the Northern situation has remained much the same. Korean missionaries too have been taking up work in different parts of the world in recent years.

The memories of past sufferings will serve as a motivation for deeper commitment to the good of society and the upliftment of the poorer sections. In a rapidly changing society it is a great missionary task to identify the cultural and ethical traditions of one's community that are under threat and defend them against erosion in a globalized world of moral indifference. Gregory of Tours taught that committed Christian life is like *spiritual martyrdom*, manifesting depth of faith and intensity of love.

Thirty-two MEP priests died in Laos during the first 25 years of their missionary work, due to fevers and ailments of all sorts. We may consider this itself *martyrdom of another sort*. Dionysius of Alexandria, in fact, considered serving the sick during pestilence martyrdom (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.22.7). This is exactly what Mother Teresa did in Calcutta.

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate took responsibility for the northern mountainous areas of Laos. As the hostile *activities of*

the armed forces increased, the missionaries had to suffer much. But they were loved by the community for their nearness to the people, respect for local customs and cultural values, and dedicated work in the field of health and education. Many of them had to pay a price for it with their lives.

Portuguese Dominicans began work in Thailand (Siam) in 1554. The Thai society, in keeping with Buddhist traditions, is usually peaceful. But during politically *disturbed times* nationalists have taken on Christians, and many have suffered. Seven blessed martyrs of Songkhorn are especially remembered. The Thais are legitimately proud of their seven martyrs. Though Catholics form only 0.4% in Thai society, they *act as a leaven* among the larger population. Martyrdom in its original sense meant 'witness'. Living one's Christian life with a sense of mission in Thai society, then, turns out to be martyrdom in its original meaning.

Looking Ahead

I would be far from suggesting that the days of *Proclamation* are over. We announce the Good News to all those who are waiting as Jesus himself did. There are so many people hungry for the word and are eager for someone who can share it. People are rushing to Taize, Lourdes, and Fatima. Asian shrines are crowded. Charismatic prayer gatherings are crammed. We have a duty to reach out to them in every context where there is an opening, in order to stimulate this hunger by a process of co-thinking with individuals and communities. It is by entering into relationships, conversation, dialogue that our work of evangelization is mostly done today, with a view to *leading to a hunger for evangelical answers*. But before we arrive at the inspired word, which plants a hunger for ultimate answers, it can be a long and painful pilgrimage beginning from the traditions and views of the local commu-

nity and neighbouring societies, and from humanity's social, philosophical and religious insights of all ages. It may be a short venture for some, but a long journey for others like Sir Galahad in search of the Holy Grail.

Courage, then, and perseverance. For many theologians, *martyrdom is 'fortitude'*, a manifestation of courage, daring, the peak event of a venturesome spiritual journey. Jesus often says, "Courage!" (Mt 9:2; 9:22; 14:7). "The gate to life is narrow and the way that leads to it hard" (Mt 7:14), and one "must take up the cross every day" (Lk 9:23) to follow Jesus and His word, like missionaries did in India.

The PIME fathers had established a field mission in Assam for quite some time. Jacopo Broy had served it generously already for 18 years when Augustin Bourry MEP was sent there in 1854. He had been eager to go to Korea or Vietnam, and so he was disappointed about India. But God had other plans and wanted him to join Nicholas Krick MEP, who had already been in the same mission for four years while trying to make his way to Lhasa. MEP missionaries had been entrusted with the task of looking after Tibet and Assam, but they could not go beyond the latter after several years of trying. Krick, however, was not a one to be discouraged, and kept moving up and down the Brahmaputra Valley seeking help from different local tribes to lead him to Tibet. He failed. Once he nearly succeeded, but was ordered back by the border guards.

For a while he stayed in Mebo, an Adi village near Pasight, hoping that they would show him the way to his destination. He got on well with the villagers for some time, but after a while he was asked to quit. And so Krick went on his final trip to Tibet with Bourry. It was a long and strenuous journey up the steep slopes of the Himalayas, which ended with the martyrdom of the two heroes at the borders. Though uncanonised, their blood has fertilized the missionary soil of northeast India

where there are 15 dioceses today. This gives hope to those other areas of Asia, where missionaries or early Christians have shed their blood, whether it be in Central or East Asia, South or Southeast Asia.

Sufferings go on. Statisticians say that there is *more persecution* in the world today than any time in the past, that more Christians are dying in our days than any other period in history. I would not like to be an alarmist. But at the same time, we may have to get ready for harder times. Aside from ongoing interferences from a secularized society, the believing community can expect harassments from reawakened forms of nationalisms and new ideologies in many parts of the world.

Consequently, *Christian communities* in Asia remain *vulnerable* from many points of view. Their external relationships are suspect, and any external loyalty is condemned. Their patriotism stands questioned whenever they oppose its exaggerated expressions that verge on fanaticism. Their immense services in the fields of healthcare, education, development, and poverty-relief are ignored. There is a biased re-interpretation of history and re-writing of text-books. Prejudices against minority religious groups are being planted into young hearts from early days. Critics of the regimes are threatened, not rarely eliminated. Officially encouraged forms of lynching get accepted as the normal way of handling local problems. Thus, martyrdom in such cases is not conferred by the civil authority, but by 'sponsored civil disorder'.

Jesus did not promise to save his people from all such troubles, but he promised to stay with them "to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). Clement of Alexandria, trying to explain the deeper meaning of martyrdom, taught that Christ is "*present*" with the *martyr* in his suffering (Strom. 4.9.75). He is always "present". And today he is present with his Church, wherever it is under hardship. Some of these hardships may be internally caused, some of them may be externally inflicted; in whatever form the

Christian believers are undergoing suffering, Jesus is there in the midst of them.

We ought to have courage, then; for God seems to say: “I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for. Then you will call me. You will come and pray to me, and I will answer you. You will seek me, and you will find me because you will seek me with all your heart” (Jer 29:11-13).



WITNESS OF FAITH: THE MARTYRS IN VIETNAM

Joseph Tran Anh Dung

The Good News of Christ was greeted in the beautiful country of Dai Viet at the beginning of the 16th century. An Imperial Decree recorded that in March 1533 – under the reign of King Lê Trang Tông (1514-1548) – a westerner named Ignatius had come to the villages of Ninh Cường and Quần Anh (Nam Chân district) and of Trà Lũ (Giao Thủy district) to silently spread the ‘heretic religion’ of Christianity. It is also mentioned that arrests of Christians were carried out in 1663 under the reign of King Lê Huyền Tông (1654-1671).¹

In the following period, hundreds of thousands of witnesses of faith, who were living peacefully among the local population, courageously gave their lives to protect their faith in Jesus Christ. They, the Martyrs of Vietnam, and their sacrifice, are the cornerstone of the history of the Vietnamese Catholic Church. The present work aims to examine the most salient phases of this history, from the beginning of the missionary endeavour to the contemporary age, providing insights, facts and figures that will help explain the importance of this phenomenon for Christians in Vietnam and for Christianity worldwide.

¹ PHAN THANH GIÀN, *Khâm định Việt sử Thông giám cương mục* [The Imperially Ordered Annotated Text Completely Reflecting the History of Viet], vol. 32, 1871, 6a-6b.

The Beginning of Evangelization

The earliest phase of the Church in Vietnam started with Ignatius in 1533. His footsteps were followed by other European missionaries of the Dominican Order, such as Luis da Fonseca, Jorge da Mota and Gaspar da Cruz, who from the Malacca archipelago arrived in Hà Tiên to sow the seeds of the Good News in 1550. Later in 1583, the missionaries Diego de Oropesa, Bartolomeo Ruiz, Pedro Ortiz, Francisco de Montilla, and four deacons from the Franciscan seminary in Manila, Philippines, reached the city of Quảng Yên, in the northern An Quảng region.

In January 1615, a boat left Macau port sailing directly to the southern region of Vietnam. After a sea journey of 12 days, the vessel arrived at Cửa Hàn port on January 18th, which is the official date of the beginning of evangelization in the South. The Italian missionary Francesco Buzomi (1576-1639), the Portuguese Diego de Carvalho (1578-1624) and António Dias (1585-?), the Japanese Joseph and Paulus Sato,² all belonging to the Jesuit Order, set foot on the land not as chaplains for Portuguese or Spanish sailors, but as religious preachers teaching catechism to the Vietnamese.

The following generations of Jesuit missionaries continued the work of evangelization. Arriving in the coastal city of Hoi An on December 1624 was Francisco de Pina (1585-1625), who was the first preacher fluent in Vietnamese and who taught the local language to Alexandre de Rhodes (1593-1660);³ Cristoforo Borri (1583-1632), spent two years in the South (1618-1620) before dy-

² A. BONIFACY, *Les débuts du Christianisme en Annam, des origines au commencement du 18e siècle*, Imp. Tonkinoise, Hanoi 1930, 16.

³ A. DE RHODES, *Divers voyages et missions du P. Alexandre de Rhodes en Chine, & autres Royaumes de l'Orient. Avec son retour en Europe par la Perse & l'Arménie*, Sebastien Cramoisy, Paris 1653, 71-72.

ing suddenly in Rome in January 1632. Alexandre de Rhodes (1593-1660) had a major influence in the research, study, and creation of the *quốc ngữ* (literally: “national language”), the Vietnamese Romanised writing based on the Latin alphabet.

Cửa Hàn, Quảng Nam, and Hội An formed the vertices of a triangle where, during the reign of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên (1563-1635), the Jesuit Order first spread the Gospel in the southern region.

The first outcome of the Jesuit missionaries’ Gospel propagation task was the establishment of the ‘Association of Catechists’, a seminary, where priests and clergymen were trained in the propagation of the Christian faith, which they pursued with great enthusiasm and passion.

The first harvest of the work carried out by this team of missionaries was the heroic martyrdom of preacher Anrê Phú Yên, who was only 19 years old. Eye witness to the martyrdom, which took place on the execution ground of Dinh Chàm, Điện Bàn district on the evening of 27th July 1644, was Alexandre de Rhodes, who had been the young martyr’s teacher.

In February 1626, lord Trịnh Tráng (1577-1657) received in audience the missionary Giuliano Baldinotti (1591-1631) in Kẻ Chợ, the capital of the southern region. However, the preaching of the Good News started giving positive results only when Alexandre de Rhodes and Pedro Marques arrived at the Cửa Bàng port, province of Thanh Hóa, on 19th March 1627, Saint Joseph’s day.

The Kẻ Chợ team of missionaries progressed daily, and with a growing number of followers, thanks to the effective cooperation of the catechists. As the need for pastoral activities increased, the preparation of catechism, prayers and verses in the Vietnamese language was undertaken by missionaries such as Gaspar do Amaral (1594-1646), António Barbosa (1594-1624) and especially Girolamo Majorica (1591-1656), who initiated this work to-

gether with the important contribution of many enthusiastic and erudite catechists.

After more than eight years of evangelization in both the northern and southern regions, de Rhodes returned to Rome and convinced the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples to publish the first two books in *quốc ngữ*, which de Rhodes himself had written in 1651. *Catechismus pro iis qui volunt suscipere Baptismum in octo dies divisus* (“Catechism in Eight Days for Those Who Want to be Baptized in order to Follow Christianity”) was made up of 319 pages, bound in a volume of 16 cm. by 21 cm. Each facing was in Latin and Vietnamese respectively.

The *Dictionarium Annamiticum-Lusitanum et Latinum* expanded over 645 pages and included a six-page foreword. The dictionary, from letter A to letter X, was made up of 900 columns, two on each page.

On 2nd August 1650, Alexandre de Rhodes delivered a detailed report to the cardinals and bishops of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples on the state of evangelization in Vietnam: “The Church in the northern region has 300,000 followers, with the number increasing by at least 15,000 faithful every year. There is the need for 300 to 400 priests to look after them: where can we find those priests if we do not create indigene missionaries? They could conceal themselves with ease when raids are conducted to arrest priests. So why not ordain the genuinely enthusiastic native preachers who live the life of a priest? To achieve this, we must immediately send Bishops to the land of evangelization.”⁴

His assessment was convincing and the Congregation lent him its support. In 1658, he established the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), whose primary task was to dispatch bishops to the

⁴ H. CHAPPOULIE, *Aux Origines d'une Eglise. Rome et les Missions d'Indochine au XVII^e siècle*, vol. 1, Bloud et Gay, Paris 1943, 103.

Far East to propagate the Christian faith with the blessing of Pope Alexander VII. Unlike the missionary preachers of other Orders, such as the Dominican, Franciscan, Augustine and Jesuit, which received the subsidies and protection of the Spanish and Portuguese governments, MEP Bishops belonged to the clergy of the dioceses spread across France. They were priests who, indicated by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, were named by the Pope as bishops and apostolic vicars.

On 9th September 1659, the *Super Cathedram* papal bull officially established the Catholic Church in Vietnam, which included two Apostolic Vicariates, in Đàng Trong (Cochinchine), from the Gianh river to the South, including the Chiêm Thành (Champa) and Chân Lạp (Cambodia) territories, under the administration of MEP Pierre Lambert de la Motte (1624-1679), who had been appointed as Bishop of Berythe and Apostolic Vicar by Pope Alexander VII on 27th July 1658; and in Đàng Ngoài (Tonkin), from the Gianh river to the north and the southern part of China, under the administration of MEP François Pallu (1626-1684), who had been appointed by Pope Alexander VII Bishop of Héliopolis and Apostolic Vicar along with de la Motte.

At the time of the promulgation of the *Instructio Vicariorum Apostolicorum* in 1659, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples entrusted de la Motte and Pallu with the task of forming an autochthonous clergy, instructing them to avoid intruding into the political sphere and to always respect the customs and traditions of the local people.

The instructions imparted to them emphasized that “the reason for the Holy See to send you to those countries with the position of bishop is to ensure that, with all available means, you will take up the responsibility of educating and helping young indigenous people to acquire sufficient capacity to become priests. You will ordain them and send them everywhere in that immense region, where they will cooperate with each other. Thanks

to your care and attention, the people will worship according to the Christian faith with all their hearts.”⁵

The first four native priests, ordained by Bishop de la Motte at the St. Joseph Seminary in Ayutthaya, capital of Siam, were two Cochinese, Joseph Trang and Luke BẾN (March 1668) and two Tonkinese John Huệ and Benedict Hiến (June 1668).⁶ In February 1670, Bishop de la Motte paid an official visit to the northern diocese, and organized the first community at Phố Hiến, Hưng Yên province, where he passed 34 decrees.⁷ He also ordained seven priests and 48 minor orders.

During Lent, Bishop de la Motte organised religious life for local women by creating the congregation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross. They lived in community under the authority of a Superior, consigning all possessions to the community. Daily, they contemplated the sorrows of Jesus on the Holy Cross, taught catechism to the poor, visited old people, sold traditional medicines and baptized the dying children of the poor in remote villages.

The Council of Notables⁸ was the organization that provided efficient aid in the evangelization with the cooperation of preachers, seminarians, religious leaders, passionate followers. All were

⁵ *Linh Mục Nguyệt San* [Monthly Bulletin Sacerdos], no. 43, Saigon, July 1965, 425-441.

⁶ A. LAUNAY, *Histoire de la mission en Cochinchine*, vol. 1, Les Indes Savantes, Paris 2000, 62.

⁷ As for the organizational structure of local Churches, see ID., *Histoire de la mission du Tonkin : documents historiques 1658-1717*, Les Indes Savantes, Paris 2000, 92-100.

⁸ The first information about the Council of Notables is mentioned in the report of François Deydier, the first MEP missionary to set foot on Vietnamese soil, dated 28th July 1668 and available in the Archive des Missions Etrangères de Paris, vol. 653, 32. See A. LAUNAY, *Histoire de la mission en Cochinchine*, 53.

enthusiastic, courageous, ready to sacrifice their own lives, to conceal and to protect the seminarians and the priests during religious persecution. Those personalities were steadfast and courageous examples that reinforced those Christian followers who were in prisons or exiled to live among the lay population in many remote and isolated areas.

The Ban of Christianity

The Promulgation of the 53 Decrees

The missionaries came to Vietnam to preach the Good News. The catechism laid the foundation of the faith in Jesus Christ. Those who received baptism and confirmation, and committed to wedlock had to be registered. The organisational system of the Church, from the parish to the diocese, including the church hierarchy, was considered an autonomous system separated from the principal royal authorities presiding over the Vietnamese territories across the country.⁹

⁹ Prior to the arrival of Christianity in the 16th century, Vietnam's history had been deeply influenced by three religions: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, which impregnated profoundly the mentality, the way of life, and the sentiment of the people. In particular, the Vietnamese society was shaped by the five Confucian principles or virtues. Humaneness or Humanity, referring to altruistic love, charity, and beneficence, as the essence of the human being. This virtue is granted to man by Heaven and, at the same time, is the means by which man may act according to this principle of Heaven to become one with it. Justice or Righteousness (Gratitude): Confucianism rests upon the belief that human beings are fundamentally good, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal endeavor, especially self-cultivation and self-creation. A strong emphasis is therefore laid upon the zeal for the good, beauty, and justice. Rites (Politeness), encompassing both respect of religious rites and good manners in the context

However, the Church and the Vietnamese State were on a collision course. The Vietnamese king was regarded as the son of God, who accepted God's mission to govern the people, and to represent them while worshiping. This could not accord with the fundamental tenets of Christianity, whereby Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Moreover, the monogamy upheld by the Church was in contrast with the polygamy practised by the king himself, and of his officials, who could ensure the continuance of their progeny by having many offspring.

of human social behaviour. It includes all human interactions with nature and a wide range of topics, such as tea drinking, mourning, governance, etc. Wisdom, is believed to be attained through contemplation of the order of Heaven, which embodies the moral order. The sage or wise is the ideal personality, someone who has attained a superior ethical, moral position, and an inner peace through the practice of this virtue. Piety (Trustfulness), including the respect and love of parents and ancestors, as well as the respect of hierarchies in society: father-son, husband-wife, elder-junior, ruler-ruled. Piety also means respect, kindness to others; love of the truth; respect of one's promises. The hierarchy of the Vietnamese society was divided into four categories: officials or civil servants, farmers (agriculture), workers (artisans), businessmen. Each Vietnamese practiced their religion according to his/her social hierarchy, belief, family situation, and origin. The Confucian morality in societal relations expected the Vietnamese individuals to follow four principles: cultivating oneself to perfection, managing the family properly, governing the country successfully, and bringing peace and equality to the world. To the Vietnamese people, *gratitude* was the foundation, the origin, the source of all the benevolence and charitableness of individuals, families, and societies. *Gratitude* is the most important pillar of the Confucian morality, and support the structure of relations on which the society is based, according to *three great moral rules*: the king/officials rule (the king and his subjects), the parents/children rule (the children towards their parents), the husband/wife rule (the relationship between husband and wife). *Gratitude* encompassed the loyalty towards the king, the children's thankfulness towards their parents, and the fidelity between husbands and wives. Confucianism influenced and impacted the ethos of the Vietnamese people, and the structures of the Vietnamese society.

That is how Vietnamese Christians started to be persecuted by the authorities. The long period of martyrdom was characterized by arrests, imprisonments, tortures, assassinations and family separations, and by the enforcement of harsh measures aimed at expelling and destroying Christianity.

The Vietnamese Catholic Church in the course of its history was affected by 53 ‘Decrees Prohibiting Christianity’ passed by the Trịnh and Nguyễn rulers between the 16th and the 18th centuries, the Tây Sơn dynasty (1778-1802) and the three kings of the Nguyễn dynasty, namely Minh Mạng (1820-1841), Thiệu Trị (1841-1847) and Tự Đức (1847-1883).

The following are a few examples of the contents of such provisions.

The decree passed towards the end of 1625 on *Prohibiting people from following the heretic religion and expelling missionaries from the country*, stated: “Christianity is a barbaric religion, a foreign religion. It causes people to lose respect and gratitude towards their parents and ancestors, because those who follow this religion do not offer ceremonial offerings to their ancestors, and also to reject a number of customs [...]”¹⁰

Decree of 1785 affirms: “Since the time when the westerners clandestinely introduced their religion into this kingdom, I regret that the worshipping of the Venerable Confucius declines with each passing day and is almost abandoned, this is because of the deceitful words of the nationals who used all mysterious means to persuade people to give up. Seeing that the people’s heart and soul are intoxicated by a deceitful and destructive religion, I am determined to support our genuinely good religion inherited

¹⁰ Decree promulgated by lord Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên (1563-1635). See ĐỖ QUANG CHÍNH, *Đòng Tên trong xã hội Đại Việt* [The Jesuit Order in the Đại Viet Society], Nhà xuất bản Tôn Giáo, Hà Nội 2008, 54.

from our ancestors and past kings, and I will destroy completely this bad religion”.¹¹

Decree promulgated on 6th January 1833 states: “As to the housing or schools and hiding places of religious leaders, you must also pay attention and closely watch their activities and destroy them completely. And from now on, if someone among the people is found to persuade women and girls, and blinding people’s eyes [...] he/she must be severely punished with a view to eradicating completely this corrupted religion. This is my wish”.

Decree of 1835 bans this western heretic religion: “Even with the person who follows the religion itself, it occurs that when boys and girls get married, the religious leader takes the girls to a secret place presumably to teach religion, but in fact to perform perverse actions”.¹²

Decree of 3rd October 1839 states that “You must flex your muscles to beat mercilessly, to torture fearlessly, to kill those who refuse to trample the Holy Cross! In each Christian village, there must be a small temple where they must celebrate twice a year, in spring and autumn, and then within one year (1840) they will have to apostatize”.

Decree of 18th September 1853 affirms: “Christians who refuse to tread on the Holy Cross will have their cheeks marked with the word *tà đạo* (heretic religion) and will be sent to exile forever. Particularly with fishermen, because they always move from places to places and help religious leaders to seek hideouts. Whoever apprehends a foreign religious leader or reports him to a

¹¹ Decree promulgated by Emperor Thái Đức or Nguyễn Nhạc (1743-1793). See L.-E. LOUVET, *La Cochinchine Religieuse*, vol. 1, Ernest Leroux Editeur, Paris 1885, 517.

¹² Decree promulgated by King Minh Mạng (1791-1841). See *Đại Nam Thực Lục Chính Biên* [Chronicle of Great Vietnam], vol. 17, Nhà xuất bản Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội 1978, 243-244.

government official to arrest him, will be rewarded with three hundred *taels* of gold; for the denouncement and arrest of a native religious leader, the reward will be one hundred *taels* of gold. Sentences reserved for the two kinds of religious leaders: native religious leaders, whether they have trampled on the Holy Cross or not, will have their bodies torn apart to set examples to others; for foreign religious leaders, they will be decapitated and their heads will be hung in public place for three days then cast in the rivers or the sea”.

Decree of 17th January 1860 enforces the “Separation of Christian villages and settlements in non-Christian villages. Christianity was introduced in our country long ago and has succeeded in intoxicating our people. The most dangerous religious followers believe that should those barbarous creatures (French authorities and soldiers) beg me, I would forgive them. I am certain they nurture that wild hope in their heart. That is why we must punish them mercilessly, we must separate the healthy rice plant from the weeds, select good citizens from those criminals and to eradicate completely their foolish ambition. Christians are criminals, they are stubborn, they rely on bad women who they call virgins, sisters, to conceal religious good, accessories, relaying letters and information from one province to the other [...] I therefore forbid all Christian men, women and children to leave their village, I also prohibit the concession of relocation permits that would allow them to move from one place to another. They must remain in the village so that they can be controlled and educated. If they are caught going from one village to another, they have to be punished in the same way as those in the two provinces Hanoi and Phú Yên so that they will not infringe the law again.”¹³

¹³ BUI ĐỨC SINH, *Giáo hội công giáo ở Việt Nam* [Catholic Church in Vietnam], vol. 2, Profess Printing Inc., San José, CA 2011, 399.

Decree of 5th August 1861 states: “*Article 1.* Christian followers, be they male or female, old or young, including those who had apostatized long ago, must be settled in non-Catholic villages. *Article 2.* In each non-Catholic village, villagers must supervise a number of Christians. In this way, every five persons must guard and oversee one Christian. *Article 3.* All Christian villages must be razed to the ground. *Article 4.* All land and rice fields belonging to Christians must be confiscated and distributed to neighbouring non-Catholic people who will cultivate the land and pay tax to the government. *Article 5.* All Christians would have their cheeks marked with the words: *Heretic Christian* on one cheek, and on the other cheek the name of the village where they came from”.

Decree of 1868, dividing the Vietnamese people into two categories: *lương dân* or the “peaceful people”, including all good, proper and honest individuals; *dữu dân* or the “evil people”, including all the followers of Christianity, a western religion, who are considered bad individuals, akin to *dữu*, a kind of weed that destroys rice in the paddies. (Would it be correct to assume that the King wanted to allude to the parable of the weeds among the wheat in the Gospel of St. Matthew 13:24-30?).¹⁴

¹⁴ However, the ‘Chronicle of Great Vietnam’ recorded that, under the reign of King Tự Đức, “Bishop Pierre Gendreau Đông (1818-1936), Bishop Jean Gauthier Hậu (1846-1902), Bishop Joseph Sohier Bình (1818-1876) presented to the Ministry of Protocols a request to change the four words *tà đạo dữu dân* or ‘heretic religion, evil people’. The Ministry of Protocols stated that the King loved all his citizens equally, without any discrimination. Consequently, in the official documents the specification of one’s own religion would have served just as formal purpose without implying any discrimination”. See TRUONG BÁ CÂN, *Lịch sử phát triển công giáo Việt Nam* [History of the Development of Catholicism in Vietnam], Nhà xuất bản tôn giáo Hà Nội 2008, 249. The ‘Chronicle of Great Vietnam’ also noted that “heretic religion” meant illegitimate religion contrary to the

As a consequence of the enforcement of these 53 Decrees, Christians were heavily persecuted, with arrests, imprisonments, tortures, assassinations and forcible family separations. The witnesses of faith were even forced to tread on the Holy Cross, as proof that they had definitely rejected their religion. Some historians argue that Christians were persecuted and killed because they supported the French authorities in resisting against the Nguyễn dynasty. However, if such an argument were correct, why didn't the Nguyễn kings force Christians to trample on the French tricolour as a sign of their loyalty to the dynasty and their country?

Witnesses of Jesus Christ

Amid the suffering caused by centuries of persecutions, the seeds of the Good News of Jesus Christ sown in the heart and soul of the Vietnamese people, silently germinated, grew, flowered, and bore fruits, culminating in the sacrifice of martyrdom. The 130,000 Witnesses of Faith who have marked the history of the Vietnamese Catholic Church continue to be the living examples of the 'Eight Beatitudes of Jesus,' and as such they have struck deep in the heart and sentiment of Vietnamese Christians for generations.

The heroic Martyrs of Vietnam have devoted their Christian lives fully to the Lord, the Church and the country, reflecting their religious as well as patriotic spirit through three main virtues of faith, trust and love.

right one. When religious persecution was abolished, any derogative adjective was dropped, allowing people who follow a religion to be called "religious people", while those who follow their conscience to be called "peaceful people".

□ The Faith of the Vietnamese Martyrs

Faith involves determination, generosity and courage. The Martyrs were truly humble and lived their lives as witnesses, preaching the Gospel to save people. They were not fanatic and relied exclusively on the grace of God in order to accomplish their earthly pilgrimage and advance towards the light of Christ risen on Easter.

During the reign of King Cảnh Hưng (1740-1766), the Saint missionary of the Dominican Order, Father Jacinto Castañeda Gia (1743-1773), along with Father Phạm Hiếu Liêm (1732-1773) participated in a debate on Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity that was held from 1st October to 7th November 1773. The debate took place at the palace of lord Trịnh Sâm (1739-1782) and has passed into history as the *Council of Four Religions*. The two missionaries replied to the question if “*Dao Hoa Lang* was a foreign religion”¹⁵ as follows: “Buddhism came from India, Confucianism from the Lo region in China, Laoism originated from the Zhou Dynasty in China”, but “there is no religion called *Dao Hoa Lang*. Our religion is a religion of God, and we hope that it will be known by all the countries in the world”.¹⁶

The Saint bishop José María Díaz An (1818-1857) wrote in a letter: “I wish my blood and that of the Lord Jesus Christ be

¹⁵ The Vietnamese-Latin dictionary authored by Jean-Louis Taberd explains that “*Hoa Lang* is ‘Portuguese’ and ‘*Dao Hoa Lang*’ is the religion of the Portuguese”, that is Christianity Taberd’s dictionary, published in 1838, was based on a manuscript completed by Pigneau de Behaine in 1772 (J.-L. TABERD, *Dictionarium Anamiitico-Latinum*, Ex Typis J.C. Marsham, 1838, 128).

¹⁶ *Sách hội đồng tứ giáo* [The Book on the Council of the Four Religions], Imprimerie de la Mission, Saigon 1904, 17-19.

mixed together on the Calvary to cleanse my many sins".¹⁷ Then missionary Isidore Gagelin Kính (1799-1833) said: "I wish to become ash and dust to join the Lord Jesus Christ. I leave this world without regretting anything, only looking at the Lord Jesus Christ hanging on the cross would be sufficient to relieve me of all pains including death".¹⁸

□ The Trust of Vietnamese Martyrs

Trust ensues from the Holy Mother's example. The life of the Vietnamese martyrs was closely connected to the worshipping of the Virgin Mary. They diligently prayed the rosary and were devoted to the first Saturday of the month, to the Month of Flowers and took part in processions. More broadly, by following the example of the Holy Family from Nazareth, the Vietnamese martyrs fully accomplished their duties as husbands, fathers and mothers to raise and educate their children.

Saint Lê Thị Thành (1781-1841), a housewife, is remembered by her children: "Our beloved mother often came to visit us and advised us to do good". Once she advised me: "Follow God's will. Get married, for that is a heavy burden. You have to behave intelligently, do not contradict your parents-in-law, bear gladly the cross bestowed upon you by God".¹⁹

Like Mother Mary, who walked silently with Jesus Christ to the Calvary, the mother of the Saint soldier Trần Văn Trong (1808-1835) also walked on the side of her son, showing no sad-

¹⁷ BUI ĐỨC SINH, *Giáo hội công giáo ở Việt Nam* [Catholic Church in Vietnam], 359.

¹⁸ J. TRẦN ANH DŨNG, *Hạnh chứng nhân đức tin* [Extraordinary Witness of Faith the Martyrs of Vietnam], *Đặc Lộ tông thư*, Paris, 186-188.

¹⁹ NGUYỄN TỰ DO, *Lịch sử giáo phận Thanh Hóa* [History of Diocese of Thanh Hoa], *Đặc Lộ tông thư*, Paris 2012, 98-99.

ness, calmly advising him to be courageous, perseverant. She was bravely present at the execution of her only son. When the sentence had been passed, she deliberately stood before the officer and said: “He is my son, please return his head to me”.²⁰ She then opened widely the flap of her dress to wrap the head of her beloved son to carry home.

Saint Bishop Peter Dumoulin-Borie Cao (1808-1838) confided in his diary that he prayed to Mother Mary in order to have a secret wish realized: “My Mother, please! Please believe me, when I grow up, I will offer my entire life to convert those who have not yet received faith. Please help me follow the true path and accomplish this. Please allow me to suffer because of our Lord Jesus Christ and be graced through martyrdom and accomplish victory”.²¹

In a letter to Bishop Joseph Theurel Chiêu (1829-1868), Saint missionary Theophane Venard Ven (1829-1861) recorded his prayers and request: “Respectful Immaculate Mother! When my head rolls under the sword of the executioner, please accept this insignificant servant as a ripe grape fruit, as a fully-bloomed rose picked for the altar. Ave Maria”.²²

□ The Love of Vietnamese Martyrs

Embodying the spirit of service between the Shepherd and His sheep, the Vietnamese Martyrs maintained warm relations with

²⁰ ĐOÀN TRUNG HIỆU, *Thiên hùng sử: 117 hiển thánh tử đạo Việt Nam* [Heroic History: 117 Vietnamese Christian Martyrs], Cộng đồng công giáo Việt Nam, San José, CA 1990, 457.

²¹ TRẦN NGỌC THỤ, *Tiểu sử 21 thánh tử đạo người ngoại quốc* [Biography of the 21 Foreign Martyrs], Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, Rome 1991, 113-124.

²² J. TRẦN ANH DUNG, *Hạnh chứng nhân đức tin* [Extraordinary Witness of Faith the Martyrs of Vietnam], 348-352.

officials, a joyous atmosphere in the family and mutual respect for neighbours and relatives.

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). This teaching of Jesus Christ was followed by two priests, Saints Đỗ Yến (1764-1838) and Nguyễn Thời (Thế) Điểm (1762-1838), and two missionaries, Saints Dumoulin-Borie Cao and Pierre Neron Bắc (1818-1860), who silently chose death to protect their flock. They had no other choice. Had they been discovered in the Catholic village where they had found shelter, those who were protecting them would have suffered severe consequences.

The spouse of Saint Nguyen Huy Mĩ (1804-1838), a village chief courageously advised her husband: “We love you with all our hearts, but you have to bear the very heavy Holy Cross for the Lord, be loyal until the end, do not worry about us. God will take care of us”.²³

Saint Phan Đắc Hòa (1787-1840), a physician, had chosen to place his love for God above that for his family: “I love you very much and always take care of you, but my love for God is greater, you should obey God’s will, do not feel sad. You stay with your mother, love each other and take care of the house”.²⁴

A Vietnamese proverb says: “Even imperial power bends before country tradition”. What this implies is that although the King persecuted and banned Christianity, the sentiment and love for the neighbour prevailed, as testified by the jail keeper’s sentiment for Saint Đoàn Viết Đạt (1765-1798), a priest: “You are intelligent and virtuous and I cherish your friendship, but you are about to receive the death sentence. I promise to offer you a coffin as a token of my love and respect for you”.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 223-226.

²⁴ Ibid., 157-160.

²⁵ Ibid., 118-121.

The day when the death sentence against Saint Vũ Bá Loan (1756-1840) was due to be carried out, one of the eleven executioners meekly and respectfully spoke to the priest: “This is the King’s order, I must obey, please forgive me. I will do my best to help you die as painlessly as possible. When you are in heaven, please do not forget me”.²⁶

Saint priest Nguyễn Khắc Tụ (1808-1840) exchanged words with the judge: “In this order of priority, I respect and love God first and foremost, then the King, and finally my parents. I cannot listen to my parents to harm the King neither can I listen to the King to cause harm to God”.²⁷

To turn his immense love and generosity, the Saint priest Nguyễn Văn Triệu (1756-1798) gave to the poor the small amount of money reserved for him to buy the last meal before the execution. He said: “Please take and give this money to the poor for me”. Likewise, the Saint priest Phan Văn Minh (1815-1853) made an earnest last recommendation: “Do not organize sumptuous funerals, use that money to help those who are poor and unfortunate”.²⁸

The Canonization of the 117 Vietnamese Martyrs

Countless Catholics witnessed their faith in Christ in the upheavals of history. As for Vietnam, 117 Martyrs out of a total of 130,000 were beatified by Pope John Paul II on 19th June 1988.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., 196-198.

²⁷ Ibid., 335-337.

²⁸ ĐOÀN TRUNG HIỆU, *Thiên hùng sử: 117 hiển thánh tử đạo Việt Nam* [Heroic History: 117 Vietnamese Christian Martyrs], 211-214.

²⁹ Prior, 64 Martyrs had been beatified by Pope Leo XIII on 7th May 1900, 8 by Pope Pius X on 15th April 1906, 25 by Pope Pius X on 2nd May 1909, and 25 by Pope Pius XII on 29th April 1951.

The manners of death of these 117 heroes were many: 75 were decapitated; 22 died from strangling (a rope was passed around their neck and the two ends pulled); nine died in jail after a long period of imprisonment; six were burned alive; four were decapitated after having their arms and legs cut off; one was cut into 100 pieces.

Of the 117 sanctified Martyrs, 96 were from Vietnam, 10 were MEP missionaries and 11 from the Spanish Dominican Order. The Bishops were eight, including six missionaries of the Dominican Order and two MEP. The priests were 50, 37 Vietnamese, eight MEP missionaries and five from the Spanish Dominican Order. The catechists were 16, plus one seminarian, while the lay Catholics were 42 (1 woman). Two witnesses of faith died under the reign of Lord Trịnh Doanh (1740-1767); two under the reign of lord Trịnh Sâm (1767-1782); two under King Cảnh Thịnh (1782-1802); 57 under king Minh Mạng (1820-1841); three under King Thiệu Trị (1841-1847); and 51 under King Tự Đức (1847-1883).

There were 30,000 Vietnamese who were martyred under lord Trịnh in the North, and lords Nguyễn and Tây Sơn in the South; 40,000 witnesses of faith heroically declared their eternal faith in Christ under kings Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức; 60,000 Catholics proudly died for their faith in Christ as a result of arrests, massacres, separations during the Văn Thân Movement (1862-1885).³⁰

Nevertheless, the blood of the Martyrs produced the seeds of faith, and by the end of the 19th century the Church was advancing ceaselessly. There were various European Orders and Con-

³⁰ TRẦN NGỌC THỤ, *Giáo hội Việt Nam: tập I, Vụ án phong Thánh* [Church of Vietnam: Volume I, Case of Canonization], St. Michael Printing, Louisiana 1987, 30.

gregations engaged in evangelization in Vietnam, such as the Orders of the Carmelites and the Christian Brothers, the Congregations of Divine Providence, Saint Vincent De Paul, and Saint Paul of Chartres. These religious organizations also helped to stimulate prayer activities, cultural events and social charity.

On the occasion of the sanctification of the 117 Vietnamese Martyrs, Pope John Paul II solemnly declared to all those gathered on Saint Peter's Square in Rome:

I decide to announce the Beatification of priest Trần An Dũng Lạc, seminarian Trần Văn Thiện, and disciple Lê Văn Thiện, two bishops of the Dominican Order Girolamo Hermosilla and Valentino Berrio Ochoa, together with other six bishops, priest of the Foreign Missions of Paris: Théophane Vénard and 105 martyred Companions in Vietnam all are Saints and they are all recorded in the Book of Saints. I also decide that all members of the Church enthusiastically and respectfully welcome them as martyred Saints. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.³¹

The Church of Vietnam Today

On 2nd February 1960, *L'Osservatore Romano* reported: "The Vatican established the Hierarchy of the Church in Vietnam including three Archdioceses and 20 Dioceses. This news was published in the Decree 'Venerabilium Nostrorum' promulgated by Pope John XXIII on 11th November 1960, establishing the hierarchy³² of the Church in Vietnam".

³¹ ID., *Kỷ yếu phong thánh tử đạo Việt Nam* [Yearbook of Canonization of Vietnamese Martyrs], Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, Rome 1989, 91.

³² The Decree established four Ecclesiastical Provinces. In particular, the Ecclesiastical Province of Hanoi, including: Archbishop of Hanoi (1679),

The Catholic Bishop's Conference of Vietnam was held for the first time at the Archdiocese of Hanoi from 24th April to 1st May 1980, and all the 33 Bishops were present. In a joint letter, the Bishops addressed all priests, nuns, religious, and lay Catholics in the entire country, setting the following pastoral objectives to be achieved:

Being the Holy Assembly in the heart of the People of Vietnam, we are determined to unite ourselves with the fate of our country, following the tradition of the people by immersing ourselves in the present life of the country. Therefore, we must walk together with our people, share the same community with our people, because this country is the place where God invites us to live to be His children, this country is the mother's womb supporting us during the realization of our vocational appeal to become God's children, these people are the communities God handed to us to serve with the role of the citizens and at the same time as People of God. [...] Within the Holy Assembly, establish a way of life and a manner to manifest the faith in accordance with the people's tradition.³³

Diocese of Hải Phòng (1679), Diocese of Bùi Chu (1848), Diocese of Bắc Ninh (1883), Diocese of Vinh (1846), Diocese of Hưng Hóa (1895), Diocese of Phát Diệm (1901), Diocese of Lạng Sơn (1913), Diocese of Thanh Hóa (1932), and Diocese of Thái Bình (1936). The Ecclesiastical Province of Huế, including: Archbishop of Huế (1850), Diocese of Qui Nhơn (1844), Diocese of Kontum (1932), Diocese of Nha Trang (1957), and Diocese of Đà Nẵng (1963). The Ecclesiastical Province of Saigon, including: Archbishop of Saigon (1844) tied to the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City, Diocese of Vĩnh Long (1938), Diocese of Cần Thơ (1955), Diocese of Đà Lạt (1960), Diocese of Long Xuyên (1960), Diocese of Phú Cường (1965), Diocese of Xuân Lộc (1965), Diocese of Ban Mê Thuột (1967), Diocese of Phan Thiết (1975), and Diocese of Bà Rịa (2005).

³³ Translation in *Thư chung, Hội đồng giám mục Việt Nam năm 1980* [Pastoral Letter of 1980, The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam], no. 9.

Statistical Data of the Catholic Church of Vietnam show that as of 31st December 2017, there were 26 Dioceses for a population of 96,405,156. Of these, Catholic followers were 6,711,602 (6,96%). There were 5,327 diocesan priests and priests from religious orders; 3,946 seminarians: 3,058 religious men; 18,623 nuns; 57,000 Catechists.³⁴

Today, the Communist government has appealed to all religions to walk together with the people, and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam fully agrees with this; however, a distinction should be made between the people and the regime. The history of Vietnam and, in general, the history of the world, show that political regimes change with time, but not the people. Consequently, the interest of the people should be a priority. Walking together with the people should read walking together with those who are the real people, in other words, the miserable and the forgotten. Walking together with the people means walking with the values that create the cultural and spiritual heritage of the people of Vietnam: to resist against the foreign invader, protect the country's borders and frontiers; to fight against those who abuse their power; to love and help each other especially those who have little.³⁵

On the occasion of the *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, a delegation of 32 cardinals, archbishops and bishops of Vietnam, visited the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul in March 2018. During the

³⁴ Official statistics of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam as reported in J. TRẦN ANH DŨNG, *Giáo hội công giáo Việt Nam: 117 hiến Thánh tử đạo* [Catholicism in Vietnam: 117 Dead Martyrs of Vietnam], Đắc Lộ Tùng Thư, Paris 2018, 36.

³⁵ THANH TRÚC, "The Catholic Bishops' Conference on the Laws on Faith and Religion 2016", *RFA Đài Á Châu Tự Do*, 12th June 2017, www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/statement-fr-vn-bishop-council-on-2016-laws-of-faith-06122017070226.html/.

audience with Pope Francis, the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, Archbishop Joseph Nguyễn Chí Linh, addressed the Holy Father as follows:

The European missionaries brought the Good News to Vietnam in the XVI century. Then three centuries later, the colonialist forces invaded Vietnam, but the Communist authorities, once in power, lumped together the colonialists and the missionaries and denounced that the Catholics served as lackeys of foreign forces. The consequence was that the Vietnamese Catholics were continuously persecuted. The history of the people of Vietnam is a painful history, a history of bloody wars and widespread hatred. And all historians agree that in all those years of strife, the Catholics were always victims, bearing the brunt of discriminations and betrayals.³⁶

However, the Vietnamese Catholics are also very glad that God has transformed all those difficulties and challenges into invaluable treasures: hundreds of thousands of Catholics have received the grace of martyrdom and 117 have been beatified by Pope John Paul II. That event was one of the brightest moments in the contemporary history of the Vietnamese Church, one it cherishes most. While this grace was celebrated concretely in all activities and at every level of the community, it does not mean that Vietnamese Catholics can now live in peace. After almost half-a-century filled with all sorts of challenges and idealistic wars, now Vietnamese Catholics are faced with a new war: the war against complacency. The religious persecution helped us

³⁶ JOSEPH NGUYỄN CHÍ LINH, “Diễn từ triêu yết Đức Thánh Cha Phanxicô” [Welcome Remarks to the Holy Father Francis], Thứ Ba, 6th March 2018, <http://trungtammucvudcct.com/hoi-dong-giam-muc-viet-nam-vieng-tham-ad-limina-dien-tu-trieu-yet-duc-thanh-cha-phanxico/>.

fortify and strengthen our faith but, from a human perspective, it has isolated and made us secretive. This is why, since the end of the war in 1975, the number of Christians in Vietnam appears to have remained unchanged.³⁷

Therefore, together with the Vietnamese Catholic Bishops' Conference, all the People of God in our beloved country, as well as the Vietnamese People of God overseas, we must all be engaged in building a "Mystical, Communicative and Serving" Church to serve intelligently the life of every brother, sister and compatriot in Vietnam.

³⁷ Catholics in Vietnam are estimated to be 6.6 percent of the population (about 6.3 million out of 96 million), while Protestants are 0.9 percent. The main religious group in Vietnam is the Buddhist, accounting for 7.9 percent. The vast majority of the Vietnamese (80 percent) say they do not follow any religion (GCatholic.org, "Catholic Church in Socialist Republic of Vietnam", 20th November 2018, www.gcatholic.org/dioceses/country/VN.htm/).

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE VIETNAMESE MARTYRS FOR TODAY

Towards an Inculturated Theology of Martyrdom

Dinh Anh Nhue Nguyen

The life and martyrdom of the Vietnamese saints, as explained above in the historic essay authored by Fr. Joseph Tran Anh Dung, stimulates the reflection about their spirituality and how it can help the seeds of faith sown on Vietnamese soil to grow.¹

The spirituality of the Vietnamese martyrs is buttressed by three pillars: strong faith in God (understood as faithfulness to God and to one's Christian vocation in the Church); mutual

¹ Apparently, there is so far no systematic study on this important topic, which is normally mentioned only *en passant* in many books about the Vietnamese martyrs. From a theological viewpoint, the reflections here exposed could contribute somehow to the more general discussion on the theology of martyrdom, which was neglected in the past and is now acquiring more and more attention in the theological-missiological research. See T. SCHIRRMACHER, "Towards a Theology of Martyrdom", *Norsk Tidsskrift For Misjonsvitenskap*, vol. 3-4, Egede Instituttet, Oslo 2012, 151-173; R. GARCÍA MATEO, "Il Martirio: Suprema Testimonianza", *Studia Missionalia*, vol. 61, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome 2012, 65-83; M.P. JENSEN, *Martyrdom and Identity. The Self on Trial*, T&T Clark Theology, London 2010; C. SAUER – R. HOWELL, "Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom. Theological Reflections", *Religious Freedom Series*, vol. 2, Johannesburg 2008; C.R. MOSS, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library, New Haven, CT 2012.

love and support (particularly to persevere in long suffering and endurance); and personal (and personalized) catechetical formation as indispensable.²

A Spirituality of Faith and Faithfulness

It is quite obvious to state that, like other martyrs elsewhere, the Vietnamese saints had a strong faith, which led them to offer their life for it. However, the most crucial aspect of that faith deserving to be acknowledged and underlined, is the faithfulness to the God whom they had come to know and experience as goodness. For them, faith is not only a static *fides quae*, which means to believe in some doctrines that remain a mystery and, at times, unintelligible to an Asian mindset. For the Vietnamese martyrs, faith meant also, and above all, faithfulness to the Christian God they had vowed to accept as their only and true God during their baptismal promises. Their faith hence was mostly *fides qua*, which concerns their personal adhesion to God who revealed Himself through the missionaries' preaching *and* in their life experience.

The difference between faith and faithfulness can be minimal, as reflected also in the minimal difference between the terms and their Vietnamese equivalents 'tin' (to believe) and 'tín' (to trust/to be faithful), because one does not exclude, but includes the other.³ However, in the case of the Vietnamese culture, the second dimension, faithfulness, is much more high-

² I am indebted to Fr. Edward Ondrako OFMConv for proofreading this text, and his precious suggestions.

³ The two mentioned Vietnamese words have identical pronunciation with only a slight difference in tones: mid-level for 'tin' (to believe) and high/mid rising for 'tín' (to trust).

lighted and actually exalted in the martyrdom of the Vietnamese Christians.

The aspect of faithfulness in the faith lived by the Vietnamese Christians and martyrs had its expression in their assiduous and devoted worship, expressed both on a personal level and in the Church community. This means concretely that the believer is by definition one who practices his or her belief, while always living with the greatest respect and reverence for God. This respect means to observe sincerely God's instructions and to seek constantly His benevolence through prayer and works of charity. Worth noting is the expression "I believe" in the Christian *Creed* has been translated by the Vietnamese missionaries with two correlated verbs: "Tôi tin kính", which is literally "I believe *and worship*", a correct and profound translation that can only be the fruit of the Holy Spirit who guided the first Vietnamese missionaries and believers.

As for the Vietnamese martyrs, being faithful to God even until death recalls the same spirituality of the first Christian martyrs and, at root, the spirituality of all the members of God's chosen people who suffered and died for their faith. They died not in defence of some abstract truth, but because of their faithfulness to the One with whom they had entered into a very special relationship. That is the reason the Vietnamese martyrs refused to trample on the crucifix or even on any cross as required by the mandarins, because for them that crucifix/cross, or better that symbol or image of the cross (the crucifix), represented the One they venerated, as the old St. Andrew Thông proclaimed simply but eloquently: "Today I cannot step over the cross I worshipped yesterday"⁴ Such a

⁴ VU THANH, *Dòng Máu Anh Hùng: Lịch Sử Những Cuộc Bách Hại Đạo Công Giáo Tại Việt Nam* [Heroic Blood: The Story of the Persecutions of Catholicism in Vietnam], vol. 3, New Orleans, LA 1988, 106.

declaration echoes wonderfully what St. Polycarp of Smyrna told the Roman proconsul who urged him to reproach Christ to avoid execution: “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”⁵

Any martyrdom is the fruit of God’s grace. Behind such a heroic act is a tradition of Christian faith and faithfulness, as the fruit of the formation by missionaries and local Church leaders and catechists. These people first professed themselves their strong faith, understood above all as faithfulness to God. Theirs was a living faith and not merely gnoseological. In such a way, by teaching and example of life, they offered a consistent formation in (true) faith to many other fellow Christians who became later Vietnamese martyrs. It was ‘a formation built on trust’.

As a matter of fact, the Vietnamese martyrs had great trust in God and God’s promises to the faithful. One may ask: where did that trust come from? First, and foremost, it came from their experience of God as the supreme Good, the One most trustworthy. Nevertheless, the experience of trust in God’s absolute Goodness was built by the pastoral wisdom in the relationship between the believers and the missionaries or pastors, who step by step and with concrete actions gave witness to God’s goodness and saving power. In other words, the missionaries and evangelizers did not only proclaim and teach truths about God, but also sought to form an unbreakable relation-

⁵ Early Church Texts, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp”, https://early-churchtexts.com/public/martyrdom_of_polycarp.htm/. See also S. PARVIS, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp”, in P. FOSTER (ed.), *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, T&T Clark Biblical Studies, London-New York 2007, 126-146; P. HARTOG (ed.), *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, Oxford Apostolic Fathers, Oxford 2013, 165-336.

ship with the believers based on trust. Trusting human relationality was the image of and ‘tiền đẽ’ (precondition or antechamber) for the special faithful relationship between a believer and God. From such a Christian trust formation process in Vietnam, one sees the mutual bond between trusting God and trusting Church ministers and missionaries. Once formed and educated in that school, the believer would most likely remain faithful to God, to His representatives on earth, and to the *Communio Sanctorum* in heaven.

One ought to not forget that during the severe persecutions, there were some Vietnamese Christians who abandoned their faith owing to multiple pressures. As in the first centuries of Christianity (and every age), fragile Christians existed together with the strong and might outnumber those who died as martyrs for their faith. Statistics are hard to come by. That some fled from martyrdom does not diminish the heroism of the martyrs. Their sacrifices remain the foundation for the young Vietnamese Church to take solid root. The witness of what may be a relatively smaller ‘flock’ of martyrs, constitutes, in my view, a diaspora of Israel in Vietnam. This perspective may lack statistics, but my emphasis is on the quality of personal relationships between the believers and the Church ministers, one of common faith and faithfulness that would triumph again and again in many aspects of Christian life in Vietnam.

To sum up, an unwavering faithfulness to God is actually the most precious treasure the Vietnamese martyrs have left to the Vietnamese Church. Venerable Card. François-Xavier Van Thuan offered a priceless reflection on the Christian and Vietnamese martyrs to Pope St. John Paul II and the Roman Curia during the annual Lenten spiritual exercises of 2000:

I was thinking about persecutions, deaths, martyrs, which occurred for 350 years in Vietnam, which gave the Church

so many martyrs whom we do not know: about 150,000. [...] I believe that the indefatigable fidelity of the Vietnamese Church today can be explained by contemplating the meaning of the blood of those martyrs. The priestly and religious vocations, which enrich the Church in Vietnam, arise from the grace of trial. The martyrs have taught us to say yes: a yes without conditions and limits to love for the Lord. But the martyrs have also taught us to say no to flattery, compromise, and injustice that might serve to compromise their willingness to die for their faith. This is a legacy which is real, not one that is easy, or automatic. A person may refuse it. *The legacy of the martyrs is not about heroism but about fidelity.* This fidelity has been maturing by contemplating Jesus, the perfect model of the Christian life, model of every witness, model of every martyr”⁶

Pope St. John Paul II also mentioned such faithfulness to God and to God’s love as a distinctive feature of the Vietnamese protomartyr Andrew of Phu Yen, during his beatification along with 43 other servants of God on 5th March 2000: “He persevered to the point of bloodshed in order to remain faithful to the love of the One to whom he had totally given himself. The words he repeated as he resolutely advanced on the path of martyrdom are the expression of what motivated his whole life: “Let us return love for love to our God, let us return life for life”⁷. The Pope, therefore, exhorted: “Today Bl. Andrew, pro-

⁶ F.X. NGUYEN VAN THUAN, *Testimonianza della speranza. Esercizi spirituali tenuti alla presenza di S.S. Giovanni Paolo II*, Città Nuova, Rome 2000, 138-140.

⁷ Here is the full text on Blessed Andrew: “‘If anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven’ (Mt 10:32). Andrew of Phú Yên in Việt Nam

tomartyr of Viêt Nam, is given as a model to the Church of his country. May all Christ's disciples find in him strength and support in trial, and be concerned to strengthen their intimacy with the Lord, their knowledge of the Christian mystery, their fidelity to the Church and their sense of mission!"

Indeed, the example of Blessed Andrew and other Vietnamese martyrs is powerfully relevant, and remains a mighty challenge for the Vietnamese Christians today.

A Spirituality of Mutual Love and Support

The Vietnamese martyrs were also distinguished by their mutual love and support to endure difficulties. This second characteristic of their spirituality is equally important and readily visible in the stories of the Vietnamese saints who lived

made these words of the Lord his own with heroic intensity. From the day he received Baptism at the age of 16, he strove to develop a deep spiritual life. Amid the difficulties to which all who adhered to the Christian faith were subjected, he lived as a faithful witness to the risen Christ and tirelessly proclaimed the Gospel in the 'Maison Dieu' association of catechists. For love of the Lord he spent all his energy in serving the Church and assisting priests in their mission. He persevered to the point of bloodshed in order to remain faithful to the love of the One to whom he had totally given himself. The words he repeated as he resolutely advanced on the path of martyrdom are the expression of what motivated his whole life: 'Let us return love for love to our God, let us return life for life'. Today Bl. Andrew, protomartyr of Viêt Nam, is given as a model to the Church of his country. May all Christ's disciples find in him strength and support in trial, and be concerned to strengthen their intimacy with the Lord, their knowledge of the Christian mystery, their fidelity to the Church and their sense of mission!" (JOHN PAUL II, "Beatification of 44 Servants of God. Homily of the Holy Father", 5th March 2000, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000305_beatifications.html).

in periods of crisis and overall turmoil. In those times of rampant mutual suspicion and division in the society, the Vietnamese believers underwent many hardships and difficulties in the sphere of economy and faith. Christian spirituality rooted in mutual love triumphed in such a social context. Believers overcame their difficulties in living and, at times, crises in faith, by encouraging each other to be faithful and to give witness to their love for Jesus. This is why in the history of Vietnamese Catholicism, there are groups of martyrs who died together (or one after another) for their faith. Notably, often if a person moved by grace to give his or her life for Jesus, others would take care of his/her families materially and spiritually. Such is the story of St. Matthew Lê Văn Gấm, a lay person, arrested on 8th June 1846 and beheaded on 11th May 1847.⁸

The Church in Vietnam from its very beginning had a strong 'community' dimension, which reflected how the first Vietnamese Christians persevered together. Their communities of faith and mutual love were consciously under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Apostles, in union with the pastors. Of particular importance, the conscious development of interpersonal relationships served as a special channel for the Vietnamese Christians to experience love within the communities as guided by their pastors. Equally, the Vietnamese faithful demonstrated love towards fellow Vietnamese who did not embrace the Christian faith. This demonstration of charity was especially towards their enemies because of Jesus' commandment to love and to forgive in the Gospel. There are many accounts of Christian martyrs who forgave their executors and traitors. Prayers and reconciliatory wishes abound for the well-being of

⁸ VU THANH, *Dòng Máu Anh Hùng: Lịch Sử Những Cuộc Bách Hại Đạo Công Giáo Tại Việt Nam* [Heroic Blood: The Story of the Persecutions of Catholicism in Vietnam], 45-48.

those who hated and betrayed them. Appropriately, Christianity in Vietnam was called since the early days “Đạo yêu thương” – The religion of love.

This account of martyrs is massively relevant to the Church in Vietnam today. The Church must face crises such as those related to the consequences of egoism and individualism in society. Egoism appears too readily under the influence of modern Western secularized culture. Only a new and strengthening mutual love and support in the community appears to be able to counter the strong negative influences. This is actually what the Vietnamese bishops ardently desire for the new evangelization of the country in the third millennium.

The Role of a Deep but Simple Catechetical ‘Formation’ in the Family and Various Groups of Evangelisation within the Vietnamese Tradition

Heroic martyrdom for many Vietnamese Christians witnessed to convicted faith. This is the sign that the first missionaries of Vietnam laid the foundations for the inculturation of the Catholic faith. Their zeal and pastoral wisdom succeeded in adapting the Gospel to the cultural circumstances of Vietnam.

One critical point of evangelization they found was to narrate the doctrines and practices of Christianity in simple language and according to local customs. This meant a strong emphasis on the simple practice of faith in daily prayer as the foundation of Christian life. People memorized prayers as a *sine qua non* to be accepted into the community. Christian families taught their children prayers by daily recitation together. These prayers of Vietnamese believers put into prisons were the source of strength for the prisoners in indescribable hardship, trial, and, for many, execution. Prayer became the source and means of evangelisation in a hostile society. That is why the Venerable Card. Van Thuan, who was deeply rooted in that practice of the

Catholic tradition, fostered recognition of the power of prayer as hope against hope, especially in imprisonment.

A second enduring aspect that helped to educate and consolidate the seeds of the Catholic faith planted by the first missionaries and the spirit of sacrifice was the formation of various groups of local catechists and of religious sisters. In these groups, the laity were given the opportunity to be co-workers with the missionaries in spreading the Gospel. As a result, they also shared willingly and with conviction as integral to witnessing the Christian faith.

A third aspect, and perhaps the most important, is that catechetical work in Christian families was under the direct care and authoritative guidance of the *paterfamilias* – the heads of families. Sometimes, to safeguard the unity and peace, the head of the family excommunicated ‘rebels’ from the family circle. This practice might be considered excessive and even non-Christian in a contemporary age often associated with the Catholic Church’s promotion of dialogue. Nevertheless, ‘excommunications’ in Vietnam have to be critiqued and understood in their historical context. On the other hand, family education by both father *and* mother revealed to be a simple but efficacious way to introduce the children into concrete practices of faith as daily prayers and regular, that is to say faithful, participation to the Holy Mass and to the Christian sacraments. In this regard, the life and martyrdom of Agnes Lê Thị Thành, the only female Saint among the 117 canonized Vietnamese martyrs, is an excellent example. Together with her husband, she managed to transmit to their six children the ABC of faith and faithfulness to God, which she herself professed until the last minute of life.⁹

⁹ Ibid., 23-30 (esp. 24).

In addition, the memory of other Vietnamese martyrs and their profession of faith during their trials and executions remained a lasting inspiration. This may be simple, but it is deep and provides a radical adhesion to God and the Church. Every new Vietnamese Christian had to face division in his or her (large) family, village, and society. Jesus warned about division in the family and society because of him and the Gospel: "Henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three" (Lk 12:52-53). This truth was dramatically true in Vietnam during periods of persecution.

A fourth point is important to remember in our age of theories of inculturation. A process of inculturation by the first missionaries followed the practices of the universal Church which were characteristic of the age. In such a context, a burning question remained unsettled in a definitive way: what about the practice of ancestor veneration? On the one hand, there was a Catholic prohibition of such a practice, to avoid confusion with wide-spread superstitious venerations which appeared quite similar in form. On the other hand, the prohibition did not disturb the Vietnamese Catholic Christians who continued to practice veneration towards their ancestors in a 'new' form. They offered prayers and Mass intentions for their deceased. What appeared very delicate and was crucial for the people, was strengthened by formation in the meaning of unconditional trust and obedience that the Vietnamese Catholic Christians and martyrs had developed towards their pastors and the leaders of the universal Church. This attitude was the fruit of circumspect catechetical education on all levels, especially in the family, as seen above.

In the end, notably, emphasis on the method of one-to-one personal relationship in formation was foundational and bore abundant fruit. Nearly all Vietnamese martyrs had an interpersonal contact with a missionary or priest who served as cate-

chist and companion of faith, a kind of spiritual director, even when they were under arrest. As a result, in the critical moments of doubt and temptation to give up faith, many Vietnamese Christian prisoners managed to persevere and get ready for their final act of life sacrifice to remain faithful to Christ their Saviour. Such a constant and individual accompaniment in Christian life could be a good model for the process of adult faith formation in the Vietnamese Church today, in the era of new evangelisation.

The Vietnamese Martyrs as a Case Study for the Asian and Universal Church

This year the Catholic Church in Vietnam solemnly celebrates the 30th anniversary of the canonisation of 117 Vietnamese martyrs by Pope St. John Paul II in 1988. May these observations on the general spiritual formation of these Vietnamese martyrs open the door to further study of the unique theological richness of the Asian Catholic Church, the development of pastoral practice in a part of the world where Christianity intersects with diverse Asian religions, and more specific spiritual elements in their lives and cultural circumstances. Their lives and supreme sacrifices out of faith and faithfulness to God is a powerful narrative for the world. May studies be inaugurated into the historical circumstances in the lives of these martyrs, analysis of the intensity and style of their prayers, and transformative power of the community support of other Christian Vietnamese believers in common crises and shared hardships. May their heroic shedding of their blood in fidelity to God inspire new generations of Vietnamese Christians to live up to their ideals and to perform their utmost desire that God may reign in every place and in every heart in their beloved country.

So be it. Maranatha! Amen.

THE MARTYRS OF LAOS (1954-1970)

History and Significance, Beatification and its Outcome

Roland Jacques

Not having any diocese yet, the fledgling Church of Laos is a missionary Church in the strictest sense of the word. All missionary personnel from the West were driven out of the country by 1977; reorganising upon new bases the pastoral activities in its four apostolic vicariates took more than thirty years, and remains an unfinished endeavour. More recently, the violent persecutions experienced between 1953 and 1970, then revived in the 80s and beyond, gave way to an uneasy tolerance for the Catholic faith, as well as finicky regulations for its daily practice, especially in remote areas of the country. Yet many Catholic communities are vibrant, and conversions and vocations have started growing.

In this context, the Beatification of the Martyrs of Laos is a milestone of great importance. Over fifteen years, while preparing for the event, the Catholic communities in Laos were given an opportunity to come to terms with their past, taking stock of their successes and failures, however painful, of their losses, gains and hopes. Pastors and members of the faithful fought together for the right that they claimed, to wit: to celebrate the beatification their own way, on the very soil that the Martyrs had irrigated with their blood. They chose to ignore the authorised voices warning them against the dangers of such a venture, in a country governed to this day by the regime that

had killed 'in hatred of the faith' their very heroes. They stood their ground to keep all seventeen Servants of God together as one single group of martyrs – Lao citizens and foreigners, members of all ethnic groups of their nation, representing all its main regions.

By Laotian standards, the Beatification ceremony was a tremendous success: celebrated in the humble pro-cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Vientiane, it widely spilled over the surrounding neighbourhood. The civil authorities honoured it with the presence of an official delegation; all main religions were represented as well. The diplomatic corps was present, though inconspicuously. Many bishops, priests and members of the faithful had come from the neighbouring Churches of Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand, to share in the common joy and pride of the small, humble, fragile Church of Laos.

This is indeed a powerful portent for the future of the Catholic Church in Laos, its unbreakable link to the Church around the world, and its integration at the very heart of the nation.

The present essay covers three main topics. The first section attempts to sketch the development of the Catholic communities in Laos in their early stages – from ca. 1880 – and during the era of the martyrs. The focus of the second section is on the persons of the martyrs, and addresses the question: What was the inner force that brought them to offer up their lives? The third section explores the legacy of the Martyrs for the Catholic Church of Laos today, while the conclusion suggests that their memory should constitute the foundation on which the future of the Catholic Church of Laos should be built.



Part I - Timeline



The Church in Laos was Born in Suffering

The evangelization of Laos in its present boundaries began around 1880 with the heroic tenacity of members of the Foreign Missions of Paris, and their catechists.¹ These missionaries were rich with the century-old experience of their society, but especially with their spirit of faith and self-sacrifice. In his historical sketch, Fr. Gérard Sion, OMI, counts 32 priests who died in the first 25 years of the Mission then called Châu-Laos – fevers, poisoned water, etc.² Even many more Vietnamese catechists and auxiliaries shared, in life and in death, the fate of the French priests. Châu-Laos is the territory where Joseph Tien, the proto-martyr, was born. After World War I, the Mission in Laos recovered painfully and called for reinforcement. In 1919, Xieng Vang welcomed the first Lovers of the Cross, a female indigenous congregation. In 1934 came the Sisters of Charity. From December 1935 on, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate took over the entire North part of the country from the MEP. The Franco-Siamese conflict of 1940 and the Japanese occupation in 1945 had terrible consequences for the Mission: persecution, missionaries captured and sent into exile, two bishops and two missionaries, all MEP, killed as hostages.³

¹ For a more complete historical sketch with precise references, see R. JACQUES, “Laos: Le Choc des Indépendances”, in C. MARIN (ed.), *Les Écritures de la Mission en Extrême-Orient. Le Choc de l’Arrivée, XVIII^e-XX^e siècles*, Brepols, Turnhout 2007, 311-464.

² Cf. G. SION, *La Mission Catholique Lao Historique*, Apostolic Vicariate of Vientiane, Laos 1969, 15; J.-B. DEGEORGE, *À la Conquête du Châu-Laos*, MEP, Hong Kong 1926.

³ Cf. C. BAYET, *Une Lumière s’est levée : Historique de l’évangélisation au nord-est de la Thaïlande et au Laos*, MEP, Bangkok 1985.

The independence of Laos in the early '50s did not bring the expected peace. Evangelization continued, however, with reinforced personnel. The Oblates successfully implanted Christianity in Xieng Khouang Province and a little later in the surroundings of Louang Prabang; but they were forced to abandon Sam Neua, a province until now closed to the Gospel. The Paris Foreign Missions also worked their way to spread the Good News towards the highlands, away from the Mekong River.

The Christian community of Laos grew amidst countless sufferings and difficulties. Jean Mazoyer, who had accepted the Mission of Vientiane for the Oblates in 1934, and was the first Apostolic Prefect residing in Laos, cried while discovering the difficulties that awaited his missionaries in the country. Étienne Loosdregt, OMI, first Vicar Apostolic in 1952, would be deeply worried when he had to publish the instructions given in 1959 by the Holy See: in case of Communist aggression, all missionary personnel must remain each in his post, whatever happens. The hour of martyrdom had come.

At the end of 1975, when the old Kingdom became the People's Republic, Catholics now numbered 35,000, in four apostolic vicariates. The clergy were still mainly foreign priests. Within a few months, all four bishops and their missionaries would have to leave. Nearly half of the Christians also went into exile, while others were pressed to abandon all practice. Little by little a new style of persecution cut them off from the rest of the world and sent their leaders to labour camps.

□ **The Hour of Martyrdom Dawns: 1953-1954**

Two texts may help to understand the radical change that occurred in 1953. On April 3rd, President Ho Chi Minh of Northern Vietnam wrote a fatherly letter to the young recruits of the People's Army whom he sent to combat in Laos. Here are a few

excerpts: “Dear young friends, this is the first time that you have been entrusted with a task as glaringly important as your present mission: to help the people of a friendly country [...] I ask you to fulfil your combat mission: in order to overcome all difficulties, you need to train yourselves to destroy the enemy [...] You must hold in high esteem the internationalist spirit [...] You must remain always constant and strongly determined, in spite of failures. As for me, your Uncle, I am awaiting news of your victory [...] With all my affection in the hope of victory”.⁴ In this letter, as explained in the footnotes of Ho Chi Minh’s collected works, ‘the internationalist spirit’ is a clear reference to the Communist doctrine. ‘Destroy the enemy’ will be applied, not to armies, but to civilians who did not share in that doctrine.

That same year, 1953, Pope XII published a message for Mission Sunday (October): “Is it not true that in many countries new and serious reasons for fear assail missionaries? They are aware of the perils which, from within and without, threaten their young Christian flock. Today no territory is sheltered from the propaganda, disguised or patent, spread by Atheist Communism. New aspirations and sometimes impatient pretensions awake in all young people without exception; and this creates immense burdens for the pastors who are accountable for and concerned by the true good of their peoples”.⁵

⁴ Published in the daily newspaper *Nhân Dân* [People’s Daily], no. 83, 14th April 1953; reproduced in PHẠM HỒNG CHUÔNG (ed.), *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập* [Complete Writings of HCM], vol. 7, Chính trị Quốc gia, Hanoi 2000, 64. Unless specified otherwise, translations from the original language were made by the Author.

⁵ PIUS XII, “Message to the Missionaries for the Mission Sunday”, 18th October 1953, in *Acta Apostolicæ Sedis*, vol. 45, 1943, 691.

The Viet Minh attack on the Houa Phan Province in 1953-54 aimed at eradicating Christianity in this border region. The largest group of Christians there were Tai-Deng; many of them could understand and speak Vietnamese. They appeared as the only opposing force against the drive to establish a regime based on Communist ideology. Fr. Joseph Tien, the proto-martyr of Laos, was a learned man, fluent in Laotian, Vietnamese and French. He had studied for many years in Vietnam. As a school-master, he wielded a large influence on the whole area. He was arrested at Easter, 1953. However, the new authorities tried for a full year to win him over and make use of his talents, but to no avail. No entreaties, no promises of promotion, no tricks, no threats could bring him to break his priestly vow of celibacy. Because of this he had to die. All Christians in Laos today know about his heroic fidelity to his faith and especially to the demands of his priesthood.⁶

**Sweeping Away All Christian Presence
from the Mountains: 1959-1961**

From 1954 to 1959, after the Geneva agreements, evangelization was yielding modest but encouraging successes in mountain areas, in Louang Prabang and Xieng Khouang Provinces in the North, in Khammouane and Savannakhet Provinces in Central Laos, and in Champasak in the South. At the same time, the Pathet Lao Party, led and supervised by Viet Minh officers, had changed its strategy. They endeavoured to indoctrinate the poor people of the mountains by winning their hearts.

⁶ See the discussion in *Nanneten., Beatificationis seu Declarationis Martyrii Servorum Dei Iosephi Thao Tiên: Positio super Martyrio*, Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Rome 2015: "Informatio" – Archives of the OMI General Postulation.

Missionaries, on the other hand, were loved by the same people for their social action in favour of health and education, for the way they respected cultural values, and for their closeness to people. This mutual love stood squarely in the way of the official Communist vision, which faulted them as enemies of the people and as agents of imperialism and oppression. To annihilate this harmful influence, at a certain point the Communist leaders found necessary to eliminate them at all costs.

To illustrate the change that occurred in 1959 in the outlook of the missionaries themselves, let me quote the rescript sent by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide to Bishop Etienne Loosdregt, Vicar Apostolic of Vientiane, Laos. The letter is dated 18th August 1959 and states: “In the eventuality of a Communist domination – quod Deus avertat – the clergy and auxiliary religious personnel (except, of course, those who are old or ill) must remain in their position of responsibility unless they come to be expelled, as they did in China with foreign missionaries”.⁷ This letter was promulgated everywhere in Northern Laos and was known also to those in the Southern half of the country. All missionaries, priests as well as religious Brothers and Sisters, welcomed it unreservedly. They were ready to bear all its consequences.

The persecution broke out shortly before Christmas 1959, in Champasak: Fr. René Dubroux was eliminated during a meeting with his catechists. In May 1960, Fr. Mario Borzaga and his teenage Hmong catechist Paul Thoj Xyooj – himself a brilliant

⁷ Archives of Propaganda Fide, Rome. Ref.: *S.C. de Propaganda Fide* 3727/59, 1959; reproduced in *Nanneten., Beatificationis seu Declarationis Martyrii Servorum Dei Iosephi Thao Tiên, Copia Publica*, vol. IX, 2414-2416. – In the following footnotes, all references to “*Copia Publica*” pertain (as here) to the cause of canonisation of Joseph Thao Tien, Ref. No. 2809 at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

apostle – disappeared in the Northern Mountains during an apostolic trip.⁸ Chao Souk Vongsak, a Red Prince who was Minister of Propaganda in Communist Sam Neua, claimed their murder for his movement.⁹ In February 1961, in Xieng Khouang, Fr. Jean Wauthier and his Oblate confrère Jean-Marie Ollivier were spared for a matter of seconds from an execution platoon at the ready. And then came a co-ordinated sweeping move, in three different provinces throughout the country:

- April 18th, Fr. Louis Leroy is arrested and killed in Xieng Khouang Province;
- April 20th, Fr. Michel Coquelet is ambushed and killed in Xieng Khouang Province;
- April 23rd, Fr. Marcel Denis is arrested, held prisoner and killed three months later in Upper Khammouane Province;
- April 27th, Fr. Noël Tenaud and his Thai-Issan catechist Joseph Outhay, fall into a trap; they are tortured and killed in Upper Savannakhet Province;
- May 11th, Ascension Day, Fr. Vincent L’Hénoret, to whom the new authorities had delivered a safe-conduct, is shot in the back while riding his bicycle to celebrate an early Mass, in Upper Xieng Khouang Province.¹⁰

⁸ R. JACQUES, “Un catéchiste Hmong chez les Hmong du Laos: Paul Thoj Xyooj (1941-1960)”, *Histoire et Missions chrétiennes*, no. 6, 2008, 149-176; ID., “Le Témoignage suprême du catéchiste hmong Paul Thoj Xyooj (1941-1960)”, *ibid.*, no. 7, 2008, 147-166.

⁹ General Archives of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Rome. Box 35 – Loosdregt E # 4630, File “Letters Deschâtelets 1958-1960”, Telegram received on 14th November 1960. *Copia Publica*, vol. IX, 2548.

¹⁰ For all Oblates (OMI) mentioned, see P. CHEVROULET, *Oblates Along the Mekong*, OMI, Rome 1998. For all members of the Paris Mission So-

□ The Last Heroes: 1967-1970

After the events of 1961, in spite of the Roman instructions, the missionaries exercised caution: no bishop, no religious superior wants his priests, his or her members, killed. But Laos was starting to experience a new tragedy. Tens of thousands of people – among them thousands of Christians – fled the mountain regions taken over by the guerrilla forces. They resettled as refugees, in dire poverty, in rough places appointed by the Government. These new settlements became grey buffer areas; officially considered as non-combat zones, they were far from safe, and access to them was restricted. Several missionaries responded however to the dire needs of the refugees and braved the restrictions. Jean Wauthier became a vocal defender of the poorest among the poor, denouncing injustice and abuse wherever he saw it; at Christmas 1967, in a remote area of Xieng Khouang Province, he was ambushed and killed by elements of the Hmong Army – the Army set up by the American CIA against communism. Jean gave up his life for the sake of justice, and for love of the poor.¹¹

ciety (MEP), see R. JACQUES, “Le Laos et ses Martyrs”, *Missions Étrangères de Paris*, no. 522, 2016, 54-60; ID., “Laos: Pour approfondir – Brève présentation des 17 martyrs du Laos”, *Églises d’Asie*, 10th June 2015, <http://eglasiemepasie.org/asia-du-sud-est/laos/2015-06-10-pour-approfondir-breve-presentation-des-17-martyrs-du-laos/>; ID., “Le Laos et le Sang des Martyrs”, *Omnis Terra*, no. 2, June 2017, www.omnisterra.fides.org/articles/view/35/.

¹¹ J. EDERN, “Témoignage: Un missionnaire. Le P. Jean Wauthier tué au Nord-Laos”, *La Croix*, 24th-25th December 1967, 12; Anon., “Le Père Jean Wauthier, Mort au milieu de ses chrétiens parce qu’il voulait partager leur vie”, Interview published in *Petites Annales*, no. 3-4, 1968, 5-10; Anon., “Laos: Un Père Oblat tué et deux Oblates blessées”, *Jeunes du Monde*, no. 65, Quebec 1969, 182.

In May 1968 in Champasak, Fr. Lucien Galan was ambushed by Laotian Communist rebels under Vietnamese command and killed, together with his 16-year old pupil, would-be catechist Thomas Khampheuane. In July 1969, near Paksane, Fr. Joseph Boissel was likewise ambushed and killed; the two young consecrated women who rode in his car were wounded but survived – unfortunately they do not qualify as martyrs!¹² Finally, in March 1970 Luke Sy, a 32 years-old fully trained catechist, and his companion Maisam, died similarly in an ambush; they were evangelising some refugee villages where priests no longer had access.¹³ The third man caught in that ambush survived as if by miracle; he was then a seminarian and is now Cardinal Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhankhoun.

Part II - Making Sense of so many Deaths: Martyrdom Experienced in Laos

Identification with Jesus

No doubt the Martyrs of Laos who were priests had heard during their studies the traditional phrase, sometimes attributed to Saint Bernard or to Bérulle, “Sacerdos alter Christus” – “A Priest is another Christ”; they had learned that, in his formal acts of ministry, a priest acts “In persona Christi” – “In the per-

¹² OMI General Archives, Rome. Personnel Files PF V/1, BOISSEL, Joseph (1909-1969) # 5443, documents 10 and 11: E. DUMONT OMI, *La dernière piste du Père Boissel*, mimeographed booklet; reproduced in *Copia Publica*, vol. XV, 4167-4171.

¹³ *Nanneten., Beatificationis seu Declarationis Martyrii Servorum Dei Iosephi Thao Tiên: Positio super Martyrio*, Rome, Congregation for the Causes of Saints, 2015: “Informatio” – Archives of the OMI General Postulation.

son of Christ”. But there is little chance that those who persecuted them had any inkling of such theological realities. Yet the Laotians among them understood that a sacred mystery enshrouds the priest, and they had their own way of expressing it.

Mr. Bonaventure Sivilay, who had been the school-master of young Thomas Khampheuane and is one of the key-witnesses for the beatification process, testifies: “When I worked with the new leaders, four or five years after the ambush, I was able to ask a few questions [...] The leaders of the rebellion decided that Fr. Galan should die; but among them there was some misunderstanding, and a lively debate ensued between the Laotians and the Vietnamese. The former said, ‘Do not harm this man, because he is Jesus.’ They did not say ‘he is a priest’, but ‘he is Jesus’; that is the way they spoke. The Vietnamese replied: ‘No, he is a secret agent. It’s war; whoever he is, we will kill him’”.¹⁴ This happened in Champasak, the southernmost province of Laos.

Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, Vicar Apostolic emeritus of Louang Prabang in the North, also testifies that the Communist in his place said: “These Italian Jesuses should go away”.¹⁵ Mainly, Cardinal Louis-Marie Ling, when he was arrested and interrogated in 1984 – nine years after the 1975 Revolution, protested that he had abstained from all propaganda. To his amazement, as he testifies, he heard the reply: “Be aware that your mere presence here is the propaganda of Jesus, can’t you get that?”¹⁶

¹⁴ Testimony of Mr. B. Sivilay: *Copia Publica*, vol. III, 672-678.

¹⁵ Testimony of Bishop A. Staccioli, in *Tridentina, Beatificationis seu Declarationis Martyrii Servorum Dei Marii Borzaga: Positio super Martyrio* [Ref. No. 2691]: “Summarium Testium”, Witness I – Archives of the OMI General Postulation.

¹⁶ Testimony of Bishop L.M. Ling Mangkhanékhouon (‘Aide-mémoire’ submitted under oath): *Copia Publica*, vol. I, 141-168.

This unusual identification of the missionaries with the person and message of Jesus resonates with some of their own words. On 28th September 1947, Vincent L'Hénoret wrote to his parents: "For the salvation of souls, Christ gave his life; why should it be surprising if God asks the same of one or the other of us?"¹⁷ On 9th December 1954, Jean Wauthier wrote to the Poor Clares in his hometown: "Because our Leader Jesus triumphed over death by dying on a cross, why should we as his disciples prefer to have an easy time of it on earth?"¹⁸ In his diary, on 28th July 1959, Mario Borzaga calls out to himself: "And you, now you've begun the Calvary of your apostolate. Along the way, you will be accompanied by Jesus, crowned with thorns; and at the top, you will find him on the cross. The Night will come, and then the Resurrection."¹⁹

Unconditional Obedience to the Church

From the onset of the beatification process, the Church leaders of Laos, and all people who had lived and toiled alongside with the Martyrs, wanted to stress a value that they considered more important than the persecutor's hatred for the Christian faith. As Fr. Yvon L'Hénoret, the Martyr's first cousin, testifies: "The dual loyalty of these men is quite noteworthy: fidelity to Rome, and loyalty to their people."²⁰

¹⁷ See the letters of Blessed Vincent L'Hénoret: *Copia Publica*, vol. VIII, 2067-2081.

¹⁸ See the letters of Blessed Jean Wauthier: *Copia Publica*, vol. VIII, 2137-2171.

¹⁹ See the Diary of Blessed Mario Borzaga, *Diario di un Uomo Felice*, Città Nuova, Rome 1985.

²⁰ Declaration dated 10th May 2004: *Copia Publica*, vol. IX, 2746.

The unquestioned loyalty to Rome is clearly visible in the unanimous reaction of the missionaries to the adamant instructions received from the Prefect of Propaganda Fide: “The clergy and auxiliary religious personnel must remain in their position of responsibility unless they come to be expelled”. In a letter to an Oblate General Assistant in Rome, one month later, Bishop Loosdregt pictures the reaction and expresses his private misgivings: “I am just back from visiting the Sisters [of Charity] [...] Their answer: ‘At least, it’s clear, now we know what we have to do’. And not a word more. The superior is more worried than the Fathers and Sisters! For sure, Rome spoke; but our Fathers are stuck in such isolated posts [...] In my humble opinion, the instructions of Rome would be very nuanced if they saw on the spot the actual state of affairs [...] The Fathers in Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang fill me with admiration; they do not hesitate for an instant to obey; in their hearts, they are all offering their lives up in a most generous sacrifice, so that together with Christ they may be of service for the salvation of the world”²¹

Unconditional Faithfulness to Serve the Poorest and Most Remote People

The unshakeable loyalty of the Martyrs to the instructions received from Rome can be easily understood if we consider the second term: fidelity to the people that were entrusted to them, Christians and non-Christians alike. As early as December 1954, Jean Wauthier wrote in his letter to the Poor Clares, quoted above: “At our last retreat, conscious of our weakness but strong in the power of God, we decided unanimously to stay,

²¹ OMI General Archives, Rome. Box 35 – Loosdregt E # 4630, File “Letters Drouart 1959-1960”. *Copia Publica*, vol. IX, 2535-2538.

whatever should happen. ‘Whatever’ is a very weighty little word. We know perfectly well what is going to happen to us: torture and death, physical or psychological torture (who knows which is to be preferred?), the People’s Court, forced labour, expulsion, being broken and belittled [...]

In a word, Rome had done nothing more than making mandatory what these missionaries had already decided to do: stay with the people.

One year earlier, when the Viet Minh were marching in, several villagers had urged the young Laotian priest Joseph Tien to flee. He replied: “I was ordained for the Christians; I cannot abandon them. Those who want to kill me, well, they’ll have to kill me here”.²² Fr. Tien had indeed become the role-model for generations of priests and other Christians, to this day.

In March 1956, Louis Leroy wrote to Carmelite Sisters in France: “I am delighted with my obedience, very happy to have arrived in this region; and I have only one desire: to work here all my life, and if it is God’s will, to die here”.²³

The loyalty of the missionaries to their people was an evident obstacle for the Communist instructors: they were trying to win the hearts and souls of the poor rural people and mountain minorities; and endeavoured to deny it. In November 1956, Louis Leroy wrote again to his Carmelite spiritual sisters: “Recently, Communist propaganda was spreading the rumour that, within a year, all the Fathers would have returned to France, leaving the Christians to themselves [...] This propaganda succeeded in troubling some of the people: ‘In that case, it’s better to wait before joining that religion.’ At the same time, we have the joy of being asked for in many villages”.

²² *Copia Publica*, vol. III, 581-584.

²³ Letters of Blessed Louis Leroy: *Copia Publica*, vol. VII, 1956-1978.

Fr. Marcel Denis needs a specific mention here, because of his special love for and connection to the lepers. In a circular letter to his home diocese dated December 1957, he wrote: “I discovered some lepers who are forced to live behind a mountain, five km away from my village. I have to climb the mountain: about three hours of acrobatics and moving on all fours over a heap of cutting and burning rocks [...] These lepers have never received visits or help of any kind: it will be a crazy adventure, but I cannot leave them like that [...] I am only a missionary whose main work is exploring these totally pagan regions”.²⁴ Fr. Denis had been wounded during World War II and had a stiff knee; but his loyalty to the people was stronger than his physical ailments.

As much as Fr. Denis loved the lepers, Jean Wauthier loved the Kmhmu’ refugees. For two years, he had pleaded with his bishop and with the civil and military authorities to be allowed to go and live with the refugees, up in the mountains. In 1966, he states in an interview: “As a priest, I am alone. But there are all the people! Because of the war, I live very close to them. It is they who made my house, just like one of theirs: a rectangle of 8 x 6 m, with a dirt floor, a roof of leaves, walls of bamboo”.²⁵ A year later, he would die in their midst, as he had forecast ever since 1954. He was ready.

The unconditional fidelity of these missionary priests for the flock entrusted to them was reciprocated, almost mirrored, in the love, trust and loyalty of the catechists for their priests – for Jesus, whom they contemplated in the person of the priest. Nineteen-year old Paul Thoj Xyooj died with Fr. Mario Borzaga. Eyewitnesses testify: “A man cried out to him: ‘Get out of

²⁴ Letters of Blessed Marcel Denis: *Copia Publica*, vol. VI, 1405-1664.

²⁵ J. FAURE, “Avec les réfugiés du Nord-Laos, Un extraordinaire témoignage du Père Wauthier (O.M.I.), recueilli par J. F.”, in *Famille Éducatrice* (Paris), vol. 21, no. 9, 1966, 4.

here quickly!’, but he answered: ‘No, I am not leaving; I am staying with the Father. If I leave, he is coming with me. If he doesn’t leave, I am staying with him! [...] If you kill him, kill me too. Where he will be dead, I will be dead, and where he will live, I will live’.²⁶ The preposition ‘where’ that he is using has, in my eyes, a deep-seated theological meaning. It expresses the theological virtue of Hope.

We do not have any words from the mouth of catechist Joseph Outhay, who was 29 when he died a Martyr in 1961. However, Bishop Pierre Bach testifies: “From the moment he left for dangerous regions with Fr. Tenaud, he was well aware of the very serious danger, but he never feared for his life. I truly believe that he chose to follow Christ and serve the people of God, whatever should happen”.²⁷

The youngest of all the Martyrs, sixteen-year old Thomas Khampheuane, left an indelible mark on the soul of his teacher Sivilay, now an old man. The latter says: “I testify that Khampheuane presented himself spontaneously [to accompany Fr. Lucien Galan] [...] He knew of the danger very well, just like his comrades – that’s why they had refused to go. The danger was undeniably evident; and this is precisely why Khampheuane volunteered: he did not want to let Father go alone in the face of danger [...] Khampheuane and his friend Vandi would have been heartbroken to see Father go alone under those circumstances”.²⁸ Loyalty is thus a constant characteristic in the lives of all Laotian Martyrs; it should be considered as one of the main reasons for their martyrdom.

²⁶ *Tridentina, Beatificationis seu Declarationis Martyrii Servorum Dei Marii Borzaga, Copia Publica*, vol. III, 795.

²⁷ Testimony of Bishop P. Bach: *Copia Publica*, vol. I, 169-179.

²⁸ Testimony of Mr. B. Sivilay: *Copia Publica*, vol. III, 672-678.

□ A Special Challenge: Priestly Celibacy

Any attempt to explore, from the theological vantage-point, the experience of martyrdom in Laos would however be incomplete if it did not include the heroic faithfulness of the Protomartyr to his priestly promise of celibacy, including the virtue of chastity. All witnesses who had known Fr. Joseph Tien – including several who were attending school as children when he, their teacher, was arrested – highlight this as the main feature of their narrative.

Mr. Sipéng, who was then living in Fr. Tien's family home, testifies: "At the re-education camp, they put pressure on him a number of times to get married: 'If you take a wife, you will be free.' He always refused: 'I am there for the Christians.' Among us, we all understood that: he could not abandon his life as a priest. When they brought him into the village, everyone wished him the courage to remain firm: 'You are the Father of the Christians; if you give up, all will be lost. If you hold firm, there will also be some Christians over there'".²⁹

Fr. Jean-Marie Ollivier heard from former co-prisoners what Fr. Tien had told them about his last interview with a member of the revolutionary Government: "After the fall of Dien Bien Phu, they were ready to release him, but on two conditions: that he accept the governorship of a district, and that he get married. His answer: 'I am already married to Jesus Christ, I will not marry!' – 'Then your life finishes here!' was the answer".³⁰ The common people in this remote area of the country did not understand the definition of the word 'martyr'; and, in their

²⁹ Testimony of Mr. Sipéng: *Copia Publica*, vol. III, 581-584.

³⁰ Declaration of Fr. J.-M. Ollivier, 10th May 2004, *Copia Publica*, vol. X, 2939.

tradition, celibacy is not well understood. But they had an unreserved admiration for a man who had the courage to give his life for the Christians, to remain faithful to his special position within the Christian community.

In March 1954, in a letter to his Oblate confreres in France Jean Wauthier, summed it up as follows: “Why be afraid? We are nothing of ourselves, but we are walking Christs. One feels it almost physically in this country, where everyone lives in the fear of spirits – and we are love; where everyone lives for bodily needs – and we are first of all a soul that should be shining; where virginity is unknown and ridiculed – and we live without women”.³¹

Part III - The Experience of the Martyrs: a Challenge to the Church in Laos Today

A ‘Church of Silence’ Wakes Up

The Diocesan phase of the beatification process was entirely entrusted to two European dioceses, Trent in Italy and Nantes in France. During the first decade of the third millennium, as a matter of fact, persecution was still rampant in Laos. The Laotian Bishops, fearing ugly consequences, instructed the postulation to proceed quietly, shunning all types of publicity that might arouse the attention of the civil authorities of the country, inside or abroad. This, of course, did not make the gathering of proof easy, especially interviewing and listening to witnesses.

³¹ Letter to the Oblates Scholastics in Solignac (France), dated from Xieng Khouang, 24th March 1954; English translation by James Allen, OMI. Original kept in the Archives of OMI Province of France, Marseilles, Box 37 E.

Quietly, then, the postulation started looking for witnesses. Some of these, having fled the country, lived as refugees abroad, mainly in France, a few in the United States. However, the vast majority were living in Laos, especially in the villages where refugees had been allowed to settle. The postulation sent personnel, on several trips over a few years, to reach those villages. Bishops, priests, consecrated persons, and catechists, did their utmost to facilitate the contacts when the powers-that-be were not looking, and serve as translators. Little by little, the Catholic faithful rank and file – including those who had not benefitted from formal education or had had no contact with the clergy during the dark years – became aware that the Church was interested in their experience of faith. They came forward with the story of those who had died; they happily told their *fioretti*; they expressed their admiration and love for those who had given up their lives rather than abandoning their faith, or their flock. Their recollections fill hundreds of pages, included in the Diocesan Inquiry held in Nantes.³² Eventually, 33 of them would formally testify.

The most important fact, however, is quite different. Repeated visits to many villages aroused the people's awareness of the martyrs, the beauty of their lives, the significance of their deaths, and the message they left for generations to come. Wit-

³² See volumes from IX to XIV of the *Copia Publica*. See also: *Nan-neten., Beatificationis seu Declarationis Martyrii Servorum Dei Josephi Thao Tien: Positio super Martyrio*, Rome 2015: "Summarium Testium" – Archives of the OMI General Postulation. One example of *fioretti* concerning Blessed Michel Coquelet OMI: "One day – I was about five years old – I was stung by an insect and could not walk because of the swollen foot. He gave me one of his shoes, which I kept. He went away barefoot". A verbal statement by Mr. Paulo Somphèng, recorded in manuscript form by Fr. Yvon L'Hénolet OMI on 1st January 2008, in Ban Phôn Say Tay (Bolikhamstay, Laos); and reproduced in *Copia Publica*, vol. XIII, 3602.

nesses were never individual persons: they were surrounded by the village community. What they communicated became the treasured possession of the whole village. Those who were present would repeat it to their families and friends. Quietly, by word of mouth, without any publicity, the martyrs' reputation spread to even more remote villages and distant areas of the country.

The postulation also asked a Vietnamese artist – Đỗ Mạnh Bình, who lives and works in Hanoi, the very city where the orders to kill the Christians originated – to create a large painting of the Martyrs. Their faces were painted from photographs, so that all who had known them would easily recognise them. The picture was dominated by the Christ of Mercy, a picture of Jesus all Catholics in Laos loved. The Martyrs were set against a characteristic Laotian landscape, with easily recognisable features. This picture, reproduced in a variety of sizes, made its way to all churches and chapels, all the way to the remote spots where Christians were present, and to every Catholic home throughout the country. All could read a short sketch of their story and prayed daily the prayer that had been freshly composed: “To love and serve the poor, the sick and the lowly they put their lives at risk. They gave up their lives in union with the life of Jesus who died for us on the cross [...] O Lord, give us the courage to follow in their footsteps and let the young generations know the example they left [...]”³³

In one word, the harvesting of testimonies on the martyrs, together with the picture and the prayer, led to a kind of new evangelisation of Laos. The results became evident. The bishops thought that the beatification ceremony would bring to-

³³ Devotional leaflet published in various languages by the OMI General Postulation in Rome, and kept in its archives.

gether from one to two thousand persons from across the country. On 11st December 2016, they were more than 6,000 – 10% of the Catholic population of the country.

A Unique Situation: Martyrs Beatified in a Country Governed by the Regime that Persecuted Them

When the Diocesan Inquiries in Nantes and Trent were completed and sent to Rome, the Bishops of Laos thought that, at last, they could breathe easier; so far, thank God, there had been no backlash from the Communist authorities in the country. At one point, however, they were stunned: The Congregation for the Causes of Saints required that the postulation document the persecution by providing original documents produced by the persecutors themselves. Under the circumstances, in the bishops' eyes, this was unthinkable. Would all the previous painstaking work now be thrown overboard?

Well, the postulation did the trick, walking a tightrope. In the long run, rising to the challenge was quite beneficial in a roundabout way. The bishops started wondering whether they had not been too fainthearted. They started to weigh all the benefits, for the people of God entrusted to them, to experience a beatification ceremony first-hand, rather than hearing about some bizarre event happening in remote places on the other side of the world.

This line of thinking would prove to be controversial. Abroad, some groups had grown fond of the idea of having a beatification at home, mainly in Italy. They started throwing their weight around to keep their treasured project alive. Some Church officials in Rome also declared privately that a beatification in Laos was impossible – period! In the millennium-old history of saints-making, there was no precedent for a beatification openly and festively celebrated under the eyes of the

persecutor. Moreover, the Vietnamese Martyrs had been canonised in Rome in 1988 under fierce protest of the present-day Communist regime of Vietnam. Laotian Catholics, whose Government was under heavy Vietnamese influence, should stop dreaming.

The Bishops of Laos, however, stood their ground and started looking for ways to make this happen. In Laos, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, of strict Marxist-Leninist obedience, was all-powerful. Eventually, aware of the weakness of their bargaining power, the bishops entrusted all negotiations to a small committee of lay Catholics – a woman and two men well versed in the lingo and ways of the regime.

Meanwhile, the Bishops sent a memo to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, outlining some principles.³⁴

- In Laos, the Christian religion has ill repute of being a 'foreign religion', specifically the religion of the West, identified with the colonial powers. A celebration abroad would only reinforce this bias, and thus cause great harm to the reputation of the Catholic faithful in the Lao nation.
- The Church of Laos expected the beatification of its earliest witnesses – a native priest, native catechists and members of the laity, together with missionaries from abroad – to become a beacon of hope and a source of the renewed vitality it strongly needs today.
- A beatification in Laos would provide a unique chance to show the unity of the Church; if all 17 martyrs were beatified jointly, the celebration would include all four vic-

³⁴ Memo of the Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia on the beatification of the "Martyrs of Laos", to the Holy See, September 2013. Unless specified otherwise, the documents quoted in this section are kept in the Archives of OMI General Postulation in Rome.

ariates; the three major ethnic families that together form the Lao nation; the two major male missionary institutes that sowed the Gospel in Laotian soil; and missionaries from various countries – Italy, Thailand and France – rather than just the former colonial power. Splitting the group to accommodate the expectations of some groups abroad would show counter-productive divisions.

The Bishops added that, due to the special circumstance of having a Communist Government, the beatification ceremony should be realised in all humility and discretion, avoiding the conspicuous presence of many foreign dignitaries.

This last point was not well understood: if the event cannot be festive, some said, if the Church cannot proclaim loud and clear that her children were killed in hatred of the faith, then let the beatification be organised outside the country. *'Odium fidei'*, 'hatred of the faith', is in fact the shibboleth of the martyrs, the litmus test provided by Pope Benedict XIV for true martyrdom. Despite the criticism, however, the Bishop's Conference maintained their idea and went ahead with their own approach.

The Martyrs as 'Ancestors of the Faith'

In this on-going dialogue with the Roman authorities, the Bishops' Conference put forward one way of having a festive, open, joyous celebration, and still receive the blessing of the civil authorities. They wrote: "A beatification celebrated in our Laotian land will honour, in front of all the members of the nation, the ancestors of the Christian faith in Laos [...] In relation to the State, the beatification would be framed in a 'celebration of the ancestors of the Catholic faith in Laos'. The term 'celebration of the ancestors' resonates very well, indeed, with the mentality of

all populations of the country, as well as with the ‘good customs’ approved by the State”³⁵

This approach, again, did not meet ready or unanimous approval. The interlocutors were rather puzzled by this highly unusual conceptual frame, unheard of in the books of Benedict XIV. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints sent back some questions:

- What does the phrase ‘ancestors of the Christian faith’ mean exactly?
- Is it a purely technical phrase, or does it have a theological content?
- In this second case, please elucidate in what way the Servants of God fall into the category of ‘ancestors of the Christian faith’.

Instructed by the Bishops’ Conference to respond, the postulation produced an 11-page, 5600-plus-word paper, that remains unpublished. This paper took stock in large part of the doctoral dissertation of Archbishop Marcello Zago, former Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, on the Rites and Customs of Lao Buddhism. It explored the notions of *pattidānagāthā*, the Pali phrase for ‘transmission of merits’ and *maranānoussati*, or ‘contemplation of death’. Furthermore, the essay also quoted from the doctrine on the veneration of ancestors developed within the Catholic Church in Vietnam; for instance, the address of Cardinal Paul Joseph Phạm Đình Tụng, Archbishop of Hanoi, to the Synod of Bishops for Asia: “The ceremonies of veneration of the ancestors are well developed in our countries and in the Chinese cultural

³⁵ Memo of the Bishops’ Conference of Laos and Cambodia (2013), as above footnote 34.

sphere: without this veneration, no man is really human. This is an eloquent and strong way of communicating with the ‘True Origin of All Things’ (万有真源 Vạn Hữu Chân Nguyên), the Origin that no one knows but from which all life stems harmoniously.³⁶ The paper drafted by the postulation concluded that, in the context of Laos, the use of the phrase ‘Celebrating the Ancestors of the Faith’ would not be a distraction from what a beatification is about. Far from it, it would help both Catholics and men and women of good will to grasp what the Church means when it confesses in the Creed the ‘Communion of Saints’.

Whether the person and groups who were making the decisions at the Holy See were convinced is debatable; however, the fact is that no one demanded further explanations or justification.

Harmony, Cooperation, Progress in Unity

Meanwhile, the negotiation of the special committee of lay Catholics had made progress. At first, the Government officials were somehow suspicious. They demanded a detailed presentation of each one of the 17 alleged martyrs, and the circumstances in which they had died. The hour of truth had come. The committee decided to play openly. Say the truth but say it in a way that makes it understandable and acceptable.

This was the message: The civil war is an undeniable fact, and it brought all kinds of sufferings to all sectors of the population. Many died on both sides for their ideals. Laotian Catho-

³⁶ Remarks by Cardinal Paul Joseph Phạm Đình Tụng in the plenary session of 28th April 1998. See TRẦN ANH DŨNG (ed.), *Hội đồng giám mục Việt Nam 1980-2000* [The Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam 1980-2000], Đắc Lộ tùng thư, Paris 2001, 465-500.

lic and priests died on both sides of the conflict – this argument could be put forward because Fr. Jean Wauthier was killed by the CIA-backed Army. All the 17 men the Catholic Church wishes to remember and honour died because they were faithful to the lowly, to those people who were abandoned up in the mountains. Now the time has come to turn the saddest pages of the past, and start anew: all men and women, Christians or non-Catholics, should now join forces to promote the noblest ideals in which these men had believed, and for which they had shed their blood.

It is impossible to know how the request was debated inside the Communist party. But the result went way beyond expectations. This is what the official authorization given by the Ministry of the Interior of the Democratic People's Republic of Laos says about the planned Beatification: "This should be an opportunity to create solidarity, mutual understanding and mutual help, which are the precious legacy and image received from our ancestors; and to maintain good relations [of Catholics] with governmental organizations, as well as with the non-Catholic people, for the sake of progress for all".³⁷

Some may detect a tinge of ideology in the text, but the Bishops of Laos received it with grateful hearts. Preparations went ahead, and invitations handed to Governmental authorities, foreign embassies, and representatives of recognised religions.

³⁷ Letter of the Chairperson of the Board, Ministry of the Interior of Laos, to the Vicar Apostolic of Vientiane, dated 22nd June 2016. Translation by Maître Thoummy Thevongsa, bar member of Vientiane-Capital. Copy of the Laotian original and translation kept in the Archives of OMI General Postulation in Rome.

□ **“A Gospel of Peace, Justice and Reconciliation”**

Pope Francis was made aware of the positive answer of the Communist regime of Laos, granting the request of the Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia to declare Blessed the 17 men who died for the faith. This awareness of the Roman Pontiff is visible in the short Apostolic Letter, dated 3rd December 2016, which is the formal act of beatification. Pope Francis does not mention the controversial phrase – Veneration of Ancestors – but the core of his document is indeed a cornerstone for a renewed dialogue between the Catholic Church in Laos and the Government authorities. He writes: “They are martyrs, that is, heroic witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ and his Gospel of peace, justice and reconciliation”.³⁸ The papal representative, Cardinal Orlando Quevedo from Mindanao in the Philippines, commented at some length on these words in English. Everybody was listening, including the Officials seated in the first row of the congregation.

At the end of the celebration, to the great astonishment of the assembly, the Deputy Director of the Lao Front for National Development, a state agency under the leadership of the Party and the Ministry of the Interior, which oversees religions, praised at length the doctrine and action of the Catholic Church in Laos. In turn, he developed the ideas put forward by Pope Francis, outlining what the nation expects of this Church for the common good. The Apostolic Nuncio Paul Tschang In-Nam, a man also deeply rooted in the culture

³⁸ “[...] martyres, heroici testes Domini Iesu eiusque Evangelii pacis, iustitiae et reconciliationis, Beatorum nomine in posterum appellentur”. Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis, dated 3rd December 2016. Copy of the Latin original and English translation kept in the Archives of OMI General Postulation in Rome.

of East Asia,³⁹ did not hesitate to take hold of the outstretched hand: he expressed his wish that harmony and collaboration will develop, so that all the people of Laos can progress in unity despite religious differences.

**A Church that is Building its Future
on the Memory of the Martyrs**

Pope Francis let Cardinal Louis-Marie Ling know that his appointment is linked with the story of the Martyrs. Cardinal Ling should have been No. 17 or No. 18 in the catalogue of the Martyrs of Laos, but he was spared when the last two died on March 7, 1970. Later, he was arrested, tried, and sent to the Communist camps for more than three years of re-education. But now, the Government of the country is proud to have him honoured internationally in this way.

Some expected the beatification would become a public clash of two opposite ideologies, one right and one wrong, a kind of shouting match, in which hatred of the faith would mingle with hatred of the competitor. None of that happened. Hatred of the faith exists, and in past years Christians in Laos had their abundant share of it. It may well be the identification mark for true martyrdom, but in no way can it be its fruit: “It was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy’. But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’” (Mt 5:43-45). Those who believed in this Gospel and died for it, loved the land, the country, the people of Laos, without distinction. Those who acclaimed them as they were officially proclaimed Blessed on 11th December 2016, at

³⁹ His Excellency Paul Tschang In-Nam is Korean. He is Apostolic Nuncio to Thailand and Myanmar, and Apostolic Delegate to Laos (not accredited to the Laotian Government).

Sacred Heart church in Vientiane, share in the same love, in the same prayer; and they witnessed some kind of miracle. It is still too early to assess the long-term effects of what happened at the end of that ceremony, but the early signs are very encouraging.

Here is a humble and very small Church that dares to affirm its existence publicly, as well as its pride and its immense respect for those who in the last century have moistened with their blood the seeds of the Gospel planted in Laotian soil. Here is a Church which will no longer hide itself, and which will find its place more and more every day in the bosom of the nation and of the whole of Christendom. And here is a nation that will show a new respect for the values and virtues that the Laotian Christians inherited from their glorious ancestors.

BURMA, 25TH MAY 1950: THE MARTYRDOM OF FR. MARIO VERGARA PIME AND ISIDORO NGEI KO LAT

Ulderico Parente

The Birth and Childhood of Mario Vergara (1910-1921)

Mario Vergara¹ was born in Frattamaggiore, a town in province of Naples and part of the Diocese of Aversa, on 18th November 1910, the youngest of nine children born to Gennaro and Antonietta Guerra.² Two days after his birth, he was brought to

¹ For a thorough account of Mario Vergara's life and death as a martyr, see F. GERMANI, *Padre Mario Vergara: martire della fede e della carità in Birmania (1910-1950)*, PIME, Naples 1987; M. ZAMBON, "Padre Mario Vergara (16 novembre 1910-24 maggio 1950)", in ID. (ed.), *A causa di Gesù. Diciotto missionari martiri del PIME*, EMI, Bologna 1994; S. CAPASSO, *Due missionari frattesi: padre Giovanni Russo (1831-1924) e padre Mario Vergara (1910-1950)*, Istituto di Studi Atellani, Frattamaggiore 2003; Congregatio de Causis Sanctorum, Prot. No. 2430, *Loikavensis: Beatificationis seu Declarationis Martyrii Servorum Dei Marii Vergara Sacerdotis Pontificii Instituti pro Missionibus Exteris et Isidori Ngei Ko Lat Christifidelis Laici et Catechistae (1918-1950), in odium fidei, uti fertur, interfectorum. Positio super martyrio*, Tipografia Nova Res, Rome 2006 (henceforth *Positio*); P. GHEDDO, *Missione Birmania: i 140 anni del Pime in Myanmar (1867-2007)*, EMI, Bologna 2007.

² The history of the district of Fratta, in the area north of Naples, has its roots in the pre-Roman era. Its main urban centre was Atella, an ancient town that disappeared in the 11th century and is famously known as the cradle of Latin drama. Under the Norman rule (1030-1266), Fratta

the baptismal font of the mother Church of San Sossio Levite and Martyr: the sacrament was administered by Rev. Luigi Costanzo, and his godmother was Rosa Orlando. Gennaro was in the textile industry and had attained a considerable wealth. His business, with one hundred employees, was flourishing.

Gennaro's wife, too, was involved in the family business, and little Mario was entrusted to the care of a wet-nurse. Her name was Maria Pietrasanta, a mother of nine from Caivano, a nearby village, to whom Mario became very attached calling her 'mamella'.

Besides schooling and an active involvement in society, Mario was certainly able to learn more about his faith, thanks also to the fact that Frattamaggiore boasted a strong religious profile expressed by the large network of churches and votive aedicule. The feast-days were intensely felt by the people, who combined Christian and Marian piety together with a diffused devotion for the Saints.

Sources assure us that Mario was a sweet child, not in the least capricious, very obedient, and little rarely inclined to quar-

was added suffix Maggiore (Major), and formed a kind of municipality connected to Naples for civil affairs and to Aversa for ecclesiastic affairs. After the Angevin period (1266-1442), the oldest part of its urban structure was reconstructed during the Aragon-Spanish period (1442-1507), with residential palaces and estates that also served for agricultural work, including the production of hemp. In 1493, Frattamaggiore became the see of the Gran Corte of the Vicaria, and its ropes and hawsers were exported throughout the Spanish empire. During the Bourbon period, the hemp craft developed into a flourishing textile industry that by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was among the best regarded in Europe. See F. PEZZELLA, *Frattamaggiore: l'immagine nel tempo, con una breve sintesi sulle trasformazioni economiche, sociali e urbanistiche dal 1850 al 1970*, Istituto di Studi Atellani, Sant'Arpino 2008; G. CAPASSO, *Cultura e religiosità ad Aversa nei secoli XVIII-XIX-XX*, Athena Mediterranea, Naples 1968.

rel with his companions. He was intelligent and extremely sensitive, and many noted how early he learned the Christian prayers and how attentive he was during catechism lessons. According to the memories of Filomena Mennillo: “He differed from us in his fervour for supernatural things. He would say: my mother taught us our prayers and told us stories about Jesus and Our Lady and about the Saints, and every evening she recited the Hail Mary with us while she put us to bed. Now, while we sometimes showed little interest or sniggered a bit, Mariuccio no. He was like an adult. I remember that at times he used to recite a proverb, which he must have heard from grownups, joke with us, but let Saints alone [...]. Another notable aspect was the concern he always showed since childhood for the poor people or people who were unhappy (those they called the village idiots). While we made fun, or even threw stones, at them, he tried to listen to them, providing help whenever he could”.³

Mario’s gentleness is universally remembered by his childhood friends. Don Angelo Perrotta praised “his goodness”,⁴ while Sirio Giametta recalled “his generosity and charity,” adding that “he never gave importance to differences in social rank and, above all, in wealth”.⁵ It was in this state of grace that Mario made his first Holy Communion, while nourishing a desire to dedicate himself to God by becoming a priest.

His decision was not an easy one, for it went against the wishes of his parents who wished for him a future in the family’s thriving and prosperous business. However, Mario was firmly convinced that his path lay in priesthood.

³ *Positio, Summarium*, 262-263.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 272.

The Seminary in Aversa: the Jesuits in Posillipo and the first PIME Experience (1921-1933)

Convinced of his vocation, Mario pled his parents to allow him to enter the seminary in Aversa, which he did on 5th October 1921 when he was yet to turn eleven. His strong and determined character emerged right from the outset: no hesitation, no regrets, but on the contrary, growing enthusiasm, which enabled him to overcome the continuous trials that he had to face along the way. In the fourth *Ginnasium*, he met father Pasquale Ziello,⁶ whose example and words stimulated Mario's strong leaning for the missionary ideal.

Mario remained at the Aversa seminary until the Autumn of 1927, displaying uncommon gifts of love for justice and commitment to the poor. He was an exuberant boy. Faith was an inseparable part of his life: faith nurtured his life and guided him. With the counsel of his superiors, a strong and serious character was forged along a path where priority was given to the glory of God and the spreading of the Gospel.

On 28th August 1927, he was confirmed, in the Basilica of Santa Restituta in Naples, by Bishop Giuseppe D'Alessio, titular Bishop of Sidone, with Monsignor Raffaele De Biase as his godfather. A few weeks later, Mario was sent to study philosophy and, successively, theology at the Pontifical Campano Seminar in Posillipo, run by Jesuit Fathers.

⁶ Pasquale Ziello was a co-diocesan and teacher of Fr. Mario Vergara. Born in Sant'Arpino (Caserta) in 1901, he entered PIME in 1926 and then left for Toungoo, Myanmar, in 1927. In Toungoo, he was a key collaborator of three Apostolic Vicars until 1974, when he fell ill and had to return to Italy. He died in Lecco on 21st May 1976. See F. GERMANI, *Padre Pasquale Ziello missionario del PIME in Birmania (S. Arpino - CE - 1901 - Lecco 1976): trasfigurato da Cristo si consacrò a lui con il voto di perfezione*, PIME, Trentola Ducenta 2005.

There he attended the first and second years of the philosophy *liceum*. He was particularly interested in the experiences of missionaries and in their sacrifices to spread the Gospel. Monsignor Michele Di Cristofaro, his companion at that time, refers that after listening to the missionaries' stories, Mario said he too wished to become a missionary.⁷ It was at this time that Mario became familiar with PIME thanks to the fathers who were based at Trentola Ducenta: "When he spoke about the missions his face would light up. He could see faraway lands and peoples awaiting the light of the Gospel, and all those who heard him speak noted his fervour, a zeal typical to those who are touched by that special calling from the Lord which they heed unconditionally".⁸

On 11th August 1929, Mario submitted his application to enter PIME and was admitted to the third-year high school in Monza. However, he contracted pleurisy and had to return home, to his family. Once recovered, he went back to the seminary at Posillipo, avoiding the harsh winter of northern Italy. At Posillipo and fully restored to good health, he completed the first three years of theology. Calm and composed, he awaited confidently his return to the PIME major seminary. However, even in Posillipo, he never lost contact with the missionary world. Jesuits – it is known – have a strong leaning for missionary work: he joined the missionary circle, organising and partaking in initiatives to help missionaries evangelising in distant lands.

His missionary fervour was accompanied by a continued human and cultural growth. Fr. Antonio Vitale, his seminary

⁷ ID., *Padre Mario Vergara: martire della fede e della carità in Birmania (1910-1950)*, 251-252.

⁸ *Positio, Summarium*, 273.

companion, recalled that “he was very kind, cheerful, outgoing, and easy to make friends with.”⁹ Sirio Giametta says: “When, as a seminarian he returned home, we often met at his house in the afternoons. However, he was not a bigoted person and he would never reprimand or preach to people, but he would speak with his eyes, or would go away if something happened to hurt his sensitivity or his religious principles.”¹⁰ According to Mario’s niece, Rosa Vergara, “he was a very sensitive person and I believe he played the piano because he was fond of music.”¹¹ Antonietta, another niece, says that “he was never strict. But he did make us learn poems by heart. When he came back home on the holidays, we used to spend some time together: he was very kind, affable, and very affectionate.”¹² Lastly, Don Giuseppe Rovereto recalled that once, during a game of draughts in the piazza at Posillipo, he tried to console Mario, by telling him that there was a lot missionaries could do here without having to go too far away. But Mario replied very seriously that ‘faraway’ one could hope to ‘die as a martyr’.¹³

In 1931-1932, he regularly went to school, attending second and third years. On 21st May 1932, Mario received the tonsure from Archbishop Carmine Cesarano of Aversa at the chapel of the Posillipo seminary. On 10th September, he was conferred the minor orders of lector and minister of the Holy Communion in the chapel of the Bishop’s residence in Aversa. The following day, he received the minor orders of exorcist and acolyte in the parish church of Saints Filippo and Giacomo in Aversa.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹² *Ibid.*, 267.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

At the PIME Major Seminary (1933-1934)

The news of his re-admission arrived in the summer of 1933. Having finished his holidays in Frattamaggiore, on 31st August 1933 he joined the PIME Novitiate in Sant’Ilario, near Genoa, with father Emilio Dilani as novice master. He expressed to the Superior General his deep joy and gratitude for “the marvellous gift received”.¹⁴

Sant’Ilario is located 13 km from Genoa. The Novitiate House stands 100 metres from the seashore along the Pisa-Genoa train line. There were 42 novices from across the country who were training at the House at that time. It was Mario’s desire to be able to travel to the Far East where there was so much poverty and need for evangelisation. In June 1934, Mario passed all his exams. Having obtained a monthly dispense from the Novitiate on the August 1st, he was fully consecrated in PIME for the mission.

Even before completing the novitiate, he was informed of the destination of his mission. He was destined for the mission in Toungoo¹⁵, in East Burma, today’s Myanmar. His superiors confided in his enthusiasm and in his gift for languages.

On 5th August 1934, he was made subdeacon by Blessed Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster, Archbishop of Milan. He should

¹⁴ *Positio, Summarium*, 138.

¹⁵ The Diocese of Toungoo was officially established on 19th July 1870, and extended for 115,000 sqm. The missionaries numbered about thirty. In the periphery, in the mountainous and forest regions far from the diocese’s center, there were various ethnic groups (Shan, Mon, Karen, Kachin, Padang, Lahu, Musho, Aklhà, Wa, Lisho, Ikò, Arakan). Each with their own language and tradition, they were mainly followers of animism or Buddhism. Subsequently, the Diocese of Toungoo was subdivided into three dioceses: Loikaw, Pekong, and Taunggyi.

have waited a year for the diaconate, but obtained a dispense and was ordained in Bergamo by Bishop Luigi Marelli on the 24th of the same month. Two days later, 26th August, he was ordained at Bernareggio by Cardinal Schuster. The following day he celebrated his first Mass in Frattamaggiore. “I remember the celebrations for his priestly ordination,” says Rosa Vergara. “I was a child, and they lasted for several days. A mass was said each day in a different church in Frattamaggiore, accompanied by a parade of relatives and friends, and the road was decorated for the occasion”.¹⁶ Few weeks later, Fr. Mario was ready to leave for Burma. It was 30th September 1934.

His First Period in Burma (1934-1941)

The journey lasted one month and two days. He arrived in Toungoo with two companions at the end of October. He was 24 years old. The local Bishop was Monsignor Vittorio Emanuele Sagrada,¹⁷ who advised him to learn the Burmese language. His teacher was Father Pasquale Ziello. He completed a feverish period of study. In one year, he learned at least three languages in order to start his apostolate and become familiar with the people, the local religions and customs, which were often very different and at times in contrast with each other.

The situation was tragic: few missionaries, scanty means, impoverished people, squalor everywhere, blatant injustice. Fr. Mario began to realize the difficulties caused by the climate,

¹⁶ *Positio, Summarium*, 265.

¹⁷ Born on 10th July 1869, Monsignor Vittorio Emanuele Sagrada was appointed Apostolic Vicar for East Burma on 18th May 1908. Titular Bishop of Hirina, he was Toungoo's Apostolic Vicar until 1936. He died on 10th February 1939.

and the hardships of the people living in villages devastated by floods during the rainy season. To make things even more difficult during those initial months of the mission, he received the bad news of the death of his grandmother and of his father Gennaro. Despite the grief, he could write that his “heart was drowned in an ocean of peace”.¹⁸

To have the opportunity to speak only in English, he moved to a small Buddhist village in the forest, where the ‘Brothers of Christian Schools’ was running a school for poor children and orphans. He experienced the confessional, and learned about the ‘spiritual ruin’ of young children condemned to lose their innocence very early on. It was not easy to adapt to the climate of those places: terrible heat and mosquitoes, which wrought atrocious torment. The hot season lasted for eight unbearable months.

At the end of 1935, Bishop Sagrada assigned him to the Citaciò district inhabited by the Red Karen of the Soka tribe, one of the poorest and most primitive in Burma, where pioneers such as Bishop Alfredo Lanfranconi,¹⁹ Fr. Ernesto Ravasi, and Fr. Pietro Mora had started the work of evangelization. Fr. Mario went to live in a small wooden shack in a little village of 108 inhabitants, and had to learn the Karenic language. The village was hidden in the mountains and could be reached only by hiking through barely accessible tracks. He took care of more than thirty Catholic villages scattered in those mountains, each of which could be reached on foot only after a perilous journey.

¹⁸ *Positio, Informatio*, 52.

¹⁹ Born in Mandello del Lario (Como), on 14th December 1888, Bishop Alfredo Lanfranconi was ordained a PIME priest on 29th June 1912. On 1st July 1937, he was appointed as Apostolic Vicar of Toungoo in his capacity as Titular Bishop of Zerta. On 1st January 1955, he was promoted Bishop of Toungoo. He passed away on 26th November 1959.

The villagers he lived with were good people, but poor and backward. When he arrived, they were starving. For two years, the rice harvest had been destroyed by rats. On the brink of starvation, the local people hunted and ate the rats, which had invaded homes and killed chickens. The rats died because in the end there was nothing more to eat, but by that time fevers had spread and were affecting the people. Fr. Mario did his utmost to help the people overcome the scourge. He distributed all the provisions of rice in Citaciò, and the people came to love him, a sentiment which also prompted many conversions.

But the difficulties were never ending: there were chapels and churches to build, thirty catechists to feed, and two orphanages, one for boys and the other for girls, with more than 150 orphans to clothe, feed, and educate. To do this, Fr. Mario needed money and, as his letters show, he did not hesitate to ask for more financial resources, aware that the Gospel could be announced also by aiding the people and seeking justice.

Bishop Sagraña had not erred when he informed his superiors that Fr. Mario had become everything for the people of that land: their priest, doctor, judge and support. They turned to him for every need. He showed a special concern for the children and the sick, and spent night and day taking care of the orphans when they fell ill. He was always on the move, from one place to another, covering vast distances and undertaking difficult journeys, in severe climate and weakened by frequent bouts of malaria.

Fr. Mario insisted on choosing his catechists, young and old, among the natives because they were trusted by the people. He passed onto them his enthusiasm and power of persuasion to involve and evangelise the natives, to be welcomed, accepted and understood by them. He put one of them in charge of each village, making him responsible for the community prayers, the schools and the supervision of the Christian communities. He

also studied medical manuals to gain the skills to assist the poor Sokù, who were suffering from malaria, dysentery and other diseases.

He also had to take his own health into account. He battled with malaria, typhoid, dysentery, but nothing dampened his missionary eagerness, as testified by many touching letters. Although sporadic and fragmentary, these letters testify to the personality of an all-round apostle, wholly devoted to spreading the Good News.

Imprisonment in India (1942-1946)

The tragic outbreak of the Second World War affected dramatically and directly the apostolic work of Fr. Mario and of the other missionaries in Burma. Since Burma was a British possession and Italy was at war with the Allies including Britain, the Italian missionaries were sent to British prison camps in India.

Life in the detention camps was hard, but the missionaries sustained and comforted each another. Some prison commanders were kinder, others were very strict, and even went as far as to mistreat prisoners, particularly the priests. In the Indian desert, the temperatures often reached 40° C causing many to die under the unbearable heat. However, the greatest torment was idleness, which was made even more excruciating by the knowledge that the immense field of apostolate work had been left untended in Burma.

The same fate befell Fr. Mario. On 16th January 1942, he was interned in the POW camp at Katapahar in India. On June 30th, he was moved to the camp in Ramgarh and on July 22th to the camp of Dheoli. Successively, on March 5th of the following year, he was sent to Dehradun. He was weak, tired,

morally exhausted and his nervous system shattered. He had peritonitis, paralysis, strokes, malaria, and two minor ear operations. There transpires in the letters he wrote during this period, despite dejection and boredom, a feeling of hope that the war would soon end and that before long he would once again resume his missionary work. Hope and sorrow came and went, but never did he fall into despair, confident as he was in the help of Divine Providence to return to his place in his beloved Burma.

Only towards the end of 1944, were the first missionaries freed and allowed to return to their missions in India. The war was ending and the Italians, following the armistice, were no longer considered enemies. Thus, Fr. Mario too, after four dismal years of interment, was released. However, he could not yet return to Burma. Set free on 5th January 1945, he was sent by his superiors to a mission in Hyderabad, where he remained on stand-by for about five years. His health was poor, but he remained hopeful and began to learn the Telugu language, in order to be able to continue his apostolate there.

At last, but only in August 1945, the governor of Burma granted the missionary fathers permission to return to the country. Another complication though forced Fr. Mario to remain in India. After his appointment as chaplain of the Italian soldiers in Trimulgherry, Calcutta, he started to have serious kidney problems and was thus sent to a house in Monogudu. Returning and increasingly violent bouts of illness forced him to enter the military hospital in Trimulgherry, where he was diagnosed with a tuberculosis of the kidney.

While travelling to Calcutta to finalise his definitive liberation from India, he had a kidney attack on the train. A week later, from 17th February to 2nd April, he was admitted to the Presidency General Hospital of Calcutta. On 6th June, his right kidney was removed because it threatened to infect the other

one. With the help of the Apostolic Delegate, he went to Bimlipatam for a long period of convalescence at an institute run by American nuns. At long last, Fr. Mario could return to Burma at the end of 1946.

The Return to Burma (1946-1950)

Upon return to the land of his mission, despite his poor health, he accepted, with his usual enthusiasm, a plan launched by Bishop Alfredo Lanfranchi, the Apostolic Vicar, to open a new mission on the farthest corner of Toungoo. Here, there were about a hundred villages immersed in the jungle in the central area of Taruddà, home to the unfamiliar Red Karen and Shan peoples. The new district was on the mountain chain called Préthole, east of Loikaw, from where it was a two-day walk. The village people were followers of traditional religions, and some had been converted by US Baptist preachers, active in the area during World War II.

Fr. Mario had to learn another language, and start over the evangelization work in two villages that before the war had welcomed Catholicism. He chose Taruddà as his residence, where the chief, named Tire, claimed to be a Baptist, but was actually a violent and traitorous man who had no qualms about using the Baptist religion to keep people under his control. For this reason, he hated the apostolic methods of Fr. Mario, who combined the spread of Catholicism with a strong sense of human promotion.

When Fr. Mario resumed his apostolate, he had nothing. He did not mind living in a hut, which he built himself, eating rice and salt. When it was raining, the water usually came leaking through the roof, prompting him to write with humour: "I have a bathroom in the house just like the rich, with plenty of fresh

air and sunshine”.²⁰ But he did need more catechists to send to the villages to evangelize. To this purpose, he undertook a journey to find trustworthy persons, and this was how he met Isidoro.

Isidoro Ngei Ko Lat, the first Burmese Martyr (1920-1950)

Unfortunately, little is known of this native lay catechist, undoubtedly one of the most trustworthy of Fr. Mario’s co-workers when he returned to Burma. There are few and fragmentary facts shedding only little light on this humble man whose life was devoted to spreading the Gospel to the point of bloodshed. The little information available does not do justice to the generosity and faith that inspired the life of this ‘soldier of Christ’, born in Taw Pon Athet. Even the date of birth is uncertain, ranging between 1918 and 1920, according to the testimony given during the beatification. His parents were reportedly named Bo Sant Tint and Mukhasi, and were probably just poor local famers. The family had already embraced Catholicism thanks to the apostolate in that area by Blessed Paolo Manna,²¹

²⁰ M. ZAMBON, “Padre Mario Vergara (16 novembre 1910-24 maggio 1950)”, 199.

²¹ Blessed Paolo Manna was born in Avellino on 16th January 1872. In September 1891, he entered the PIME seminary in Milan to attend theology. On 19th May 1894, he received his priestly ordination in the Cathedral of Milan, and in 1895 he left for East Burma, from where he returned in 1907 after having fallen seriously ill. From 1909 onwards, for almost forty years, he devoted his whole self and energy writing and working to spread the missionary ideal among the people and the clergy. In 1916, he founded the Missionary Union of the Clergy, elevated by Pius XII to ‘Pontifical’ in 1956. Director of the review *Le Missioni Cattoliche* in 1909, he founded *Propaganda Missionaria* in 1914, and also *Italia Mis-*

and therefore it is almost certain that he was baptised shortly after birth and brought up as a Catholic.

Isidoro, baptised by the PIME Fr. Domenico Pedrotti with the new name of Paolo, experienced, like many children in his country, the pain of losing both parents. As a little orphan, he went with a younger brother to live with an aunt. While still a child, he came into contact with the PIME missionaries, often travelling with them as they moved across the country. This kindled in him the missionary vocation. During his beatification process, a witness recalls: “I lived in the same village, and met him when I was a little girl. When Isidoro was a child his parents died and so he was sent with a younger brother to live with an aunt. While still very young, Isidoro spent much time with the missionaries and often accompanied them. He longed to become a priest and asked to enter the seminary, but due to poor health he was unable to fulfil his desire”²²

Actually, he entered the seminary at Toungoo, distinguishing himself for his simpleness, honesty, and humility. Old seminary companions highlighted his zeal and seriousness as a student, but “he suffered from bronchial asthma and was unable to continue his studies and achieve his dream of becoming a priest. He returned to his village, and opened a private school and taught the children Burmese and English, as well as religion with catechism. He was loved by all and on good terms

sionaria in 1919. In 1924, he was elected Superior General of the Institute for Foreign Missions of Milan, which in 1926 merged with the Missionary Seminary of Rome to give birth to Pontifical Institute of Foreign Mission (PIME), pursuant to the request of Pius XI. He passed away in Naples on 15th September 1952, and was beatified by John Paul II on 4th November 2001. See F. GERMANI, *Padre Paolo Manna*, PIME, Trentola-Ducenta 1989-2000.

²² *Positio, Summarium*, 29.

with everyone”.²³ As part of his catechism method, he had a great capacity to transmit the faith using simple songs and hymns: a path of musical melody and gentle words that led straight to the heart of the people with whom he desired to share the Gospel.

When Fr. Mario arrived in Leiktho, where he had previously spent some time in search of a catechist for a new field of action east of Loikaw, Isidoro did not hesitate to follow him. During the diocesan enquiry, a witness affirmed: “The people were ignorant, peasants with little culture. Fr. Vergara asked Isidoro to help him teach the children and stimulate a cultural and religious development among those peoples”.²⁴

Another witness confirms that Fr. Mario had entrusted Isidoro with the task of religious and human promotion: “Fr. Vergara had built homes, churches, and schools in many of the villages to help the people meet their religious, social, and cultural demands. He took Isidoro along with him to teach in those schools”.²⁵

Fr. Pietro Galastri - PIME (1918-1950)²⁶

The difficulties with the mission in the east of Loikaw were known to the PIME Superiors. That is why in 1948, before the outbreak of the Burmese civil war, Fr. Mario received the help of a young, courageous, resourceful and hardworking PIME

²³ *Positio, Summarium*, 15.

²⁴ *Positio, Summarium*, 13.

²⁵ *Positio, Summarium*, 27-28.

²⁶ Cf. C. MATTESINI, *Da Camaldoli alla giungla: profilo biografico di padre Pietro Galastri missionario del PIME in Birmania*, EMI, Bologna 1980.

missionary: Fr. Pietro Galastri. He came from Tuscany, and had considerable experience in educating children, also in manual work. He was just the person to lay solid foundations for a mission in need of everything. Born on 18th April 1918 at Partina, province of Arezzo, and ordained a PIME priest on 18th December 1943, he left for Burma on 23rd March 1948, after four years of priestly ministry in Groppello d'Adda, Archdiocese of Milan. Filled with enthusiasm, he threw himself heart and soul into the apostolate especially of young people, devising activities that were attractive and educational. Tall and with marked features, dark skin, large penetrating eyes, a thick black goatee on the long and austere face and crucifix always hanging on his chest. Despite his severe appearance, his heart was filled with strong passions and great ideals. He was thirty years old, and had been a missionary for five when he finally set out for Burma.

In the early months, what really weighed on Fr. Pietro's heart was not being able to speak with the children. The most pressing urgency was thus to master the local languages. In Tarudà, he worked with Fr. Mario. He built huts in wood and bricks, organised rooms for catechism and other pastoral activities, without neglecting the apostolate. He taught the children, provided orphans with food, and built a small wooden church. Then, he moved with his confrere to Shadow, where there was the urgency to build and furnish the mission house, school, orphanage and dispensary.

The Context Prior to Martyrdom (1948-1950)

In 1948, Burma finally obtained independence. But this goal instead of leading to the pacification of the country after World War II, sparked a confrontation between various rebel

groups and the new central government.²⁷ Burma's rebel movement was not a united front and, as such, did not share a common ideology or military strategy. The internal fragmentation of the movement was obvious in the region of Loikaw, particularly after the clashes of 12th January 1950, when the government managed to retake control of the town and to disperse the rebels, who fled mostly to the south, towards Mawchi Mines, and to a lesser extent to the east towards Shadow, the furthest place where Fr. Mario had established the missions.

The commander of the combatants in Shadow was known as Richmond, a ferocious and violent soldier, or a Baptist for some. In reality, he was just a superstitious and sectarian individual, pervaded by destructive ideas driven by religious proclamations drawn indifferently from Christianity, Buddhism and Animism.²⁸ The troops he had mustered amounted to no more than 150-200 men. These fighters, trying to enlist more young men and even boys from the Karen villages in the district, found a serious and insurmountable obstacle in the Christian religion of life, peace, and harmony, upheld by the missionaries and by Fr. Mario in particular. Richmond's allies included Tire, the chief of Taruddà district, who had been manifesting for quite some time his hostility to the apostolate and the religious, educational, social and cultural activities carried out by the missionary fathers and their catechists.

²⁷ For an in depth account of the historical events and the internal conflict following Burma's independence, see L. A. CROZIER, *Mining, War and Insurgency in Burma*, Griffith University, Faculty of Asian and International Studies, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Queensland 1994; M. STIVIERI, *Viaggio in Myanmar. La Birmania dal feudalesimo alla dittatura attraverso il colonialismo*, Cleup, Padova 2007.

²⁸ For an illustration of the Baptist Church in Burma, see R. REID, J. BINDLOSS, S. BUTLER, *Myanmar*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2009.

It is in this climate of hostility that the martyrdom of Fr. Mario and Isidoro, as well as the disappearance of Fr. Pietro, occurred. Sources claim that intimidatory action had been taken against missionaries in the district of Shadow as early as 1950, with frequent threats and acts of violence. Fr. Mario wrote about this in a letter to his brother Carmine. While the letter has not survived and cannot therefore be accurately dated, its content was partly reiterated in a message Carmine addressed to Fr. Antonio Lozza²⁹ on 16th November 1960:

Once a communist band of Red Karen captured Fr. Mario to take him to be martyred, but on the way Fr. Mario succeeded in changing the hearts of those outlaws, and not only did they decide not to kill him, but they even escorted him to the village, fearing that he might be harmed by other blood-thirsty bands. Another gang captured Fr. Galastri. Warned by the local population, instead of running in the opposite direction, Fr. Mario took a bicycle, and defying the certain death awaiting him, pedalled speedily towards the rebels. Once again, he converted the hearts of those men, who then freed Fr. Galastri. On this occasion, my brother wrote to me: 'For the second time, I have managed to tame these tigers. Will I succeed a third time?' [...]. My brother was not a hero, an unsuspecting martyr; he was a voluntary, conscious martyr, who knew that a third or fourth time he would not succeed in taming those tigers.³⁰

²⁹ A PIME priest, Fr. Antonio Lozza authored the book *Sangue fecondo. Profilo dei martiri del PIME*, PIME, Milan 1962.

³⁰ "Letter from Carmine Vergara to Fr. Antonio Lozza, Frattamaggiore 16th November 1960"; in *Cartella Padre Mario Vergara*, PIME General Archive, Rome.

Acts of violence and intimidation against Catholics continued throughout 1950 with increasing violence due to the total absence of the rule of law in the district of Shadow. It is sure that both priests were again seized in early February on their way back from Loikaw to Shadow, after having attended the annual spiritual exercises organised by PIME. During that time in Loikaw, Fr. Mario wrote a letter to the readers of the PIME review *Venga il tuo Regno*, which was published the following May 15th.

Once again in the forest, the missionaries resumed their work, confident in the assistance of the Divine Providence, but also concerned about the increasingly tense political-military situation and the growing difficulties in keeping contact with their confreres based in Loikaw. Despite these adversities, Fr. Mario continued to move in his district in search for new catechists. Catechists were crucial to the consolidation and development of what had been achieved so far: they acted as bridges, facilitating entry into the villages, and through their school teaching and their work aimed at stimulating material wellbeing, they ensured that the Christian message announced by Fr. Mario could have greater penetration and endurance.

In March 1950, Fr. Mario was sent to take part in a meeting organized by the rebels at Taruddà, Tire's fiefdom. He had already participated in a similar meeting in December 1949, and on this second occasion he underlined the importance of making peace to prevent the forced recruitment of native young men and boys. The aftermath of that meeting was crucial to the events that led to the martyrdom of Fr. Mario, Isidoro and, most likely, also of Fr. Pietro. Around April 8th the catechist Giacomo Còlei was arrested in the village of Doy Cholucku and imprisoned in Taruddà, where he was killed in early June.

We do not know when Fr. Mario was informed about the arrest, but we know for sure that he did try to obtain his release.

Fr. Iginio Mattarucco³¹ heard him say, in August 1951, that “the *Bonze* of Shadow told me that he had let Father Vergara know that it would have been better for him not to do anything about the fate of the catechist in order to avoid trouble himself”³²

However, the fact that the rebels were strongly hostile to the missionary work of the PIME fathers is proven by the murder of the catechist Pio, killed at the beginning of May. The attack on the Catholic mission had therefore started in full earnest. Pio’s arrest and death, in conjunction with Còlei’s detention, made Fr. Mario realize just how serious the threat to the mission was.

To save Giacomo from the same fate that had befallen Pio, he decided to write a letter to Tire asking for his release. However, the rebels had extorted from Giacomo a false confession by trickery, in which he accused the missionary fathers of activities in support of the government forces: a pure fabrication. The defence written by Còlei, at that point, had become the ‘proof’ to incriminate Fr. Mario. Therefore, Tire called a meeting in Shadow to discuss the question.

Martyrdom (25th May 1950)

The earliest sources underline in detail the arrival of Fr. Mario and Isidoro in Shadow to meet Tire, at 6.30 pm on Wednesday, 24th May 1950. The fact that Fr. Mario had decid-

³¹ Born on 14th January 1921 and ordained priest on 3rd June 1944, Fr. Iginio Mattarucco was a missionary in Burma from 1948 to 1986. He was in Italy from 1986 to 1993, and returned to Burma from 1993 to 1999.

³² “Letter from Fr. Iginio Mattarucco to PIME Superior General, Loikaw 15th October 1951”, in *Cartella Padre Mario Vergara*, PIME General Archive, Rome.

ed to come with the catechist Isidoro demonstrates the missionary had no idea he was going to be drawn into a trap. At the exact time they arrived at the meeting with Tire, Fr. Pietro was abducted from the Mission House. The simultaneity of the two episodes clearly showed that the destruction of the Catholic presence in the district had been premeditated.

When Fr. Mario and Isidoro arrived in the centre of Shadow, they were surprised to find Richmond instead of Tire. Several sources concur that they were apprehended and escorted to the banks of the River Salween after the interrogation. The heated discussion took place in English at a house presided by soldiers and was therefore unapproachable: the few Shan who overheard the voices could hear Richmond's wild and accusative tones, and Fr. Mario's firm replies. The content of the discussion, however, could not be understood by anyone.

It is practically impossible to establish what went on between Richmond and Fr. Vergara. It is possible, but not certain, that Richmond, as military chief, had accused the missionary of being an associate of the catechist Còlei. It all went according to the plan that had been orchestrated with Tire. Fr. Mario and Isidoro were handcuffed and taken at night to the river Salween. They had to march on a rough and difficult terrain, escorted by an unknown number of rebel fighters.

The distance between Shadow and the river Salween is about 24 kilometres: this meant that the *via crucis* imposed by the soldiers, probably including beating and mistreatments, lasted at least six hours. They reached the banks of the Salween around dawn of the new day, on Thursday, 25th May 1950. It was there that Fr. Mario and the catechist Isidoro Ngei Ko Lat were murdered.

According to early sources, some people living in huts along the river distinctly heard shots; some spoke of seven rifle shots. Other sources claim the two Christians were stabbed with a

bayonet. Only when the district was liberated did it become clear how the two Blessed faithful had been martyred. Monsignor Alfredo Lanfranconi, after learning about their death from a letter by Fr. Igino Mattarucco, wrote: "It seems that only Fr. Vergara and the catechist Isidoro, who was with him, were taken to the river Salween, and shot dead there with rifles. In Shadow, they said that no one was present at the killing except for the soldiers, probably four or five, with the commander".³³

Fr. Mario and Isidoro were killed by four or five soldiers in front of Richmond. Their bodies were put in two separate plastic sacks. The sacks were thrown into the Salween, but shortly thereafter they were found by a few Shan near Tatamaw and Ywathit, two small villages to the South of Shadow, along the course of the river. When they opened the sacks, and found out that there were cadavers, the fishermen cast the sacks back into the river out of superstition or fear. From that moment onward, between 25th and 27th May 1950, the bodies of the two Blessed faithful were never seen again.

Recognition of Martyrdom in *odium fidei* (2003-2014)

In 2003, Monsignor Sotero Phamo, Bishop of Loikaw, the son of a catechist who worked with Fr. Mario, opened the diocesan inquiry for the cause of beatification of Fr. Mario and Isidoro Ngei Ko Lat, killed *in odium fidei*.

Once the diocesan inquiry was completed, the acts were taken to Rome. However, on 4th December 2008, the Special

³³ "Letter from Monsignor Alfredo Lanfranconi, PIME Superior General, Toungoo 25th July 1951", in *Cartella Monsignor Alfredo Lanfranconi*, PIME General Archive, Rome.

Congress of Theologians of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in charge of examining the *Positio* Servants of God, expressed a negative response regarding the recognition of the martyrdom. On 9th July 2013, the postulator, having adequately addressed the observations of the Theologians of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the same Special Congress of Theologians unanimously approved the *Positio* of recognition of the Martyrdom of the Servants of God. On 3rd December 2013, the Ordinary Congress of the Cardinals and Bishops of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints expressed a favourable opinion for the recognition of their martyrdom.

On 9th December 2014, the Holy Father Pope Francis, receiving in audience the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Cardinal Angelo Amato, authorized the promulgation of the decree of martyrdom *in odium fidei* of the Servants of God Fr. Mario Vergara and the lay catechist Isidoro Ngei Ko Lat. On 24th May 2014, Fr. Mario and Isidoro were proclaimed Blessed in Aversa during a ceremony celebrated by Cardinal Angelo Amato, representing the Holy Father.

The Example of the Martyrs for the Burmese Church Today

Today, in Myanmar, there are more than three million Christians, both Catholics and Protestants. In the past centuries, they were led to the Christian faith by dedicated foreign missionaries and local Burmese catechists, and now they form the largest religious minority in this mainly Buddhist country. Most of the country's Christians belong to the ethnic groups of the complex mosaic of the country, that are seeking more autonomy from the government. They are the Kachin, Karen, Shan, and Chin people who suffered persecution for almost

seven decades. First by the ruthless dictatorship of general Bo Ne Win (who ruled Myanmar for 26 years until November 1981), and then by the military junta which continues to control the country despite the fact that, at least according to the perception of the international community, the situation has supposedly changed at the end of 2015 with the electoral victory of the National League for Democracy, the party led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

During these almost seventy years of violence against the country's ethnic minorities with the intention of eliminating any type of ethnic and religious diversity, the soldiers of Tatmadaw – the powerful Burmese army – torched entire villages, damaged or destroyed numerous places of worship, killed thousands of civilians, and forced hundreds of thousands to seek shelter in overcrowded camps situated close to neighbouring Thailand. The same violence suffered by at least 800,000 Rohingya Muslims, many of whom, following recent episodes of violence, fled to Bangladesh in August 2017.

In the 2018 report issued by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the list of “countries of particular concern” for religious persecution includes Myanmar.³⁴ The report affirms that Burmese Christians are suffering from serious injustices, such as forced transfer, unlawful taking away of land rich in natural resources, forced conversion, attacks on places of worship, destruction of cemeteries, and “brain washing” in state schools.

A few months ago, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, voiced deep anguish for Christians in areas of conflict:

³⁴ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Annual Report 2018”; www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_BURMA.pdf.

I am seriously concerned about the situation in the Kachin and Shan northern states. Above all following the arrest of two Christian pastors in February this year in Mong Ko after the destruction of a Catholic church by government soldiers. I pray for them and for thousands of homeless and dispersed people fleeing recent military offensives in the country [...]. Burma is living one of the worst moments in its history. The people are deeply saddened because the country appears to be falling back into the dark times. The country needs the attention of the world to support its fragile path to democracy.³⁵

Of key importance was the outcome of the visit by Pope Francis who said:

The future of Myanmar must be peace, a peace based on respect for the dignity and rights of each member of society, respect for each ethnic group and its identity, respect for the rule of law, and respect for a democratic order that enables each individual and every group – none excluded – to offer its legitimate contribution to the common good.³⁶

The example of Fr. Mario Vergara – a missionary who came from the West not to proselytise, but simply with a desire to

³⁵ F. POLESE, “Myanmar, la persecuzione dei cristiani”, *Panorama*, 19th November 2017, www.panorama.it/news/esteri/myanmar-birmania-persecuzione-cristiani/.

³⁶ “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis”, Meeting with Government Authorities, the Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps, International Convention Centre, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, 28th November 2017, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/november/documents/papa-francesco_20171128_viaggioapostolico-myanmar-autorita.html/.

make Christ known, succeeding in dialoguing with all the Burmese with whom he came into contact – is the proof of the intention of the Church to dialogue with all the ethnic groups in the area. His figure is the forerunner of a desire for dialogue and acceptance, which characterises, and must continue to characterise, the spirit of evangelization: this activity includes the promotion of justice and the construction of peace, with religion understood as a means of harmony and meeting, also in diversity and plurality, of every human person. Peace, in the memory of Fr. Mario Vergara, has the name of development.

Blessed Isidoro Ngei Ko Lat, on his part, is an indication of the development reached by the local Church, its capacity to incarnate to the final trial, the message of Christ. He is the proof of the maturity of the Church in Myanmar, the Burmese Church, and of the fertility of a territory irrigated with the blood of a courageous witness to the Gospel. That he was a layman shows the importance of Burma's Catholic laity in the development of the local Church: a path along which every individual Christian shoulders personal responsibility for the growth of the body of the Church. Contemplating the figure of these martyrs, Myanmar's Christians can draw inspiration for their own commitment for peace, social promotion, and dialogue.

THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN MYANMAR: TOWARDS NEW MARTYRDOMS?

Benedict Rogers

Over the past five years, the Church in Myanmar (previously known as Burma) has celebrated several significant occasions: the beatification of the martyr Isidore Ngei Ko Lat, a lay catechist murdered by Burmese rebels in 1950, on course to become Myanmar's first Saint; the celebration of the Church's 500 years in the country; the appointment of Myanmar's first Cardinal, Charles Maung Bo; the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See; and the first ever Papal visit to the country. The Church in Myanmar is, as Cardinal Bo says, "a church of initiative", "a crucified church", "a wounded healer" and "a church of exodus", with hundreds of thousands having fled war, oppression and poverty.¹ It is also a Church that is increasingly gaining attention in the world, and that has influence in the country disproportionate to its size. "The Church has never flinched from her social mission, even when it had no support", argues Cardinal Bo.²

¹ Cardinal Bo's homily for the 500th Jubilee Celebration of the presence of the Catholic Church in Myanmar, 22 November 2014 – as quoted in B. ROGERS, *From Burma to Rome: A Journey into the Catholic Church*, Gracewing Publishing, Leominster 2015, 135.

² Ibid.

During that same period, Myanmar has undergone a fragile transition from military dictatorship to civilian-led democracy, although the military continue to hold significant power, directly controlling the three key ministries of home affairs, border affairs and defence, and with 25 percent of the parliamentary seats reserved for them in the constitution. It has seen the country's democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi freed from over 15 years under house arrest and elected to lead the government, although the constitution, drafted by the military, prohibits her from becoming President and gives her no control over the army. Yet it has also seen hopes of peace and freedom dashed by increasing religious intolerance and intensifying ethnic conflict, notably the campaign of ethnic cleansing unleashed against the predominantly Muslim Rohingya people on the western border and the Christian Kachins in northern Myanmar. The military stands accused by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights of conducting "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing",³ which has, in the words of the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar, "the hallmarks of genocide"⁴ and is according to the United Nations Secretary-General "catastrophic".⁵

³ "UN Human Rights Chief Points to "Textbook Example of Ethnic Cleansing in Myanmar", UN News, 11th September 2017, www.news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar/.

⁴ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Myanmar: UN Expert Calls for Accountability Over Violence in Rakhine State", 12th March 2018, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22793&LangID=E/.

⁵ "Rohingya Crisis: Humanitarian Situation Catastrophic, UN Says", BBC, 14th September 2017, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-41260767/.

The Legacy of Myanmar's Catholic Martyrs Amid the Current Wave of religious intolerance

So, in this current time where Myanmar's future hangs in the balance, what can be learned from the experience of its Catholic martyrs? Isidore, according to Cardinal Bo, is "an example of a faithful follower and a boy of gratitude towards the missionaries and to his cause". But, he adds, "there are many like him who died for the faith and for the Church around the country".⁶ Men such as Fr. Stephen Wong, who was martyred in Kengtung Diocese on 7th April 1961, by a Shan Buddhist monk. Fr. Wong was the sixth priest from the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) to be killed within ten years. He travelled extensively in the country's ethnic mountainous areas, on foot or by horseback, baptising thousands of people, particularly Akhas, and tried to counter the opium trade. It was his successful evangelisation that angered a Buddhist monk who had failed to convert the Akhas to Buddhism. Just before Easter, on route to hear confessions and baptise several people, he was ambushed, shot and beheaded. "His companions fled and alerted the nearby Catholic Akha village and the Buddhist Shan village", Cardinal Bo recalls. "When people arrived, they found Stephen lying in a pool of his own blood. The Shans made a coffin and the body was transported to the cathedral in Kengtung. It became as dark as night for several hours – even though it was daytime. All knew that a new martyr had laid down his life for them. Thousands came to his funeral, including many Buddhist monks, ashamed that he should be killed by one of them".⁷

⁶ B. ROGERS, *From Burma to Rome: A Journey into the Catholic Church*, 138.

⁷ Ibid.

Two elements of the story of the martyrdom of Fr. Stephen are relevant to today's crisis in Myanmar. The first is that militant Buddhist nationalism is behind the rise in religious intolerance in the country today. There are Buddhist monks who, like Fr. Stephen's murderer, preach hatred towards other religions, inciting intolerance and violence. The most famous is Ashin Wirathu, whose anti-Muslim sermons are notorious, but there is an influential movement known as 'Ma Ba Tha' (the Committee for the Protection of Race and Religion), which has spread throughout the country. The second parallel, however, is that, as with the Buddhist monks who attended Fr. Stephen's funeral, there are still many monks in Myanmar today who, albeit more quietly and fearfully and less visibly, share the same sense of shame and embarrassment about monks preaching hatred and inciting violence as those monks did about the priest's murderer. There are Buddhist monks who try to counter the voices of hatred, who engage in inter-faith dialogue, and some who, in times of violence, have sheltered and protected Muslims who otherwise would have been attacked. The challenge for the country, and for the Church, is how to work with and strengthen Buddhists who work for religious freedom for all.

When reference is made to religious intolerance in Myanmar, the international community understandably tends immediately to consider the crisis that has unfolded over the past year in Rakhine State, resulting in more than 700,000 Rohingyas fleeing across the border to Bangladesh since August 2017.⁸ This is in addition to 200,000 Rohingya refugees already in Bangladesh, taking the total Rohingya refugee population in

⁸ UN OCHA, *Rohingya Refugee Crisis*, www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis/.

Bangladesh to approximately one million.⁹ Between August and November 2017, it is reported that at least 354 villages were burned down by the military.¹⁰ Hundreds have been killed and survivors report widespread, systematic and horrific violations of human rights, including the killing of children. According to some reports, witnesses claim to have seen infants beaten to death with spades, a six-month old baby thrown into the river and drowned, a baby snatched from her mother and thrown into a pit of burning bodies and parents forced to watch, helpless, as soldiers killed their children.¹¹ Reports of the destruction of entire villages and thousands of homes in attacks by the Burmese Army suggest an orchestrated campaign to eliminate or drive out much of the Rohingya population.¹² The UK House of Commons International Development Committee has argued that it represents a “deliberate, state-sanctioned, long-term ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people.”¹³

⁹ UNFPA Bangladesh, “The Rohingya Crisis: Looking Back, Looking Ahead”, 25th August 2018, www.bangladesh.unfpa.org/en/news/rohingya-crisis-looking-back-looking-ahead/.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, “Burma: 40 Rohingya Villages Burned Since October”, 17th December 2017, www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/17/burma-40-rohingya-villages-burned-october/.

¹¹ Cf. J. GETTLEMAN, “Rohingya Recount Atrocities: ‘They Threw My Baby into a Fire’”, *The New York Times*, 11th October 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/world/asia/rohingya-myanmar-atrocities.html/.

¹² Cf. P. MCPHERSON, “6,700 Rohingya Muslims killed in one month in Myanmar, MSF says”, *The Guardian*, 14th December 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/14/6700-rohingya-muslims-killed-in-attacks-in-myanmar-says-medecins-sans-frontieres/.

¹³ House of Commons International Development Committee, “Major Changes in UK Burma Policy Required Following Rohingya Crisis”, 22nd May 2018, www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/international-development-committee/news-parliament-2017/bangladesh-and-burma-report-publication-17-19/.

In March 2018, I visited the refugee camps on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and heard first-hand testimony of the devastating human rights violations in Rakhine State. I met one man whose eye had been taken out by a bullet and another man whose leg had been shot off, and heard stories of people's eyes being gouged out, throats slit, legs cut off. I heard many reports of rape from refugees. I met an Imam who said that the soldiers came to his mosque and, before burning it, they played 'football' with the Qu'ran and then tore it into pieces. And I met 16-year-old girl, Khalida, her 18-year-old brother Mohammed Rafiq and their mother. Khalida is paralysed because she was shot in her leg. She cannot walk or stand. When I met her in their tiny bamboo shelter, she was flat on the floor. She and her brother told me their story. They said more than 300 people in their village had been killed. Their two sisters, one brother and their father were killed, and their mother was also shot. Mohammed Rafiq had managed to flee before the attack, and came back to discover many bodies around the village. He found his sister, unconscious but still alive, and with the help of another villager managed to carry her to the border. They stayed at the border for two days, before finding a man with a boat who was willing to help them. They had to pay him 70,000 Myanmar kyat (\$70). They made it to Bangladesh, and have managed to get some medical care for her very serious bullet wounds, but now the hospitals have said they can't keep her any longer and so they are back in the camp. Because they were in hospital when registration for rations was taking place, they only have very basic rations and often don't eat for several days". After sharing her story, Khalida looked up from her position on the floor, gave a beautiful smile, and said: "Thank you" in English. Then she said, through translation, "thank you for caring enough to come all the way from your country to see us. Please come again".

Pope Francis has spoken out for the Rohingyas several times. On the advice of the local Church he did not use the name 'Rohingya' publicly during his visit to Myanmar in November 2017, as it is not accepted by the government and by many in society, but he raised concerns about their situation in private conversations and met Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, where he greeted them with the words: "The presence of God is also called Rohingya". He asked them for forgiveness, saying: "Your tragedy is very hard, very big. We give you space in our hearts. In the name of everyone, of those who persecute you, those who hurt you, and especially of the world's indifference, I ask for your forgiveness".¹⁴ In February 2017 when he asked people to pray "for our Rohingya brothers and sisters driven out of Myanmar [...] They have been tortured, killed, simply because they carry on their traditions, their Muslim faith".¹⁵

Cardinal Bo has been outspoken too, describing the suffering of the Rohingyas, even before this current crisis, as "an appalling scar on the conscience of my country". Cardinal Bo told the British Parliament in 2016: "We desperately need to work to defend rights without discrimination, to establish equal rights for all people in Myanmar, of every ethnicity and religion" and said that the Rohingyas "are among the most marginalized, dehumanized and persecuted people in the world". He continued:

¹⁴ J. J. McELWEE, "Francis Tells the World: 'The Presence of God Today is Called Rohingya'", *National Catholic Register*, 1st December 2017, www.ncronline.org/news/world/francis-tells-world-presence-god-today-called-rohingya/.

¹⁵ K. DE FREYTAS-TAMURA, "Pope Francis Rebukes Myanmar Over Treatment of Rohingyas", *The New York Times*, 8th February 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/world/asia/pope-francis-rohingya-muslims.html/.

“They are treated worse than animals. Stripped of their citizenship, rejected by neighboring countries, they are rendered stateless. No human being deserves to be treated this way. Without [a solution], the prospects for genuine peace and true freedom for my country will be denied, for no-one can sleep easy at night knowing how one particular people group are dying simply due to their race and religion”.¹⁶

The Crackdown on Muslims, Christians and Moderate Buddhists

Two points should be made about the crisis that has unfolded in the past year. The first is that it is not new. The current crisis is a dramatic escalation in a campaign of severe persecution against the Rohingyas that has been continuing for decades. The Rohingyas have long been described as among the most persecuted people in the world. Despite living in northern Rakhine State for generations, even centuries, the Rohingyas were stripped of their citizenship rights by a new citizenship law in 1982, rendering them stateless and restricting their right to move freely, access education and health care, marry, practice their religion or vote. They faced periodic campaigns of violence by the military in the past, notably in 1978, 1991-2 and October 2016, as well as violence from the Rakhine population in 2012. In October 2016 and August 2017, the military’s campaign was sparked by reported attacks on Myanmar border guard posts by a small armed Rohingya group known as the

¹⁶ “‘An Appalling Scar on the Conscience of My Country’: Myanmar’s Cardinal Bo Defends Rohingya before UK Parliament, Coconuts Yangon, 27th May 2016, www.coconuts.co/yangon/news/appalling-scar-conscience-my-country-myanmars-cardinal-bo-defends-rohingya-uk-parliament/.

Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) – but the military’s response was grossly disproportionate and indiscriminate.

The second key point is that while the plight of the Rohingyas is without doubt the most egregious, other ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar are also facing a campaign of hatred, both from Buddhist nationalists and from the Myanmar army. Periodic violence against Muslims in other parts of the country, who are not Rohingyas, has broken out, notably in Meikhtila, Lashio, Bago, Mandalay and other cities in 2013 and 2014. A sustained campaign of discrimination against Muslims continues, with hate speech a daily feature of sermons and literature distributed by Buddhist nationalists. In April 2017 two madrassahs were forcibly closed by the authorities in Yangon, under pressure from Buddhist nationalists. At least 21 entire villages in some parts of the country have been declared Muslim-free zones, and Muslims are facing increasing difficulty obtaining identity cards, renovating or rebuilding damaged mosques or gathering to pray. In April 2018, seven Muslim men were sentenced to three months in jail for organizing prayers in Tharkayta Township, in Yangon.¹⁷

Christians also face increasing restrictions in some areas, including what the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom describe as “bureaucratic hurdles and societal pressure that make it difficult to gather in public to worship or obtain permission to build churches”.¹⁸ For example, in December 2017 ethnic Chin Christians in Kan Thar Village Tract

¹⁷ See reports from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Burma Human Rights Network, Fortify Rights, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Burma Campaign UK, and other human rights organisations, as well as the United Nations, BBC, and other media.

¹⁸ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Annual Report 2018”; www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_BURMA.pdf.

in Magwe Division received a letter from the local authorities informing them that a prayer gathering during the Christmas season was banned, because it was going to take place in a private home.¹⁹

Christians in the ethnic conflict areas, particularly Kachin State and northern Shan State, are sometimes targeted as part of the wider conflict. In October 2017, two Kachin Baptists, Dumdaw Nawng Lat and Langjaw Gam Seng, were sentenced to prison terms of four years and three months, and two years and three months respectively, after they helped local journalists visit the St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Mong Ko after it had been bombed during an airstrike by the Myanmar military. They were released in a prisoner amnesty in April 2018.²⁰ Kachin Christians in prison have sometimes been the targets for religious abuse – some have described being forced to kneel for long periods on sharp stones, with their arms outstretched as if on a cross: a painful position to be in, and a deliberate mockery of their faith.

Seven years ago, on 9th June 2011, the Burma Army ended a 17-year ceasefire with the Kachin armed resistance organization known as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and resumed a civil war in northern Burma which first began in 1961. The Kachin, despite the name of their armed wing, seek autonomy in a federal Myanmar, not independence.

According to Global Kachin Communities, a coalition of Kachin organizations, between June 9th, 2011, and April 30th,

¹⁹ “Buddhists Cancel Christmas Prayer in Myanmar Village”, Coconuts Yangon, 15th December 2017, www.coconuts.co/yangon/news/buddhists-cancel-christmas-prayer-myanmar-village/.

²⁰ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, “Burma Kachin Christians Freed from Prison”, 20th April 2018, www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/20/press/3924/article.htm/.

2018, over 3,800 battles were fought between the Kachin Independence Army and the Burma Army, averaging 46 battles per month. Over 120,000 people have been displaced and currently reside in 167 Internally Displaced Persons camps; over 7,000 have been displaced since the beginning of April this year alone. More than 66 churches have been destroyed. As the Kachin groups' statement says: "There have also been ongoing abductions, deaths, and injuries by landmine explosion, torture and subsequent health problems, and mortar shells exploding on civilians' houses [...] This level of intensity has inflicted an unprecedented humanitarian crisis on people of the Kachin region". The statement adds: "Surely, enough is enough, and it's time for durable peace and justice". Other groups claim abuses include blocking IDPs from accessing refuge; using IDPs as human shields and minesweepers; indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombing of civilian areas; looting and destruction of property"²¹

In December 2017, on the night of Christmas Eve, the Myanmar Army fired artillery shells near Woi Chyai IDP camp, resulting in widespread panic and at least one civilian injury. In February 2018, the Myanmar Army conducted intense air assaults in Sumprabum, Danai and Mansi areas, leading to more civilian deaths and injuries. In April 2018, conflict escalation once again displaced over 5,500 civilians, with an estimated 2,000 Kachins trapped in the conflict-affected zones and 152 held against their will in Lainawng Hku. And on May 30th, according to the humanitarian organization the Free Burma Rangers, Myanmar Army soldiers indiscriminately

²¹ Global Kachin Communities, "Enough is Enough: World Must Act to End Burma Army's Devastating War on Kachin", 9th June 2018, www.burmalink.org/enough-is-enough-world-must-act-to-end-burma-armys-devastating-war-on-kachin/.

fired at a Catholic church and a nearby house in Kamaing Kawng Ra Village, Hpakant Township. One bullet hit near the church door and one grenade landed without exploding in the church compound 15 meters from the church building. The second shell landed next to the home of a villager, Sum-lut A Di, sending shrapnel fragments through the bamboo walls of his home and grazing the cheek of his 22-month-old daughter.²²

According to the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT): "Villagers rescued from Lai Nawng Khu, Hpakant township, on May 6th and 7th, have given terrifying accounts of how 152 people, including 64 children, were blocked when fleeing through the jungle by Burma Army troops of LIB 424, who then used them as human shields and minesweepers. They were made to trek through the jungle single file, interspersed with Burmese troops, causing a villager in front to be injured by a land mine. After being forced to stay near a military base for four days, they were forced back to their village, where they camped in the village church for 17 days, while the troops stayed in their homes, looting their food and property, and wearing villagers' clothes to ward off KIA attacks. Before being released, the IDPs were told by the Burma Army not to stay in IDP camps".²³

²² "Northern Burma Update: Burma Army Attacks a Church and Shells a Home", Free Burma Rangers, 6th June 2018, www.freeburmarangers.org/2018/06/06/northern-burma-update-burma-army-attacks-church-shells-home/.

²³ Kachin Women's Association Thailand, "Burma Army Commits War Crimes against Kachin IDPs", 15th May 2018, www.kachinwomen.com/burma-army-commits-war-crimes-against-kachin-idps-blocking-access-refuge-using-human-shields-minesweepers-indiscriminate-shelling-looting/.

On May 12th, Burmese military jetfighters bombed the Kachin Baptist Mission School in Bawmwang village, northern Kachin State. While there were no casualties, the bombs hit buildings belonging to the school. The attack took place while the villagers were at work on their farms. A two-storey wooden building which used to be the mission office and clinic of the American Baptist missionaries and was later used as the main office of the Kachin Baptist Mission School was hit in the attack.²⁴

In April, the Kachin community worldwide appealed to the United Nations Security Council to refer the government of Burma to the International Criminal Court. In their statement on April 23rd, the Kachin community warned of an escalation in Burma Army offensives, saying: “The Burma military is escalating attacks against ethnic groups in the country, including in Rakhine state, Kachin State, Shan State and most recently breaking the cease-fire in Karen State”. They add: “There is no shortage of evidence of violations of international law committed by the Burma military. The United Nations has been documenting these crimes for decades. A detailed assessment in 2016 stated that what may amount to war crimes were being committed in Kachin State and Shan State. The United Nations has also stated that human rights violations against northern Rakhine State may constitute crimes against humanity and even elements of genocide”.²⁵

²⁴ Cf. Christian Solidarity Worldwide, “Burma Army Attacks Kachin Christian Mission School”, 15th May 2018, www.csw.org.uk/2018/05/15/news/3972/article.htm/.

²⁵ Kachin Communities Worldwide Statement, “Kachin Communities Worldwide Demand United Nations Security Council Urgently Refers Burma to the International Criminal Court”, 23rd April 2018, www.kachinwomen.com/kachin-communities-worldwide-demand-un-security-council-urgently-refers-burma-to-icc/.

As Kachin Peace Network activist May Sabe Phyu concluded in an op-ed in the *Washington Post* on June 5th: “Human rights groups and Kachin activists have recently called for the United Nations to refer Burma to the International Criminal Court, and the United States and European Union have started talking about reintroducing targeted sanctions. Both of these steps could help. Impunity only encourages the Burmese military to continue its atrocities. Instead of passively witnessing another genocide, the international community must be proactive in taking preventative measures to save lives.”²⁶

In May 2018, the Catholic Bishop of Myitkyina, Kachin State, Bishop Francis Daw Tang told *Vatican News*: “We want peace, justice, that’s all. If there’s no justice, there’s no peace, so we would like to request on behalf of all Kachins, and all people of Myanmar (Burma), peace and justice.”²⁷

Until recently the escalating Kachin conflict has not received the international attention that the crisis facing the Rohingya has. However, in June 2018 both Sky News and the BBC carried reports on the attacks on Kachin civilians. Sky’s Alex Crawford reported that: “What we found in this forgotten part of the world was worrying evidence of a second genocidal campaign – at least that’s certainly what the Kachin people believe. [...] Thousands have died in bombings and attacks against them carried out by the Myanmar military – and

²⁶ M. S. PHYU, “Burma Continues to Brutalise Minorities with Impunity”, *The Washington Post*, 5th June 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/06/05/burma-continues-to-brutalize-minorities-with-impunity/?utm_term=.183cfe9b1e6a/.

²⁷ P. HITCHEN, “Myanmar Bishops Call for Peace and Justice in War-Torn Kachin State”, *Vatican News*, 3rd May 2018, www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2018-05/myanmar-bishop-kachin-conflict-peace-justice.html/.

these attacks have increased substantially since January after the same forces had spent months driving the Rohingya out from the west of the country. The national forces have been using helicopters and heavy artillery to bomb Kachin rebel positions. Thousands of civilians have been stranded in the thick jungle and fled several times to escape the attacks. We spoke to many Kachin civilians who had moved multiple times to try to reach safety, some on the backs of elephants. A number spoke of attacks in or near civilians who had taken shelter in the camps for displaced people dotted across the region. Lashi Ókawn Ja, a mother of four now living in one of the dozens of camps in the north of Myanmar, told Sky News: ‘I am convinced the Burmese government is trying to ethnically cleanse the Kachin people. Whenever they see Kachin people they try to kill us and they rape the women, even the women who are pregnant.’ The vice president of the Kachin Independence Council (KIC), General Sumlut Gun Maw, also believes Myanmar’s authorities want to crush them. ‘Maybe their actions against us are not so sudden as their violence against the Rohingya, but their intentions are just the same. They want to eliminate us,’ he said.²⁸

Burman Buddhists who speak out against ethnic and religious hatred also face risks. In 2015 Htin Lin Oo, a Buddhist and a prominent member of the National League for Democracy, gave a speech in which he argued that Buddhist monks who incite hatred and violence are not being consistent with the teachings of Buddhism. He was sentenced to two years in prison, under sections 295 (a) and 298 of the Penal Code, for

²⁸ A. CRAWFORD, *Uncovered: “Worrying Evidence” of New Genocidal Campaign on Kachin Christian Minority of Myanmar*, *Sky News*, 5th June 2018, www.news.sky.com/story/uncovered-worrying-evidence-of-new-genocidal-campaign-in-myanmar-11395173/.

“insulting” Buddhism.²⁹ In July 2017, the editor of *Myanmar Now*, Swe Win, was arrested for alleged online defamation after he criticized Wirathu, the most prominent militant Buddhist nationalist monk.³⁰

Similarly, inter-faith activists are experiencing more challenges. Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt, both Muslims working to promote inter-faith activities, were jailed in 2015, but in May 2017 then President Htin Kyaw pardoned them and they were released.

In 2015, legislation was introduced restricting religious conversion and inter-religious marriage, as part of a package of “Protection of Race and Religion Laws”.

Civil society space is under increasing restrictions. On 12th May 2018 a peaceful protest in Rangoon (Yangon) calling for peace in Kachin State was broken up by the police, and at least 17 of the demonstrators were arrested. An event organized on 9 June to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the resumption of war in Kachin State was prohibited.

The Future of the Church in Myanmar

In May 2018, the Bishops of Myanmar met with Pope Francis in their *ad limina* visit. The bishops from dioceses in Kachin and northern Shan states urged the Pope to publicly pray for the victims of conflict in northern Myanmar, and Car-

²⁹ Burma Campaign UK, “Htin Lin Oo Jailed for Criticising Religious Extremism”, 2nd June 2015, www.burmacampaign.org.uk/jailed-for-criticising-religious-extremism/.

³⁰ S. GLEESON, “Myanmar Now Editor Ko Swe Win Arrested at Yangon Airport”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 30th July 2017, www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/myanmar-now-editor-ko-swe-win-arrested-at-yangon-airport/.

dinal Bo urged the Vatican to convene an international conference to address the plight of the Rohingyas.³¹ Later in May Cardinal Bo led an international inter-faith delegation from Religions for Peace to visit affected areas in Rakhine State, and to meet Aung San Suu Kyi. They subsequently issued an 'open letter' with an appeal for peace.³²

Cardinal Bo has become one of the most outspoken and courageous national figures in Myanmar, and one of very few people willing to speak out for human rights for all. Most of his homilies and statements focus on human rights and religious freedom. When he became Cardinal in 2015, he said: "I want to be a voice for the voiceless", and he has lived up to that pledge.³³

In an address to a conference on religious freedom in Asia organized by the Religious Freedom Institute in March 2018, Cardinal Bo said: "Extremism and nationalism have joined forces to produce a dangerous cocktail of hate and intolerance. [...] Those of us, of whatever religion or country, who believe in human dignity, human rights and religious freedom for all must unite to defend those values for everyone, everywhere. As I have said before, 'Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, as detailed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human

³¹ Cf. A. GAGLIARDUCCI, "Myanmar Bishops Discuss China, Rohingya with Pope Francis", *Catholic News Agency*, 9th May 2018, www.catholic-newsagency.com/news/myanmars-bishops-discuss-china-rohingya-with-pope-francis-21877/.

³² Cf. "Multi-religious Delegation's Visit to Rakhine State", Religions for Peace, Press Release, 21st June 2018, www.rfp.org/press-release-religions-for-peace-%E2%80%8B-multi-religious-delegations-visit-to-rakhine-state/.

³³ Cf. S. MAHTANI, "Myanmar Cardinal Charles Maung Bo to Work Toward Religious Tolerance", *The Wall Street Journal*, 7th January 2015, www.wsj.com/articles/myanmar-cardinal-charles-maung-bo-to-amplify-plea-for-religious-tolerance-1420611495/.

Rights, is perhaps the most precious and most basic freedom of all. Without the freedom to choose, practice, share and change your beliefs, there is no freedom.' [...] It is so important that we defend not only the rights of our own particular religious community, but the right to religious freedom for everyone, everywhere. [...] Let us work together to end violence, hatred and terror in our region, and to build a world where every man, woman, and child of every race and religion is recognized both as our fellow citizen and as our brother and sister in humanity. Let us build a world where hope is not an illusion, and where we can join hands, regardless of ethnicity or religion, in peace and solidarity. I pledge to renew my efforts to that end, and I extend my hand to any of my brothers and sisters of any race or religion who will join with me. Peace with justice is possible. Freedom of religion or belief for everyone is achievable. Unity in diversity – where we celebrate such diversity – must be our goal”.³⁴

In 2014, before he became Cardinal, the Archbishop of Yangon wrote a powerful article in *The Washington Post* in which he said that “Burma [Myanmar] stands on a knife-edge of hope and fear”. He warned against “premature euphoria”, saying: “Concern fills our hearts as we see darkness compete with hope. We pray this is not a false dawn. For five decades Burma endured crucifixion on a cross of injustice bearing five nails: dictatorship, war, displacement, poverty and oppression. Today, a new crucifixion threatens the country, with five new nails: land grabbing, corruption, economic injustice, ethnic conflict and displacement and religious hatred and violence”.³⁵

³⁴ C. M. BO, “Message to South and Southeast Asia Consultation”, *Religious Freedom Institute*, 29th March 2018, www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/blog/cardinal-bo-message-to-south-and-southeast-asia-consultation/.

³⁵ ID., “Burma Needs Tolerance to Reach its Potential”, *The Washington Post*, 13th June 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/burma-

But his message to the Church is always consistent. In his Christmas homily in 2015, he said: “Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to seek your rights to dignity. Do not be afraid of resisting injustice. Do not be afraid to dream, to imagine a new Myanmar where justice and righteousness flow like a river [...] The Christian community is at the service of the nation and its people. Empowering the vulnerable will be a major task for the Church in a new Myanmar”. At the Marian shrine at Nyaunglebin in Bago division, in February 2015, addressing 100,000 pilgrims, the Cardinal once more appealed for peace and freedom: “Let us not live with indifference. Let us not challenge God, like Cain, the murderer, ‘am I my brother’s keeper?’. God will reply: ‘Yes, you are your brother’s keeper! You have a duty to take care of him!’ He released a flock of doves, and called for a new, genuine peace process”.³⁶ And in his Easter homily in 2015 he repeated this call: “This is a wounded nation, a bleeding nation [...] Our conflicts are rooted in injustice [...] Stand for the truth [...] We fear no one. We love all. So, we will continue to work for peace and justice in this land, bringing mercy and promoting reconciliation”.³⁷ That is the story of the Church in Myanmar today, building on the legacy of its martyrs.

needs-tolerance-to-reach-its-potential/2014/06/13/6e5d3c92-ea90-11e3-93d2-edd4be1f5d9e_story.html?utm_term=.4c0323653f8c/.

³⁶ Homily delivered at Nyaunglebin, February 2015. A copy of the full text of the Homily is in the possession of the author. For more information on the meeting held at Nyaunglebin, see F.K. THWE, *Yangon cardinal calls for dialogue between military and ethnic militias to end conflict in Myanmar*, Asia News, 2nd March 2015, www.asianews.it/news-en/Yangon-cardinal-calls-for-dialogue-between-military-and-ethnic-militias-to-end-conflict-in-Myanmar-33597.html/.

³⁷ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, “The Cardinal Who Brings Poetry to the Faith: Quotes from Cardinal Charles Maung Bo”, 2016, www.comece.eu/dl/NqqsJKJKoKonJqx4KJK/Cardinal_Bo_booklet.pdf/.

Afterword

Paolo Affatato

Looking at the future of the Church in Asia, martyrs are the source of inspiration and hope it must be built upon. This certainty emerges from the pages of this book, which aims to provide an overview of the stories and experiences of martyrdom that have marked the life of the Asian Churches: the connecting tissue of the broader continent.

Martyrs were men and women who demonstrated that they had found a reason for living and for dying. Living the Gospel of Jesus Christ gave a meaning to their existence every day and all day. As in the life stories featured in the book, they did not plan martyrdom, nor did they seek glory or fame. They did not walk to their death filled with hostility or anger, nor did they walk towards their executioners or persecutors. Martyrs love life but as followers of Christ embrace persecution. Their way of dying is in keeping with their way of living: the act of rendering life is never 'against someone', an enemy or an evil doer: it is an act to thwart violence by revealing the truth, showing that love is stronger than hatred.

So, in the vast Asian continent the martyrdom of Christians – who mainly belong to minority groups in many diverse cultural and religious contexts – is for all the baptised the most eloquent seal to their faith and their presence in history. First and foremost, martyrdom is bearing witness to Christ, and testifying to the truth of God's merciful love for all mankind: a love that Christ came to reveal and which He lived through by giving Himself up on the cross.

Therefore, as emphasised by many scholars and theologians, martyrdom is an expression of the Christian identity. It is never an accessory or an option. It is the very measure of Christianity, the very measure of the Gospel so often watered down or reduced to a mere cultural factor. Martyrdom is part of the condition of being a disciple who 'takes up' and patiently 'carries' the cross behind Jesus Christ.

This means that martyrdom must be understood as a call to the Churches of Asia to rediscover their essential Christian identity, their characteristic style of life in the world: a life lived in conformity with the cross of Christ. The figure of Christ humiliated and crucified expresses not only an image of the past, but a reality ever present in the Church. In this sense, the Churches of Asia need to examine their conscience in order to discern whether the joyous news of Christ's resurrection and triumph over death has perhaps generated a sort of triumphalist ecclesiological model: the destiny of Christians in the world is not one of 'worldly triumph', but rather a crucified presence and love, as lived out by Jesus. It is Christ who in every martyr emerges victorious.

Although throughout history a certain visibility has always been inherent to the act of martyrdom, here we speak of a visibility which reveals no human glory but Christ alone. The question is what kind of visibility is being sought by the Churches in Asia today? A visibility of 'self-affirmation' in society, of vengeance for situations of oppression, or a 'different' visibility, so transparent that it reveals the life and love of Christ?

Many of the works published in the book – which drew inspiration from the Study Seminar on 'Martyrs in Asia' convened in Rome by CIAM International Center for Mission and Formation on June 8th-14th, 2018 – underline the need for the Churches in Asia to commemorate their martyrs and all who have borne witness to Christ.

To commemorate is to take a step towards reconciling ourselves with the past and opening ourselves to the future. Besides being an act of human justice, the commemoration enables the martyr to offer the faithful fruits of communion and evangelization. In some circumstances, commemoration can lead to strife and resistance on the part of those who do not wish to remember, or just want to bury and to forget. However, today the Churches in Asia must strive to purify the way of recalling their martyrs, freeing this act from any expression of vengeance or antagonism, be it nationalistic, ethnic, political, or confessional in nature. Memory can never be an act of revenge for a situation of oppression suffered from, but it must always be purely 'testimonial commemoration' at the service of the truth, the truth which gives life and builds communion.

Commemoration for the Church is not like a court judging history, seeking culprits. It is not another 'Nuremberg', rather it is a call for a change of heart in the present and for an opening towards the future; an act of drawing from the sources of one's own history of martyrdom to rediscover in one's roots the seed of an authentic Gospel witness. This seed serves as food to live *hic et nunc* the love of Christ, the supreme gift to the whole world.

Hence the lives of martyrs in Asia provide a wellspring for the current missionary activity. By reviving the experiences of martyrdom, the purpose of the CIAM Study Seminar was indeed to discern possible pointers for today that can orient the Church's life and pastoral, spiritual, and social activities, as well as the apostolate and the mission of all baptised.

To reflect on how the vicissitudes of martyrs continue to speak to the faithful, helps to identify and take up the major challenges to the mission of the Asian Churches in our days. Far from any ideological manipulation, simply because "our

Church is the Church of martyrs”,¹ the book sheds light on the very dynamics of martyrdom in Asia not as a pretext for an identity mobilisation or an indignation campaign bearing cultural-political objectives, but seeks to pinpoint the traits of the martyrs as a source of inspiration for every Christian: patience, meekness, mercifulness, the absence of hatred towards persecutors, and, on the contrary, love for enemies. Martyrs triumph because they radiate the strength of love received as a gift from Christ, who gives consolation and victory to all who suffer for His name.

Mysteriously, since the ancient Roman times to the present days, the lives of martyrs have always been intertwined with the convulsions of the world. However, when within these convulsions the sufferings of Christians are reduced to tools of ideological battles or pawns for geopolitical strategies, the very essence of martyrdom is betrayed. Martyrdom is ‘genetically modified’ when the sufferings of believers undergoing persecution are twisted for political or even military reasons, or when the approach with which their case is dealt with is equal to a merely lobbyist ‘demand for rights’. The Asian martyrs throughout history call all baptised on the continent – many of whom live in small minority communities and experience heavy restrictions of rights and freedoms – to be witnesses of love, love even for enemies and persecutors, even at the price of life.

¹ “The Church of Martyrs”, *L'Osservatore Romano*, n. 17, 24th April 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2015/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20150421_church-of-martyrs.html.

Authors

PREFACE

Fr. Fabrizio Meroni, a PIME missionary priest, is Secretary General of the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU), Director of CIAM (International Center for Mission and Formation – Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples), and Director of FIDES (News Agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies). Fr. Meloni worked as Coordinator of the Five Year Project for the Renewal of the Philosophy Department at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia (1996-2000). From 2001 to 2011, he served as Director of the Center for Culture and Christian Formation (CCFC) of the Archdiocese of Belém do Pará, Brazil, and Coordinator of University Pastoral Ministry for the same Archdiocese. For 11 years he also taught courses in Systematic Theology at the Instituto Regional de Formação Presbiteral (IRFP) of the Brazilian Bishops Conference (CNNB-NORTE 2) in Belém do Pará and at the Diocesan Seminary of Patos de Minas, Minas Gerais. From 2006 to 2011, he acted as President of the Amazon Center for Bioethics (CBAm). In 2014, Fr. Meroni joined the faculty of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at the Catholic University of America, Washington DC, to teach in the area of theological anthropology. He holds a Ph.D. degree.

INTRODUCTION

Archbishop Thomas Menampampil SDB was appointed Apostolic Administrator of Diocese of Jowai, India, by Pope Francis on 3 February 2014. For 20 years he was the Former Archbishop of Guwahati and Bishop of Dibrugarh for 11 years, and also served as Chair of the Regional Bishops' Conference of Northeast India; Chair of the Commission for Education and Culture, Catholic Bishops' Conference of India; Special Secretary for the Asian Synod; Chair-

man of the Office of Evangelization, Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences office of Evangelization. Archbishop Menampampil acted as mediator in the conflict between various ethnic groups in the Indian state of Assam, and in this context he coordinated the "Joint Ecumenical Peace Team". He is the author of hundreds of written works on a variety of subjects, such as evangelism, culture, ministry, education, religious life, and prayer. In recognition of his continued commitment to the advancement of peace, dialogue, and reconciliation, Archbishop Menampampil was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

VIETNAM

Fr. Joseph Anh Dung Tran OFMConv was born in 1950 in Hue, Vietnam. He entered St. Sulpice Seminary of Hue and later joined St. Mary of The Lake Seminary, Mundelein, Illinois, United States. After his ordination, he went to France to pursue his studies at the Catholic Institute of Paris (Institut Catholique de Paris) and Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Historical and Philological Studies, 4th Section. He is the author of several publications, among them: *Extraordinary Witness of Faith of the Martyrs of Vietnam* (Dac Lo Tung Thu, 2013), *Bibliography of Vietnamese Catholic Books, Papers and Bulletins (1651-1975) published in Vietnam and Overseas (1975-2015)* (Dac Lo Tung Thu, 2017), *Archives & Bibliotheque des Missions Etrangere de Paris* (Dac Lo Tung Thu, 2018). Since 1993, he has been the Vicar at the Vietnamese Catholic Mission in Paris (Mission Catholique Vietnamiene), and concurrently oversees the Publishing House at Dac Lo Tung Thu-Alexandre de Rhodes.

Fr. Dinh Anh Nhue Nguyen OFMConv is Professor and President of the Pontifical Theological Faculty St. Bonaventure – Seraphicum (Rome), invited professor ("professore invitato") at the Pontifical Gregorian University and Pontifical Urban University (Rome), and Honorary Research Associate of the University of Divinity (Melbourne, Australia). He holds a Master of Science in Engineering from Tula State Technical University (1994, Russia), and a Doctorate in Biblical Theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University (2005, Rome). He received the Carlo Maria Martini International Award 2013 (Category of

Bible and Culture) for the research *The Bible and Asian Culture: Reading the Word of God in Its Cultural Background and in the Vietnamese Context* (written with Tran Thi Ly and Jb Pham Quy Trong) (Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016). His two most recent publications are: *Gesù il saggio di Dio e la Sapienza di Dio: Indagine biblicoteologica introduttiva per ripensare la cristologia sapienziale nei vangeli sinottici* (Casa Editrice Miscellanea Francescana, 2017); and *Numeri: Introduzione, Traduzione, Commento* (Nuova Versione della Bibbia dai testi antichi; San Paolo, 2017). He is founding director of FIATS – Franciscan Institute for Asian Theological Studies and has recently edited (with Jude Winkler) its first collective work: *Franciscan Asian Biennial Book 2016-2017: Research and Reflection on the Christian Faith and Values in Asia* (Casa Editrice Miscellanea Francescana, 2017).

LAOS

Fr. Roland Jacques was born 4 August 1943 in Lorraine, then under Nazi tyrannical rule. From his family's experience, he is perceptive to the plea of those living under oppressive regimes. Since 1963, he has been member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a Congregation that has given six Blessed Martyrs to the Church in Laos. From 2002 to 2010, Fr. Jacques served as diocesan postulator for the cause of 15 of the Martyrs of Laos, and from 2010 to 2016 as vice-postulator for the Roman process of all 17. He has a Ph.D. in the History of Laws, a Doctorate in Canon Law, and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Far-Eastern Studies. He is fluent in Vietnamese. Since retiring from St. Paul University in Ottawa, Canada, in 2010, he has been living in Vietnam, for the service of his Congregation.

MYANMAR

Ulderico Parente (Teano, 1964) is Professor of Contemporary History at the University of International Studies in Rome, and Historic Consul-tor to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. He mainly focuses on themes pertaining to sanctity and religious Institutes in the contemporary age, and on which he has published several monographs. He has also taught History of the Church. He holds a Ph.D. in History of the European Society, and degrees in History of the Church and Archivistics.

Benedict Rogers is the East Asia Team Leader at the human rights organization “Christian Solidarity Worldwide”. He has travelled to Myanmar and its borders more than fifty times. In 2013, he was baptized and received into the Church in Myanmar by Cardinal Charles Bo in St. Mary’s Cathedral, Yangon. He is the author of three books on Myanmar: *Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads* (Rider, 2012-2016); *Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma’s Tyrant* (Silkworm, 2010), *A Land Without Evil: Stopping the Genocide of Burma’s Karen People* (Lion Hudson, 2004). He also wrote the spiritual memoir *From Burma to Rome: A Journey into the Catholic Church* (Gracewing, 2015), and is a regular contributor to international media, including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, The Huffington Post, The Diplomat, The Tablet, and The Catholic Herald.

AFTERWORD

Paolo Affatato is responsible for the Asia Desk at “Fides”, the News Agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies. A journalist and writer, he is the author and co-editor of reportages and books on different realities and country contexts in Asia, such as *Il Dio della Guerra* (Guerini, 2002); *A Oriente del Profeta* (ObarraO, 2005), focused on Islam in the Asian continent; *Geopolitica dello Tsunami* (ObarraO, 2005). In addition, he has contributed to the following publications edited by “Asia Maior”, an Italian think-tank engaged in Asian studies: *L’Asia del grande gioco* (2008), *Crisi globali, crisi locali e nuovi equilibri in Asia* (2009), *L’Asia di Obama e della crisi economica globale* (2010). On behalf of CIAM International Center for Mission and Formation, he coordinated the Study Seminar “Martyrs in Asia”, which inspired the publication of this volume.

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Realizzazione editoriale



Ingegno Grafico

SERVIZI INTEGRATI PER LA GRAFICA,
LA STAMPA E L'EDITORIA
www.ingegnografico.com

Stampa

Tipografia Mancini s.a.s. – 2019



MARTYRS IN ASIA

Martyrs are the seed from which the Church has flourished throughout the history of salvation, and today their memory continues to guide the faithful wherever the Christian mission is challenged by hardships, injustices, and suffering. In this regard, the case of Asia is paradigmatic, and the accounts of the life and death of hundreds of Martyrs over the centuries and in recent times are the bedrock of the missionary baptismal identity of millions of Christians, who are called to bear witness to the Word of Jesus amid extremely adverse circumstances. For such a reason, the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU) has decided to devote this editorial endeavor to the extraordinary figures of the "Martyrs in Asia".

The book describes the path to martyrdom of Christians, both missionary religious and lay, in selected Asian countries (Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar), and provides theological and pastoral reflections with the aim to inspire the work of evangelization of the local Churches and their faithful. "Martyrs in Asia" is part of the PMU contribution to the Pontifical Mission Societies' engagement in the framework of the Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019, designated by Pope Francis in conjunction with the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Pope Benedict XV's Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, addressing the faith and missionary activities of Catholics in all continents (www.october2019.va).

Fr. Fabrizio Meroni, a PIME missionary priest, is Secretary General of the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU), Director of the International Center for Mission and Formation (CIAM), Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and Director of Fides, News Agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies.

ISBN 978-88-401-5053-6



9 788840 115053 6

€ 15,00

www.urbaniana.press