



CONGREGATIO SS. REDEMPTORIS

Superior Generalis

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Roma, October 5, 2013
Memorial of Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, C.Ss.R.

Beatification of the Redemptorist Martyrs of Cuenca

Dear Confreres, Sisters, Lay Associates and friends,

“Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed...Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God’s will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.” (1 Peter 4:13, 19)

On Sunday, October 13, 2013, the beatification of 522 martyrs of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) will take place in Tarragona, Spain. Among those to be beatified are the six Redemptorist Martyrs of Cuenca: Fathers Javier Gorosterratzu Jaunarena, Ciriaco Olarte Pérez de Mendiguren, Miguel Goñi Áriz, Julián Pozo Ruiz de Samaniego, Pedro Romero Espejo, and Brother Victoriano Calvo Lozano. This beatification is an historic and important event, not only for the Province of Madrid and the Church of Spain, but also for the entire Congregation.

It is important to remember the context in which these martyrs to be beatified gave their lives. There were many casualties of the Spanish Civil War. Approximately 270,000 people died, including soldiers and civilians. Many died from acts of war, but many also died from acts of reprisal, from disease, and from hunger. Approximately 6,850 died as a direct result of religious persecution. Of these, 13 were bishops, and over 6,000 were priests and religious. Among these, almost 1000 have already been canonised or beatified. Another 2000 cases are in process. As the Year of Faith draws to a close, the beatification of these 522 martyrs celebrates the witness of martyrdom as an act trust in our faithful Creator, as well as sharing the sufferings of Christ. Without neglecting the importance of the collective witness of all these martyrs, the Redemptorist family remembers in a particular way the six Redemptorist Martyrs of Cuenca in a particular way. We also remember that the cases involving fifteen other Redemptorist martyrs are still in process.

Information about these confreres is already available in several languages. The website of the Redemptorist Province of Madrid (www.redentoristas.org) has short biographies, as well as portraits of the martyrs and other information. Other

publications and information will be available in the near future (see also <http://testigosdelaredencion.blogspot.com.es>).

In this short letter, I cannot speak in detail about each of these confreres individually. I encourage you to learn more about them as material becomes available. Their stories are inspiring and challenging for us today. In this letter, I would like to say a few words about the significance of these martyrs for all of us who live the Redemptorist charism.

The witness of martyrs has always been very significant for the Church. The first disciples of Christ viewed martyrdom as following closely in the footsteps of Jesus and sharing his sufferings, as St. Peter expresses in the above quote from his first letter. The witness of the martyrs goes beyond the act of enduring a violent death. It expresses the reason for which they are willing to give their lives: as witnesses to Jesus Christ and to announce plentiful redemption for all. Martyrdom is a proclamation of the Good News, and the martyrs become witnesses to the Gospel, “continuing to do good” for the sake of their sisters and brothers.

For the first 200 years of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, no Redemptorist Missionary was killed and recognized by the Church as a martyr. St. Alphonsus had dreamed of Redemptorist Missionaries proclaiming the gospel in distant places and embracing martyrdom in fidelity to the Gospel. However, before 1936, no Redemptorist Missionary had yet been martyred for the faith. I doubt that Alphonsus ever thought that the first members of his Congregation to experience martyrdom would do so in Spain. It is remarkable that since 2001, the Church has recognized eleven Redemptorist Martyrs who gave their lives for Christ and his people, all in the 20th century and all in Europe – in Spain, Ukraine and Slovakia.

In late July, 1936, as the signs of persecution increased in Cuenca, one of our Blessed Martyrs, Fr. Julián Pozo, began to intuit that martyrdom was a real possibility. He said: “We (the Redemptorists) don’t have martyrs; do you want to see that we will be the first martyrs?” It was not long before his intuition became reality. None of these six confreres sought martyrdom. Several clearly feared the possibility. All gave their lives as witnesses to redemption. Their deaths also remind us that today many people continue to die as the victims of violence, prejudice, war and poverty. Their lives and their violent deaths call us to build the culture of encounter and dialogue envisioned by Pope Francis in order to overcome these evils which continue to afflict human society.

In most ways, these first six Spanish confreres to be beatified were ordinary Redemptorist Missionaries. Fr. Javier Gorosterratzu was an historian who was supposed to be in Rome doing research in the Vatican Archives. Fr. Ciriaco Olarte had been a missionary in Mexico. He returned to Spain due to the revolution and religious persecution in that country. Fr. Miguel Goñi and Fr. Julián Pozo were both suffering from ill health and were more restricted in their ministry and missionary activity. Both were well appreciated for their preaching and spiritual counsel by those who knew

them. Brother Victoriano Calvo was quiet and deep, a man of prayer and service to those in need. Fr. Pedro Romero, judged by his superiors as unqualified for extraordinary ministry, showed extraordinary courage and faithfulness as he continued to minister in Cuenca, often living homeless in the streets during the period of persecution. He died in prison of his wounds and suffering, two years after he was forced to leave the Redemptorist convent.

For five of these six confreres, martyrdom came quickly. Yet it seems to me that the final surrender of their lives into the hands of God was the result of a much longer process. Their fidelity to God at the moment of martyrdom was shaped by the daily decision to say 'yes' to Jesus Christ as they lived their Redemptorist missionary vocation. In the daily ministry of preaching and confessions, prayer and service to others, teaching and spiritual direction, they lived this missionary vocation with fidelity. In the face of serious chronic illness, they learned to welcome others graciously and with a smile. Even in the experience of the failure of some apostolic endeavours, they did not despair or give up, but continued to proclaim the Gospel.

Through their religious profession and fidelity, they gave their lives daily as missionaries before they gave their lives as martyrs. "Profession makes all Redemptorists truly missionaries, whether they are engaged in different activities of apostolic ministry or hindered from working at all, whether they are occupied with various services on behalf of the Congregation or the confreres, or are advanced in age, sick, or incapable of external work or whether, above all, they are suffering and dying for the salvation of the world" (Cons. 55).

In 2003, the theme chosen by the XXIII General Chapter affirmed that "*Giving our lives for Plentiful Redemption*" is at the heart of the Redemptorist Missionary Vocation. The martyrs of Cuenca lived this vocation and gave their lives as witnesses to redemption. They also testify to the truth that the call to martyrdom can come to any disciple at the most unexpected time and in the least expected place. Very few Redemptorist missionaries are asked to lay down their lives as these martyrs did. A small number of Christian disciples will shed their blood through violent death in testimony to their faith in Jesus Christ. However, all of us are called to give our lives for plentiful redemption through the proclamation of the Gospel and service of our sisters and brothers. "Moved and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, the members spare no effort to arrive at a total gift of themselves" (Cons. 56).

During this Year for the Promotion of the Redemptorist Missionary Vocation, may the lives and martyrdom of our confreres inspire us to renew and deepen our own share in the Redemptorist charism. Confreres and Sisters, Lay and Religious, we are missionaries – called to be *Witnesses and Missionaries of Redemption*. We are called to give our lives, with generosity and availability, in union with our brothers the martyrs of Cuenca.

Although not all of us can be physically present in Tarragona on October 13th for the celebration of the Beatification, I ask every Redemptorist Missionary, Sister, and

Lay Collaborator to join in spiritual communion with this celebration. Please remember this important event in all of our Churches and Chapels, in each Mass and common prayer. I ask each community to dedicate some moment on October 13th to come together in prayer and communion with our newly-beatified brothers. Where possible, I ask you to do this with the People of God and to share this Good News with them.

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). May the prayers and intercession of the Blessed Redemptorist Martyrs of Cuenca be a source of inspiration and blessing for us during this Year of the Redemptorist Missionary Vocation. May their example and self-gift attract others to share their commitment to follow “Jesus Christ the Redeemer by preaching the word of God to the poor” (Cons. 1). May St. Alphonsus Liguori and Our Mother of Perpetual Help accompany us as we preach the Gospel ever anew and give our lives for plentiful redemption.

Your brother in the Redeemer,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael Brehl, C.Ss.R." in a cursive script.

Michael Brehl, C.Ss.R.