

# **YOUNG SAINTS AND OTHERS**

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Blessed Daudi Okelo and Jildo Irwa (+1918)

## **SACRIFICE AT DAWN**

*Baptism gave them a new identity. They offered Jesus their spontaneous loyalty and their ardent youth. The strength of their Acholi tradition found its purpose in their blood witness to Christ who had enhanced their humanity and given them a new freedom. The glorification of Daudi and Jildo gives courage and hope to their people in Northern Uganda, in the long trial of senseless violence they are going through.*

In the beginning of the XX century, in the vast area of savannah in the North-Eastern part of Uganda, bordering with the Sudan, life was going on as it had from time immemorial: the antelopes, buffalos, lions and the other great games were roaming the plains as they had done since the beginning of creation and the humans were scratching the soil for the traditional crops of millet, peanuts and sesame. The pitiless sun was beating down on the roofs of the village huts, making the long elephant grass lose its bright color, and the sudden tropical storms were washing away the traces of human settlements and obliterating the tombs of the ancestors in the earthen courtyards. Men were born and died without leaving a trace, sucked into oblivion by the relentless cycles of nature.

### *The encounter*

On February 11, 1915, the Feast of the Apparition of Our Lady at Lourdes, two Italian Comboni missionaries arrived in Kitgum, the main settlement of that area of northern Uganda. They were Fr. Antonio Vignato and Fr. Giuseppe Beduschi. They were the forerunners who had come to see the place and decide if it fitted their aims. A month later, two of their confreres arrived, Fr. Gian Battista Pedrana and Fr. Cesare Gambaretto.

They settled in the midst of the people, “around the fire,” as they say there, to listen, converse, and announce the Gospel. This was something new for the tribe of the Acholi, who had always lived in fear of the white people (Arabs and Europeans) who had appeared sporadically in their land: the

Arab slave traders and ivory merchants and the British colonial officers who had recently arrived and imposed forced labor, an imposition that had even produced a rebellion in the mountains.

The missionaries soon began gathering together the listeners in the villages, initiating a catechumenate with some of them. Daudi and Jildo were among the first who joined the instruction. Jildo's father, who later became a Christian, remembers his encounter with one of the missionaries, Fr. Cesare: "He would visit my family often. He loved the children, and Jildo was one of the first to get to know the Father."

These were encounters of friendship. The missionary taught them the Christian prayers and spoke to them of Jesus, the Son of God, who became a man in the womb of the Virgin Mary and died on the cross to save us. He did this through the recitation and explanation of the Rosary, telling them the history, the events. Jildo and Daudi were struck by these stories and the figure of the missionary who moved about from village to village. The two boys decided, together with others, to follow the missionary as far as Kitgum. Daudi and Jildo were around 16 and 14 years old respectively when they started their journey to go to the mission in Kitgum, being both children of pagan families.

### *Christians and catechists*

In Kitgum, they received a medal of Our Lady as a sign of their journey toward Baptism. They learned the catechism of S. Pius X, translated two years earlier into the Acholi language by Fr. Pasquale Crazzolaro, who would become one of the greatest African linguists. One of the witnesses of their Martyrdom and a companion of Daudi testified that Daudi had brought with him a girl he intended to marry. But after some time, the girl, struck by a devastating attack of chiggers in her feet, had to return home. Daudi put her out of his mind and continued to attend catechism classes with great determination. Jildo also showed himself to be a determined boy. His father declared that he himself would take food to the catechumenate in Kitgum, because his son was so wrapped up in his new commitment as not to be concerned in the slightest with eating.

Daudi and Jildo received Baptism and Holy Communion on June 6, 1916, and on that day were given the crucifix from which they would never be

parted again. These future martyrs received the faith as adolescents, but they soon showed the maturity of adults. The missionaries chose some of the newly baptized to train as catechists and sent them among the people in far-away villages, just as Jesus had done with His disciples. Daudi and Jildo were chosen. Both of them had shown willingness to make any sacrifice in order to proclaim the salvation of Jesus Christ. They no longer wanted to return to their villages. They were ready to go wherever they would be commissioned.

In 1917, a year after the celebration of the sacrament of Confirmation, the two young converts were sent to Paimol, because the incumbent catechist, Antonio, had met a premature death. Paimol was a hilly area about fifty miles from Kitgum, with various villages, one of which, called Palamuku, became the place of their martyrdom. Now, after the sacrifice of Daudi and Jildo, the village is called *Wi-polo* (“Heaven”) by the local Christians.

Before their departure, Fr Cesare spoke to them: “So you are willing to go to Paimol. What if they kill you?” Daudi replied, “We will go to heaven. Antonio is already there, isn’t he?” Jildo reiterated, “Father, you surely are not afraid like the others? Jesus and Mary are with us.” Surprised by the faith of the two youths, Fr. Cesare went silently into his room and came back with a catechism and a rosary for each of them. Kneeling, Daudi and Jildo received the tools of their apostolate. Together they recited a *Hail Mary*, and the Father blessed them and sent them on their way.

In Paimol, they were welcomed by the vice-chief of the clan. He offered them food, but Daudi and Jildo would not accept food without earning it by their labor. In the morning, before sunrise, they would beat the drum to call the children to the recitation of the prayers and a short period of catechism. The children would then go to their activities in the fields and pastures, while the two catechists, before going to their own work of farming the land, would recite the Rosary since they could not attend Mass.

Their daily program continued in the afternoon: after working in the fields, they would wash their feet and hands and eat, then would call the children together once again by the sound of the drum, resume their teaching of prayers and catechism, and conclude in the evening, before going to bed, with the recitation of the Rosary. We have the people’s witness for this: “When Daudi and Jildo lived in Paimol, the kids were happy to go see them and they too were glad to receive the kids. All the people in the village, with

no exceptions, loved them for the good they did. They were totally devoted to doing their duty, until they were killed. They died in the precise fulfillment of their duty.”

### *Sacrifice at dawn*

From 1916 onwards, the situation had become very difficult in Paimol for a drought had brought famine to that region. The tribal chieftain of Paimol, Lakidi, had been arrested, tried, and imprisoned in Kitgum by the English colonial authorities on the false accusation of illegal possession of weapons. The local rebels and the Arab slave traders and ivory merchants were intolerant of the commitment of the catechists, who with their teaching were introducing a disturbing element into their sinister, flourishing business and immoral conduct that was contributing to the spread of venereal diseases.

They sought the alliance of the *ajwakki* (sorcerers) and accused the Christian religion of Daudi and Jildo of the evils that had occurred: famine, pestilence, and oppression by foreigners. From hatred to the elimination of the catechists was a brief step. It would be a lesson to all and a diktat to abandon the Christian faith they had brought! The plan to kill the catechists was prepared. The murderers were divided in groups: the first two continued toward the village of the chief and under-chief imposed by the English, while the third group went to the catechists' hut.

One of the attackers, Okidi Ibrahim, dragged Daudi out of the hut and beyond the fence, and having ordered him in vain to abandon the Christian faith, mortally wounded him with a spear. Jildo, who had been left in the hut because he was too young, came out and started yelling, “If you killed Daudi because he taught the new religion, then kill me too. I also taught the religion with him.” Opio Akadamoi grabbed him and ran him through with a lance, then finished him off with a dagger. It was Sunday, October 20, 1918. The two boys were 18 and 16 years old respectively.

Their bodies were abandoned in the grass, until a merciful hand pulled their remains to a spot near an isolated anthill. Their relics were then transported to the Mission Church of Kitgum, where they had been baptized. Fr. Cesare started immediately to collect testimonies about their martyrdom. The depositions of all the witnesses affirm that the two catechists were killed "for



Kateri Tekakwitha (1656-1680)

# TORTURE OF LOVE

*She was a young Mohawk girl who had received the faith from her mother, an Algonquin prisoner who had eventually married her Mohawk master. Scarred by smallpox, Kateri showed a heroic capacity of suffering, as if she was inflicting on herself the torture that was a trait of her native culture, but out of love and for the conversion of her people. Kateri was a child of nature. As a USA bishop said: "Her sainthood will raise the minds and hearts of those who love nature". Kateri Tekakwitha was canonized last October 21 by Benedict XVI and is honored by the Catholic Church as the patroness of ecology and the environment.*

During the XVII century in North America, the encounter of the tribes of Native Americans with the white settlers both French and English often assumed dramatic features that are described in famous works of fictions and films. The attempts of the Christian missionaries to evangelize the Red Indians are also part of this epochal clash. Brian Moore, author of the historical novel *Black Robe*, for instance, draws his protagonist from his admiration for the gestures of the Jesuit missionaries to the Native Americans, the Red Skins.

But it is the nature of the people whom the missionary deals with that comes to the fore. The missionary is aware of the emergence of these peoples. The yardstick is no longer the culture of the white man. He has come not only to teach but to learn. Sometimes it is a culture shock, as in the way Fr. Noel Chabanel, missionary to the Huron in 1640, one of the Canadian Martyrs, reacts to the life style of the Indians: "He detested Indian life: the smoke, the vermin, the filthy food, the impossibility of privacy. He could not study by the smoky lodge fires, among the noisy crowds of men and squaws with their dogs and their restless, screeching children".



And yet, there is more than what meets the eye. Brian More writes: “In my search for writing *Black Robe*, I moved to the *Relations*, the voluminous letters that the Jesuits sent back to their Superiors in France. In the *Relations* themselves and their deeply moving reports I discovered an unknown and unpredictable world. These letters are the only real records of the early Indians of North America. They introduce us to a people that bear little resemblance to the “Red Indians” of folklore.

The Huron, Iroquois and Algonquin were a handsome, brave, incredibly cruel people, who at that early stage, were in no way dependent on the white man and, in fact, judged him to be their physical and mental inferior. They were warlike, and for reason of their religion, subjected their enemies to prolonged and unbearable tortures.”

Brian Moore in *Black Robe* wants to represent how the Indian belief in a world of night and in the power of dreams clashed with the Jesuits’ preaching of Christianity and paradise after death. Eventually, the details of the story narrated in his novel can be a commentary to the circumstances of the sacrifice of the Canadian Martyrs: Isaac Jogues and his seven companions who lost their lives from 1642 to 1649.

French Jesuits were the first missionaries to go to North America, after J. Cartier’s travels opened Canada to the white man in 1534. Their mission region extended from Nova Scotia to Maryland. These eight saints preached the gospel to the Iroquois and Huron Indians, and, after being tortured, they were martyred in the area of what is now Auriesville, New York.

Despite the brutality and destructiveness of these initial encounters between the Black Robes and the Indians, it is the ethos of Christian love that eventually won the day and brought civilization to North America and its native population. Ten years after the death of St. Isaac Jogues, Kateri Tekakwitha, the first North American Indian to be canonized, was born in the same village in which he died.

### ***Escape through the wilderness***

Tekakwitha was born in 1656. Tekakwitha's father was a Mohawk chief and her mother was a Catholic Algonquin, a prisoner who had eventually married her Mohawk master. Her village had a mixed population, as the Mohawk were absorbing many captured natives of other tribes, particularly

their competitors the Huron, to replace people who died from diseases or warfare. Tekakwitha's Iroquois name can be translated as "she pushes with her hands" or "the one who walks groping for her way" (because of her faulty eyesight). At the age of four, smallpox attacked Tekakwitha's village, taking the lives of her parents and baby brother, and leaving her an orphan. Although forever weakened, scarred, and partially blind, Tekakwitha survived. The brightness of the sun blinded her and she would feel her way around as she walked.

Tekakwitha was adopted by her two aunts and her uncle, also a Mohawk chief. After the smallpox outbreak subsided, her people abandoned their village and built a new settlement, called Caughnawaga, some five miles away on the north bank of the Mohawk River, which today is in Fonda, New York. In many ways, Tekakwitha's life was the same as all young Native American girls. It entailed days filled with chores, spending happy times with other girls, communing with nature, and planning for her future.

Although Tekakwitha was not baptized as an infant, she had fond memories of her good and prayerful mother and of the stories of Catholic faith that her mother shared with her in childhood. These remained indelibly impressed upon her mind and heart and were to give shape and direction to her life's destiny. She often went to the woods alone to speak to God and listen to Him in her heart and in the voice of nature.

When Tekakwitha was eighteen, Father de Lamberville, a Jesuit missionary, came to Caughnawaga and established a chapel. Her uncle disliked the "Black Robe" and his strange new religion, but tolerated the missionary's presence. Tekakwitha vaguely remembered her mother's whispered prayers, and was fascinated by the new stories she heard about Jesus Christ. She wanted to learn more about Him and become a Christian.

Father de Lamberville persuaded her uncle to allow Tekakwitha to attend religious instructions. The following Easter, in 1676, twenty-year old Tekakwitha was baptized. Radiant with joy, she was given the name of Kateri, which is Mohawk for Catherine. Kateri's family did not accept her choice to embrace Christ. After her baptism, Kateri became the village outcast. Her family refused her food on Sundays because she wouldn't work. Children would taunt her and throw stones. She was threatened with torture or death if she did not renounce her religion.

Because of increasing hostility from her people and because she wanted to devote her life to working for God, in July 1677, Kateri left her village and fled more than 300 km through woods, rivers and swamps to the Catholic mission of St. Francis Xavier at Sault Saint-Louis, Kahanawake, near Montreal. Kateri's journey through the wilderness took more than two months.

### *Lily of the Mohawks*

The Jesuits had founded Kahnawake for the religious conversion of the natives. When it began, the natives built longhouses for residences. After her arrival, Kateri shared the longhouse of her older sister and her husband. Her mother's close friend, Anastasia Tegonhatsiongo, was clan matron of the longhouse. Anastasia and other Mohawk women introduced Tekakwitha to the regular practices of Christianity.

Because of her determination in proving herself worthy of God and her undying faith she was allowed to receive her First Holy Communion on Christmas Day, 1677. Although not formally educated and unable to read and write, Kateri led a life of prayer and penitential practices. She taught the young and helped those in the village who were poor or sick. Kateri spoke words of kindness to everyone she encountered. Her favorite devotion was to fashion crosses out of sticks and place them throughout the woods. These crosses served as stations that reminded her to spend a moment in prayer.

Kateri's motto became: "Who can tell me what is most pleasing to God that I may do it?" She spent much of her time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, kneeling in the cold chapel for hours. When the winter hunting season took Kateri and many of the villagers away from the village, she made her own little chapel in the woods by carving a Cross on a tree and spent time in prayer there, kneeling in the snow. Kateri loved the Rosary and carried it around her neck always.

Often people would ask: "Kateri, tell us a story." Kateri remembered everything she was told about the life of Jesus and his followers. People would listen for a long time. They enjoyed being with her because they felt the presence of God. One time a priest asked the people why they gathered around Kateri in church. They told him that they felt close to God when Kateri prayed. They said that her face changed when she was praying. It became full of beauty and peace, as if she were looking at God's face.

On March 25, 1679, Kateri made a vow of perpetual virginity, meaning that she would remain unmarried and totally devoted to Christ for the rest of her life. The Church considers that in 1679, with her decision on the Feast of the Annunciation, her conversion was truly completed and she became the “first virgin” among the Mohawk. She is rightly called: “The lily of the Mohawks”.

Kateri hoped to start a convent for Native American sisters in Sault St. Louis but her spiritual director, Father Pierre Cholonc discouraged her. Kateri's health, never good, was deteriorating rapidly due in part to the penances she inflicted on herself. Father Cholonc encouraged Kateri to take better care of herself but she laughed and continued with her "acts of love."

### **Corporal mortification**

The historian Allan Greer notes that most of these early converts to Christianity were women. They lived in a way which they thought was integral to Christianity, dependent on charity. They devoted their bodies and souls to God and participated in mortification of the flesh. There were similar practices among Mohawk traditions, usually carried out by warriors. Despite it was discouraged by the Jesuits, the women of the village continued to practice mortification, usually in groups, claiming it was needed to relieve their people of their past sins.

Tekakwitha met Marie-Thérèse Tegaiaguenta for the first time in the spring of 1678. Aspiring to devotion, they began to practice mutual flagellation in secret. Fr. Cholonc wrote that Kateri could flog herself between one thousand and twelve hundred blows in one session. Tekakwitha's dedication to ritual mortification became more intense and consuming over the remainder of her life; she included prolonged fasting, flogging, cutting, sleeping on a bed of thorns, and burning herself with hot coals.

Tekakwitha was said to have put thorns on her sleeping mat and lay on them while praying for the conversion and forgiveness of her kinsmen. Piercing the body to draw blood was a traditional practice of the Mohawk and other Iroquois nations. She lived at Kahnawake the remaining two years of her life. She learned more about Christianity under her mentor Anastasia, who taught her about the practice of repenting for one's sins. When the women learned of nuns and female convents, they wanted to form their own and created an informal association of devout women.

Kateri Tekakwitha died on April 17, 1680 at the age of 24, in the arms of her friend Marie-Therèse. Her final words were: "I will love you in heaven." Fr. Pierre Cholenec, a witness at her deathbed, states that at the time of her death Kateri's face "... so disfigured and so swarthy in life, suddenly changed about fifteen minutes after her death, and in an instant became so beautiful and so fair that just as soon as I saw it (I was praying by her side) I let out a yell, I was so astonished, and I sent for the other priest. At the news of this prodigy, he came running along with some people who were with him. We then had the time to contemplate this marvel right up to the time of her burial".

Bishop H.J.Hubbard wrote: "In this day and age, when the pleasure-principle so dominates our society, and when people expend all kinds of time, effort and energy to remove the Cross from Christianity and to escape the sometimes harsh realities and responsibilities of mature Christian living, Kateri Tekakwitha stands as an heroic example of how to integrate the mystery of the Cross with the mystery of the Resurrection in a way that gives honor and glory to God and that ensures loving service to His people."

### *Mystic of the wilderness*

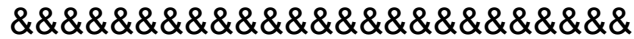
The Jesuits' account of Kateri revealed that she was a modest girl who avoided social gatherings; she used to cover her head with a blanket because of the smallpox scars. Her life was always close to the rhythms of nature. She became skilled at traditional women's arts, which included making clothing and belts from animal skins; weaving mats, baskets and boxes from reeds and grasses and preparing food from game, crops and gathered produce. She took part in the women's seasonal planting and intermittent weeding. She was pressured to consider marriage around age thirteen, but reportedly she refused.

Tekakwitha grew into a young woman with a sweet, shy personality. She helped her aunts work in the fields where they tended to the corn, beans, and squash, and took care of the traditional longhouse in which they lived. She went to the neighboring forest to pick the roots needed to prepare medicines and dye. She collected firewood in the forest and water from a stream. Despite her poor vision, she also became very skilled at beadwork.

In Kateri we can see the truth of the following words, from Margaret Craven's novel *I heard the owl call my name*: "The Indians know their

village and feel for their village as no white man for his country, his town, or even for his own bit of land. Their village is not only the strip of land four miles long and three miles wide that is theirs as long as the sun rises and the moon sets. The myths also are the village and the winds and the rains. The river is the village...The village is the salmon that comes up the river to spawn, the seal that follows the salmon and bites off his head... The village is the talking bird...The fifty-foot totem by the church is the village”.

In these words there is a kind of homesickness for the old ways of the tribe, consecrated by a long tradition and threatened by the ways of the white people. There is bitterness and sadness when the youth of the tribe go to the cities and take to drink and drugs; when they cease to respect the elders and lose their religion in the jungle of the metropolis. May the splendor of this young woman’s figure who was called: “The mystic of the wilderness” be close to the young and help them not to succumb to the allure of the city.



# YOUNG HOLINESS

*This is the extraordinary adventure of two young men of the XX century who reflected in their similar destiny the features of Christ like the two faces of a mirror. Both with university education and keen mountaineers, they displayed an exceptional love for and devotion to their Catholic faith. Their holiness soon took them to the commitment for social transformation as they both entered politics. Pier Giorgio Frassati used to say: "Charity is not enough, we need social reforms", and he worked for both. A terminal illness severed the thread of his life at 24. As for Vinicio, he fell to his death while climbing a dangerous mountain. He was only 30. Pope John Paul II declared Pier Giorgio Frassati a blessed in 1990 and made him one of the patrons of the World Youth Days. The process of beatification of Vinicio Dalla Vecchia was opened in his diocese of Padua in 2001.*

To be an active Catholic in Italy, in the years immediately after the end of World War I, often meant to be subject to the violent pressure both of the Communists and of the rapidly emerging Fascist Party. Catholic youth, belonging to Church organizations, were expected to be courageous and resourceful in the public manifestations of their loyalty to the Church and in the defense of their Christian ideals. This is what we see in the life of Pier Giorgio Frassati, university student from a well-to-do family and committed member of Catholic movements.

One day, as he was participating in a Church-organized demonstration in Rome, he bravely withstood police violence and rallied the other young people by grabbing the banner which the police had knocked out of someone else's hands. He held it even higher while using the pole to ward off their blows. When the demonstrators were arrested by the police, he refused special treatment that he might have received because of his father's political position, preferring to stay with his friends.

Despite the many organization to which Pier Giorgio belonged, he was active and involved in each, fulfilling all the duties of membership. Pier Giorgio was strongly anti-fascist and did nothing to hide his political views. He used to say: “It is not those who suffer violence that should fear, but those who practice it. When God is with us, we do not need to be afraid”. One night a group of Fascists broke into his family’s home to attack him and his father. Pier Giorgio beat them off single-handedly, chasing them down the street, calling them: “Blackguards! Cowards!”.

He wrote: “In this trying time that our country is going through, we Catholics must steel ourselves for the battle we shall certainly have to fight to fulfill our program and give our country, in the not too distant future, happier days and a morally healthy society, but to achieve this we need constant prayer to obtain from God that grace without which all our efforts are useless; organization and discipline to be ready for action at the right time; and finally, the sacrifice of our passion and of ourselves, because without that we cannot achieve our aim.”

### *Love for the poor*

Pier Giorgio Frassati was born in Turin, Italy, on Holy Saturday, April 6, 1901. His father, an agnostic, was the founder and director of the liberal newspaper *La Stampa*, and was influential in Italian politics, serving a term as senator, and later was Italy’s ambassador to Germany. Pier Giorgio grew up in the usual activities at the school and in sports. But he showed since an early age a great love for the poor.

Although the Frassati family was well-to-do, the father was frugal and never gave his two children much spending money. What little he did have, however, Pier Giorgio gave to help the poor, even using his train fare for charity and then running home to be on time for meals in a house where punctuality and frugality were the law. When asked by friends why he often rode third class on the train he would reply with a smile: “Because there is not a forth class”.

When he was still a child, a poor mother with a boy in tow came begging to the Frassati home. Pier Giorgio answered the door, and seeing the boy’s shoeless feet gave him his own shoes. At graduation, given the choice by his father of money or a car, he chose the money and gave it to the poor. He obtained a room for a poor old woman evicted from her tenement, provided



a bed for a consumptive invalid, supported three children of a sick and grieving widow.

At the Italian embassy in Berlin, he was admired by a German news reporter who wrote: “One night in Berlin, with the temperature at twelve degree below zero, Pier Giorgio gave his overcoat to a poor old man who was shivering with cold. His father scolded him, and he replied simply and matter-of-factly: “But, you see, papa, it was cold.”

### ***The life of a mystic***

Pier Giorgio also spent time in the countryside with friends; mountain climbing was one of his favorite sports. On these outings, however, the young friends did not hesitate to share with him their religious inspiration and spiritual lives. He often went to the theater, to the opera, and to museums. He loved art and music, and could quote whole passages of the poet Dante.

But beneath the smiling exterior of the restless university student was concealed the amazing life of a mystic. Love for Jesus motivated Pier Giorgio’s actions. He assisted at Mass and took communion daily, often serving Mass and making frequent nocturnal adoration. He liked to meditate on St. Paul’s “Hymn of Charity” (1 Corinthians 13) and on the writings of St. Catherine of Siena.

He decided to become a mining engineer, studying at the Royal Polytechnic University of Turing, so he could “serve Christ better among the miners”, as he told a friend. Although he considered studies his first duty, they did not keep him from social and political activism. In 1919, he joined the Catholic Student Foundation and the organization known as Catholic Action. He became a very active member of the People’s Party, which promoted the Catholic Church’s social teaching based on the principles of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*. “Charity is not enough: we need social reforms” he used to say.

### ***Role model for the youth***

Just before receiving his university degree, Pier Giorgio contracted poliomyelitis, which doctors later speculated he caught from the sick whom he tended. Neglecting his own health because his grandmother was dying, after six days of terrible suffering Pier Giorgio died at the age of 24 on July

4, 1925. His last preoccupation was for the poor. On the eve of his death, with a paralyzed hand he scribbled a message to a friend, asking him to take the medicine needed for injections to be given to Converso, a poor sick man he had been visiting.

His family expected Turin's elite and political figures to come to offer their condolences and attend the funeral; they naturally expected to find many of his friends there as well. They were surprised, however, to find the streets of the city lined with thousands of mourners as the cortege passed by: they were the many people Pier Giorgio had directly helped during his brief life. He was originally buried in the family crypt in the Cemetery of the city.

His mortal remains, found completely intact and incorrupt upon their exhumation on March 31, 1981, were eventually transferred from the family tomb to the cathedral in Turin. Many pilgrims, especially young people, started coming to the tomb of Pier Giorgio to seek favors and the courage to follow his example.

Pope John Paul II, after visiting his original tomb in the family plot, said in 1989: "I wanted to pay homage to a young man who was able to witness to Christ with singular effectiveness in this century of ours. When I was a young man, I, too, felt the beneficial influence of his example and, as a student, I was impressed by the force of his testimony." On May 20, 1990, in St. Peter's Square which was filled with tens of thousands of people, the Pope beatified Pier Giorgio Frassati, calling him the "Man of the Eight Beatitudes."

Young people today who are looking for a role model will find someone to identify with in this vibrant young outdoorsman who combined a deep love for Christ, a desire to serve the needy, and a mission to imbue society and politics with Christian ideals.

### ***Vinicio Dalla Vecchia***

On August 17, 1954, Vinicio Dalla Vecchia, medical doctor and assistant lecturer in the Institute of Medical Pathology of Padua University, was rock-climbing a difficult mountain of the Dolomites in Northern Italy. With him was his cousin, a Salesian priest. The solitary climbing was destined to end in tragedy: because of unknown reasons, they both fell to their death. Vinicio was only 30 years old: a promising member of his profession and

especially an exceptional operator in the field of Catholic Action and in politics with the Christian Democrats.

He was a passionate rock-climber and had written: “The desire to see and know these beautiful mountains is like a flame which bursts from the bottom of my heart. It is impossible for me to resist the powerful fascination that emanates from those naked mountains walls... I wait impatiently for the moment to come of setting out for the climbing: for me it is to know, to see realities which recall my soul to the contemplation of God’s greatness and wisdom, to experience emotions that make my heart throb”.

Vinicio Dalla Vecchia was born near Padua, Italy, from a working class family, on March 23, 1924. He grew up in the school and in the parish, harmoniously combining studies and apostolate. During his university course he joined politics. He graduated as a medical doctor and surgeon and soon started a career in the University of Padua itself.

At the time of his sudden death, Vinicio was engaged to Maria. We have a bunch of love letters that reveal the fiber of this Christian lover. He wrote: “In this moment it is easy for me to create around and inside me a “Silence Zone” where the dearest thoughts and feelings gather in order to be enriched in God’s light...Really, Maria, we must become good and without wasting time. Many people are expecting this from us. To draw closer to God: this is the objective. Any other objective has no value unless geared to this progress of the soul towards God”

“In the family I have always thought of finding a help for this program of drawing close to God by means of the day-to-day activities. We will be two, we will be together in our journey towards that perfection to which God calls us. And looking into my heart, I experience all my unworthiness in front of the gift God has granted me: the joy of faith, the joy of hope, the joy of love. Our journey must be, therefore, a climbing. We may not be able to face, as experienced rock-climbers, the sixth degree; but the ordinary way we must be able of going through”.

Vinicio’s love story for Maria is so beautiful because it enhances the whole of his affective life. The novelty of what he is experiencing is more than a generic falling in love. The emotional attraction he experiences is consistent with the great ideals for which he is living. His affective adventure becomes a key for reading the whole of his life. Our life of faith cannot be all in the

head, it must become an emotional involvement: ideals and affection in Vinicio become one.

During his long commitment to politics and social action, Vinicio defined the social teaching of the Church as “truthful” and added: “In order to spread and defend it we must know it: and the greater is our knowledge of it, the more relevant will be our action to spread it, because ever more will shine in us the conviction that the social teaching of the Church is just, true and indispensable in order to foster peaceful co-existence and brotherhood among peoples”.

Mons. Giovanni Vaccarotto, postulator of the cause of Vinicio’s beatification, wrote: “I think that venerable Dalla Vecchia may be easily proposed as model for a journey of faith and enlightened discernment. He was able to harmonize all the areas of his commitment: life, studies, politics and all the other choices he made in order to serve others. Somehow, he anticipated the reading of the signs of time, of Vatican II. Vinicio knew how to use his beautiful mind in order to stay at his place, always looking at his polar star: Jesus in the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary, without modifying his personality, in full cooperation with and respect for the Church leadership, in full accomplishment of his total, solid, full lay status”.

Leon Bloy has written: “There is only one sadness: that of not being saints”. Vinicio pursued incessantly this ideal of holiness. He understood the importance of the Eucharist and prayer. Near the Faculty of Medicine he was attending at Padua, there is a little church. There the medicine student Vinicio was going daily to ask the priest for Communion. He wanted to be a saint, but he also wanted to save souls. He wanted his school mates and friends to follow him along the road to holiness with the same passion as himself. Mons. Luigi Sartori, famous theology professor and Vinicio’s contemporary, candidly admitted : “I have lived fifty years more than Vinicio, but I am convinced that he has overtaken me in intensity of life”.

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Pedro Calungsod (1654-1672)

# HEROISM AT DAWN

*Pedro Calungsod was a young Filipino Christian and a catechist who died as a martyr at Guam, in the course of his mission, together with the Jesuit priest he had followed, Fr. Diego Luis de San Vitores. Baptism had given him a new identity. He offered Jesus his life and, with it, his spontaneous loyalty and his ardent youth. The strength of his Visaya tradition found its purpose in his blood witness to Christ who had enhanced his humanity and given him a new freedom. In his footsteps, we remember the blessed African catechists and martyrs Daudi Okelo and Jildo Irwa, also teen agers. Almost at the eve of the fifth century since the arrival of Christianity in the Philippines, Pedro Calungsod, together with Saint Lorenzo Ruiz, embodies the Christian faith that found itself at home in the Philippines.*

The Mariana Islands are a crescent-shaped archipelago comprising the summits of fifteen mostly dormant volcanic mountains in the western North Pacific Ocean. They lie south of Japan and east of the Philippines, demarcating the Philippine Sea's eastern limit. The islands were named after Queen Mariana by Spaniards, who first arrived in the early 16th century and who eventually annexed and colonized the archipelago. The previous name was *Islas de los Ladrones* (Islands of the Thieves).

The indigenous inhabitants are the Chamorro. Archaeologists in 2013 reported findings which indicated the people who first settled the Marianas arrived there after making what was at that time the longest uninterrupted ocean voyage in human history. They further reported findings which suggested that the island of Tinian among them is likely to have been the first island in Oceania to have been settled by humans.

In 1668, Pedro Calungsod, a 14 years old teen ager, was among the exemplary young catechists chosen to accompany Spanish Jesuit

missionaries, from his native Visaya region, to the *Islas de los Ladrones*. Calungsod went together with the priest Diego San Vitores to Guam to catechize the native Chamorros. Missionary life on the island was difficult as provisions did not arrive regularly, the jungles and terrain were difficult to traverse, and the Marianas were frequently devastated by typhoons. The mission nevertheless persevered, and a significant number of locals were baptized into the faith.

After a while, a Chinese man named Choco, a criminal from Manila who was exiled in Guam, began spreading rumors that the baptismal water used by missionaries was poisonous. As some sickly Chamorro infants who were baptized eventually died, many believed the story and held the missionaries responsible. Choco was readily supported by the *macanjas*(medicine men) and the young warriors who despised the missionaries.

### ***Supreme Sacrifice***

On April 2, 1672, Calungsod and San Vitores came to the village of Tumon. There they learnt that the wife of the village's chief Matapang had given birth to a daughter, and they immediately went to baptize the child. Influenced by the calumnies of Choco, Chief Matapang strongly refused. To give him some time to calm down, the missionaries left his house and gathered the children and some adults of the village at the nearby shore and started chanting with them the tenets of the Catholic faith.

They invited Matapang to join them, but he shouted back that he was angry with God and was fed up with Christian teachings. Determined to kill the missionaries, Matapang went away and tried to enlist another villager, a pagan named Hirao. The latter initially refused, mindful of the missionaries' kindness towards the natives, but became irritated and eventually capitulated when Matapang branded him as a coward.

While Matapang was away from his house, San Vitores and Calungsod baptized the baby girl, with the consent of her Christian mother. When Matapang learnt of his daughter's baptism, he became even more furious. He violently hurled spears first at Calungsod, who was able to dodge them. Witnesses claim that Calungsod could have escaped the attack, but did not desert San Vitores. Those who knew personally Calungsod considered his martial abilities and that he could have defeated the aggressors with weapons. San Vitores had however banned his companions from bearing arms.

Eventually, Calungsod was struck in the chest by a spear and fell to the ground, then Hiraos immediately charged towards him and finished him off with a machete blow to the head. San Vitores quickly gave absolution to young Pedro Calungsod, then he too was killed.

Matapang took San Vitores' crucifix and pounded it with a stone while blaspheming God. Both assassins then undressed the bodies of Calungsod and San Vitores, tied large stones to their feet, and brought them on their boats out to Tumon Bay, dumping the bodies in the water.

We know nothing of Calungsod's beginnings. Only the adjective "Visaya" that accompanies his name tells us that he was from Cebu. It is probable that he received basic education at a Jesuit boarding school, mastering the Catechism and learning to communicate in Spanish. He also likely honed his skills in drawing, painting, singing, acting, and carpentry, as these were necessary in missionary work. Pedro Calungsod was beatified on March 5, 2000, by Pope John Paul II and canonized by Pope Benedict XVI, at Saint Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, on October 21, 2012.

### ***Blood as seed***

On the occasion of Pedro Calungsod's beatification, Pope John Paul II said: "From his childhood, Pedro Calungsod declared himself unwaveringly for Christ and responded generously to his call. Young people today can draw encouragement and strength from the example of Pedro, whose love of Jesus inspired him to devote his teenage years to teaching the faith as a lay catechist. Leaving friends and family behind, Pedro willingly accepted the challenge put to him by Fr. Diego de San Vitores to join him on the Mission to the Chamorros".

"In a spirit of faith, marked by strong Eucharistic and Marian devotion, Pedro undertook the demanding work asked of him and bravely faced the many obstacles and difficulties he met. In the face of imminent danger, Pedro would not forsake Fr. Diego, but as a "good soldier of Christ" preferred to die at the missionary's side. Today he intercedes for the young, in particular those of his native Philippines, and he challenges them". John Paul II concluded: "Young friends, do not hesitate to follow the example of Pedro, who "pleased God and was loved by him" (*Wisdom* 4: 10) and who, having come to perfection in so short a time, lived a full life (*Wisdom*, v. 13)."

On December 19, 2011, the Holy See officially approved the miracle qualifying Pedro Calungsod for sainthood by the Roman Catholic Church. The recognized miracle dates from March 26, 2003, when a woman from Leyte, who was pronounced clinically dead by accredited physicians two hours after a heart attack, was revived when an attending physician invoked Calungdod's intercession.

On October 18, 2012, several hundred pilgrims from the Philippines gathered in the Church of St. Augustine in Rome for a Mass celebrating the life of Blessed Pedro. Among the prelates concelebrating at the Mass was Msr. Anthony Apuron, Archbishop of Agaña in Guam, the island where Blessed Pedro was martyred. He was asked: "How do you feel about the canonization of Blessed Pedro Calungsod"?

Archbishop Apuron said: "I think it's a moment of pride. I know for the Filipinos, and especially those in the Visayan region, and just today before the mass several of the bishops said, "We should really thank you, you should not apologize for the Chamorros, your people, killing Pedro Calungsod, but instead we should thank you for giving us a Saint."

He was asked another question: "Tertullian, one of the early Church fathers, wrote: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Since Blessed Pedro was martyred in Guam, have you seen the fruits of this seed? Has this seed been planted in Guam?" This is his answer:" Yes, we now have native vocations. I started a major seminary and I'll be ordaining my eleventh priest this coming November.

Other six natives seminarians are there and one of them hopefully next year will be ordained a deacon. So, vocations are coming and I think the Church is still going strong in Guam after more than 300 years of Christianization, so the Church will survive".

### ***On Calungsod's footsteps***

On February 11, 1915, Feast of the Apparitions of Our Lady at Lourdes, two Italian Comboni missionaries arrived at Kitgum, the main town of that area, in Northern Uganda, East Africa. They settled in the midst of the Acholi people, "around the fire" as they say there, to listen, converse and announce the Gospel. Among the first youth who were baptized were two teen agers, Daudi Okelo and Jildo Irwa who subsequently accepted the invitation of becoming catechists and were sent to a fairly distant area, called Paimol, to instruct the people in the new religion.



After a successful beginning, when the local population had already appreciated their presence, violent opposition appeared on the part of the witch doctors and some Muslim traders who accused the new religion of the calamities that were affecting the people like drought and epidemics. On the morning of Sunday, October 20, 1918, Daudi and Jildo were speared to death. Their bodies were abandoned in the grass until a merciful hand gathered their remains and took them to the parish of Kitgum where they had been baptized. The two boys were 18 and 16 years old respectively.

Daudi Okelo and Jildo Irwa were beatified in Rome , on Mission Sunday, October 20 2002 by pope John Paul II. They followed in the footsteps of Pedro Calungsod. They are symbols of the catholicity of the Christian faith. They reminded those who wanted to kill them that no one would ever be able to bar the door to Jesus Christ.

Today, thanks also to them, Uganda definitely belongs to Christ: Christians make up 70% of Uganda's 25 million people. The best fruit of their martyrdom has been a host of catechists in Northern Uganda. Many of them have sealed the announcement of the gospel with their blood. In the diocese of Gulu alone, to which Kitgum belongs, at least 80 catechists have been killed in the past twenty troubled years.

The Archbishop of Gulu, Right Reverend John Baptist Odama, wrote in the letter of preparation for their beatification in Rome: "The two martyrs died to bear witness to what they had encountered and had made their life free and full. A life that rose upon two pillars: passion for Christ and love for our Lady. The encounter with Christ made them more human, thus they bore witness to how precious this treasure they had encounter was to them, to the point of giving their life for it".

### ***Ambassadors of the Church's Catholicity***

I am now quoting extensively from the editorial of the *Enquirer*, the leading daily paper, on the occasion of Saint Pedro Calungsod's canonization. The text, in a very beautiful way, puts the event in its historical and cultural perspective.

"It is only right for the Visayas to finally have a canonized saint; after all Christianity is older there than in Manila by nearly half a century. The head start was provided in 1521 when Humabon and his people welcomed Magellan and the Spaniards and underwent Christian baptism; his wife was christened after queen Juana of Spain and received for a gift the Holy Infant Jesus – the Santo Nino".

“What happened between the time the remains of Magellan’s fleet left to return to Spain in what became the first circumnavigation of the globe and the time the Spaniards, led by Legazpi, came back to the Philippines in 1565 is what Nick Joaquin calls as “the most tantalizing periods in Philippine history”. Upon the Spaniards’ return, they found the image of the Santo Nino in an altar among several *anitos*, perhaps the first recorded evidence of folk Catholicism”.

“Today the Santo Nino of Cebu, together with the Santo Rosario of Penafrancia, la Naval de Manila and Manaoag shrines, is the biggest Catholic devotion in the Philippines. The fact that the devotion has spread from Cebu to Manila (witness the Santo Nino feast every January in Tondo and Pandacan) should indicate the catholicity of popular Catholic Liturgy and religious pilgrimage”.

“Too often, Catholic feasts have been derided by liberals and secularists as a waste of time and resources. But Joaquin and another National Artist for Literature, the late Alejandro Roces, defended the fiesta as an “accurate barometer of progress” and the engine for nation building. Fiestas, after all, celebrate the milestones in a community. “With births, marriages and deaths recorded, Filipinos began to see themselves as historical beings,” Roces writes”.

“The town was the nation in embryo. This explains why the Filipino word for town “*bayan*”, is also the word for nation. The Filipino saw his nation as an expansion of his home town...”. Similarly, Europe became Europe because of the ancient annual great pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The examples of Calungsod and Lorenzo Ruiz should indicate that the “home town” has grown to embrace as well the globe”.

“Both of them earned the palm of martyrdom abroad – the latter in Japan, the former in what is now Guam. They may as well have been the first Filipino OFWs! And although they died with clerics (Calungson with the Jesuit Fr. Diego Luis de San Vitores, and Lorenzo with several Dominican friars), they were laymen, an indication of how Christianity had really taken root among the Filipinos”.

“Their martyrdom having sown and watered the seed of Christianity elsewhere, they are veritable ambassadors and embodiments of the universality of the Catholic faith. They are the Philippine Church’s gifts to universal humanity. They make us proud to be Filipinos and Christians”.

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Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi (1903-1964)

## **THE ROOT OF THE HUGE TREE**

*Son of a pagan family, the young Iwene was baptized Michael, but disappointed his parents by entering the seminary. Once a priest, he was a true pastor close to the people, poor and exemplary, to the surprise of the prejudiced Irish missionaries. He was sent to a monastery in England in view of bringing monasticism to Nigeria, but God had a different plan: Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi was to be the worthy root of the present thriving Nigerian Christianity.*

Nigeria is called “The Giant of Africa” because of its huge population and present and potential riches. According to the Pew Research Center, Nigeria has the largest Christian population of any country in Africa, with more than 85 million faithful belonging to churches of various denominations. The Catholic Church is the largest with 25 million. Nigeria also boasts of the highest number of priests in Africa.

This is the story of a Nigerian Catholic priest and monk who embodies in his person the heroic virtues of the beginning of Christianity in that country: Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi who was proclaimed blessed by pope John Paul II during his second visit to Nigeria in 1998.

On that occasion, the pope said: "Blessed Cyprian received the gift of faith through the efforts of the missionaries, and taking the Christian way of life as his own, he made it truly African and Nigerian."

### ***The business of being a Christian***

Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi was born in Aguleri, Nigeria, in September 1903, a son of the Igbo tribe. Before he was born, the British had come to colonize Nigeria. He was born Iwene and his father, Tabansi, who was a pagan, sent him to a Catholic mission school, with the intention of getting his son to receive a better education that would help lead their family

out of poverty. The boy was baptized in 1913 in the school with the Christian name of Michael. Upon graduating, he became a teacher.

In 1925 Michael decided to enter the seminary. His family was appalled because they wanted him to go into business. His family was poor and they desperately needed his help, but Michael felt that God wanted him to continue in the seminary rather than do something else. He was ordained in 1937 at 34 years of age.

At that time in Nigeria, almost all priests were foreign missionaries. Few Africans were being ordained to the priesthood. The foreign missionaries were generally unwilling to live in the same poverty or conditions that the native-born Nigerians endured.

### ***Father Michael was different***

When Michael became a parish priest, he refused to live in the fashion of the missionaries. He lived a very austere life in comparison to the other priests around him. He refused to live in a nice home, and he would build his own home using adobe, mud brick or other traditional materials.

He would eat even poorer food than what the local people ate, surviving on tiny portions of yam. His lifestyle shocked and amazed the Nigerian Catholics, who were not accustomed to this kind of priest. And he became extremely popular and loved among the four parishes that he served in. He organized the community to help the poor and needy, and he personally would help people to build their own homes or perform other projects. He was remembered as always being very kind.

He was unyielding in confronting vice among his flock. He was also a very strict disciplinarian with students who failed to work hard at the parish school to the point of hiding near the school in order to catch them when late. He stood up against oppression of women within the traditional culture and advised women to fight back against those who would rape them or mistreat them.

On one occasion, a female parishioner was attacked by a group of pagan males, and she fought back against them, and Fr Michael, who was nearby, came on his bicycle and joined with her and fought them until they fled. He then encouraged her to bring the assailants to court and she did, and won the case against them. This case was a milestone in the establishment of women's rights in Nigeria.



Fr. José Gabriel del Rosario Brochero (1840-1914)

## **THE “COW-BOY” PRIEST**

*The vast expanse of the Argentine pampas saw Fr. José Gabriel indefatigably ride his mule to visit his scattered parishioners. He started for them schools, hospitals, even roads, post-offices and railways. He died of leprosy because of sharing the local mate with a group of people affected by that sickness.*

Argentina is the eighth largest country in the world and the largest Spanish-speaking one. The country has its roots in the Spanish colonization. The beginning of the XIX century saw the declaration of independence. The country thereafter enjoyed relative peace and stability, with massive waves of European immigration aiming at occupying its immense *pampas* (prairies). This is the theatre of the adventures of Fr. José Gabriel del Rosario Brochero and his rough pastoral life.

The consequent edginess of Fr. José Gabriel’s character became an obstacle during the process of beatification and slowed down the same process, but did not alienate the people’s love and empathy for him or make him less “simpatico” to his people. It is certain that pope Francis had a great estimation for Fr. José Gabriel del Rosario Brochero, *El Cura* (the priest) *Brochero*.

We can bet on it since at the 2013 Chrism Mass, the first in his new capacity as bishop of Rome, pope Francis asked priests to be pastors who have “the smell of the sheep about them”. He was certainly thinking of him as it became clear in the Beatification Mass, when he defined Fr. José Gabriel as a pastor who had about him the smell of the sheep, who made himself poor with the poor, who always fought to stay close to God and people, who did much good and kept doing much good as “God’s caress to our suffering people”.

### ***An original pastoral approach***

Jose Gabriel del Rosario Brochero was born on March 16, 1840 in Argentina as the fourth of ten children to Ignacio Brochero and Petrona

Davila; he had two sisters and the others were brothers. The two sisters became nuns. He was baptized the following day along with the registration of his birth.

He commenced his studies to become a priest at the College Seminary of Our Lady of Loreto when he was sixteen. As a young man he had joined the Dominican Third Order. He was ordained to the priesthood in the diocese of Córdoba on November 9, 1866 at the age of 26 and celebrated his first Mass the following 10 December.

Just ordained as a priest, Fr. José Gabriel started his front-line ministry in the city of Cordoba which was infested by a cholera epidemics that claimed more than four thousand victims, the majority of whom saw our young priest defy the danger and kneel beside the sick people in order to administer the last sacraments to them.

Soon the emergency was over and the ordinariness of ministry came with his appointment to the parish of Saint Albert, a community of ten thousand people scattered in more than four thousand square kilometers, a parish that required three days of journey from Cordoba on mule back.

It is the same distance to and fro that he soon requested his parishioners to cover when, in groups of 50/70 every time, he accompanied them to the city to do the Spiritual Exercises according to the style of saint Ignatius of Loyola, often under the threat of snow storms.

It was an unusual and challenging pastoral proposal directed to people who were farmers, animal keepers, almost illiterate and yet they came back from it wholly renewed and with the resolution of changing their lives.

Fr. José Gabriel believed so much in this pastoral choice that eventually he decided to build a retreat house at Villa del Transito in order to eliminate the time required for the journey: a building which now bear his name and through which some forty thousand people may have passed during Fr. Brochero's forty years of ministry in the area.

### ***El Cura Gaucho (The “cow-boy Priest”)***

He was certainly not a parish priest likely to spend his life in the sacristy “to comb the wool of his sheep”, according to pope Francis' colorful expression. Fr. José Gabriel chose to make his own the life of those to whom he was assigned to preach the Gospel, knowing that only in that way he could reach straight to the heart of those simple people.

Starting from his mount, a female mule ( called “*Malacara*” i. e. Sad Face) which in itself was not very remarkable, up to his attire which was very similar to that of the common people: the classic *poncho* (cloak) over his black *sotana* (robe) and a large sombrero: everything was commonly shared with his people. Add to that his prayer book and the missal, kept together by a red ribbon so that they may not come apart during the long journeys and without forgetting the necessary mass kit and a small statue of our Lady.

Precursor of all the street priests, in perennial movement in order to visit all the “peripheries”, he used to reach the most hidden corners of his parish with sun or rain, especially when it was the case of a dying person, because, the “cow-boy priest” used to say: “Otherwise the devil will steal a soul from me”.

Without losing sight of the supernatural purpose for which he is working, Fr. Brochero yet came to the help of the needs of his parishioners who were “abandoned by everybody, but not by God” as he used to say. To this aim he built roads, where there weren’t any, he opened schools where the government didn’t reach, health centers where doctors never treaded, homes for abandoned girls, nurseries, chapels, shelters, irrigation canals, a cemetery, an aqueduct, a post-office and even the extension of a railway.

His way of speaking was simple and straightforward, a pastoral conversation, in order to be understood by people with almost no education who did not know any other language but their dialect. In his sermons he used examples from everyday life, episodes and anecdotes easy to understand, employing terms familiar to farmers and shepherds, like when he explained to them that God is like the lice because he clings to poor people not to the rich.

### ***The strategy of “incarnation”***

We could hardly imagine how many and what kind of doubts a talking and writing style of this kind may have provoked in censors and theologians during the process of canonization, to the point of considering it too low and even vulgar, forgetting that the holy priest in question had obtained the title of Master of Philosophy with flying colors in Cordoba University. Actually, his modest ways were a strategy of “incarnation”.

At any rate, his humble style of relating to people was successful if we consider only the fame which surrounded the “cow-boy priest” still during



his lifetime so much that in 1883, at Cordoba, they distributed his biography and in 1906 his name found its way in the school textbooks.

In 1898 he was forced to retire because of poor health since he could no longer bear the killing rhythm expected from being a parish priest. He was therefore named canonic at Cordoba cathedral, but he could not resign himself to that type of sedentary life and four years later, he was again given parish responsibility at Villa del Transito, in 1902. He started again with the same rhythm and style without caring for the caution his poor health required.

It looks as if he neglected even the most elementary precautions when he used to deal with caring for the sick to whom he had always showered his preference and attention. And thus a fatidic day he was affected by contagious because he did not refuse to share the famous Argentine beverage, *mate*, with some lepers he was assisting.

### *Affected by leprosy*

Suffering the devastating effects of leprosy, in 1908 Fr. José Gabriel was forced to leave the parish for good and retreat to his home place where his sister took care of him. Practically blind and deaf because of leprosy, he started his Calvary with the disposition from God of , as he said, “preparing my end and praying for people of the past, present and future until the end of time”.

Even in this diminishing condition, the parishioners of Villa del Transito came to fetch him and take him to their place in 1912 and there he contributed to the completion of the only initiative he had left unfinished: the railway terminal.

He was now completely blind and still he celebrated Mass using the text he knew by heart, the Mass of our Lady. On January 26, 1914, he was heard whispering: “ Now I have all the tools that I need for the journey”. His heart then ceased beating and he peacefully fell asleep for the eternal rest.

Immediately, his parishioners of the Argentine *pampas*, and with them the whole country, paid him the highest honors and passed on his memory: his holiness was plain to them and didn't need a process. The process of beatification on the contrary took more them fifty years because of the

hesitations of the experts: the rough personality of the “cow-boy priest” didn’t easily fit into the usual patterns of holiness.

But eventually the truth prevailed also because of the convincing strength of the miracles that happened through Fr. José Gabriel’s intercession. On October 16, 2016, it is an Argentine pope, Francis who concluded the long but successful process with the solemn canonization: the “cow-boy priest” is now a saint!

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Luis Ruiz Suarez S.J. (1913-2011)

## **THE ANGEL OF MACAU**

*This is how the Jesuit Fr. Luis Ruiz Suarez was commonly called in the former Portuguese enclave because of his extraordinary work in favor of the Chinese refugees and subsequently the elderly and mentally disabled. A Spaniard by birth, he joined the Jesuit and was brought to China for the study of theology. Ordained a priest there in 1945, he was expelled from the country by the Communists. Assigned to Macau in 1951 to recover his health, he remained there until his death at the age of 97. A larger-than-life personality, he was the catalyst of an immense network of charity. When he was already over 70, he discovered the world of the lepers in mainland China and for twenty years he improved the life of more than 8000 of them. He wasn't a great intellectual, but a giant because of the size of his heart. His motto was: "There is nothing that gives more joy than to give joy to others".*

Fr. Luis Ruiz Suarez was already 76 and widely famous in Macau for his very long commitment to the refugees and the homeless, when he was invited by a Chinese priest and fellow prisoner under the Communists, Fr. Lino Whong, to visit an island in mainland China where two hundred lepers had been confined by the government. This is how Fr. Luis himself describes his first encounter with the lepers and the impact it had on him:

"In 1986 I came in contact with the forgotten world of the lepers. My first visit to the lepers' camp of Tai-Kam was shocking. Situated in a little island at about one hour journey from the continent, I travelled to reach it in a fishing boat. I had prepared two hundred American cigarettes to distribute as a present. The lepers were already waiting for my visit. I intended to give them a cordial handshake, but many of them didn't have hands and they could not catch the cigarettes that I wanted to give them".

"I was obliged to light the cigarettes and place them between their lips and eventually they held them awkwardly with their stumps. I was struck by the misery which was palpable and experienced the abandonment in which they were living, away from any human contact. But thanks to the presence of four Sisters of Charity of Saint Anne, one from Spain and three from India,

that sad center, dirty and abandoned, is now the best leper colony of China. The inmates are cheerful, clean, well dressed and well fed and the Government has continued to send sick people to be treated there”.

“After that first place, I visited all the Lepers’ Centers of the Guangdong province, some placed in impossible locations. At a certain moment, a doctor told me: “The lepers in the North-Eastern area of China are in a much worse situation”. I went to see and I was shocked, I couldn’t believe what I saw: without drinking water or electricity, in run-down houses, with clothes in shreds and dying of hunger. A leper camp was in the bottom of a cave. I made a point of being lowered down to it with much difficulty and I found there lepers who had been lowered down there with ropes forty years before. If you see this, you cannot cross your arms and say: Let God help them”.

### *Oasis of Love*

This is how Fr. Luis's ministry for the lepers began. It is estimated that he worked with more than 8,000 leprosy patients, living in 140 leper colonies located throughout China. Fr. Luis’ institution: “Casa Ricci Social Service” made friendly approaches to about one hundred leprosaria in remote mountain areas of ten different Chinese provinces. Fr. Luis’ goal was to change those dilapidated villages into dwellings worthy of human beings. He built roads, residences, schools, bridges, clinics. He installed waterways and electricity lines. He provided about 2000 annual scholarships for students, from kindergarten to university.

After about ten years, he had a great insight: invite religious Sisters to help. A few years later, he had more than 80 Sisters living together with the lepers in their villages. Normally there are three or four Sisters in one leprosarium. He told me that the whole atmosphere of a leprosarium completely changes once Sisters are living there. Sisters create what he calls “Oasis of love.”

Fr. Luis stated in an interview: “Thank God, we already have many centers taken care of by Sisters. Religious Sisters know how to give love and this is what the sick people need most. There is nothing that gives more joy than to give joy to others. If they ask me: How did you managed to do that?, my answer is: I don’t know and I don’t care to know, it is enough for me to know that God is doing it. For me, it is a immense joy to make others happy and God happy, I think, as well”.

In 1995, the government of Hunan invited Father Ruiz to establish a center for HIV and AIDS patients in the Chinese province. He not only heeded that invitation but went on to found other centers for AIDS patients in mainland China.

### *Missionary to China*

Luis Ruiz Suarez was born in Gijón, Asturias, Spain, on September 21, 1913. The young Luis joined the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits, in 1930 at 17. A year later he was kicked out of Spain by the Communist government of the republic. As a Jesuit student for the priesthood and as part of his normal Jesuit training, he was first sent to Belgium for philosophy and then to Cuba, to teach in the Jesuit College in Havana. He loved it and was torn when asked to go to do his theological studies prior to ordination in Shanghai, although he had applied for China in the first place. He loved Cuba and the students he taught. He had a special affection for one who was the leading student of his: Fidel Castro. He found Fidel a most attractive young man and was proud of what he later achieved in ridding Cuba of the detested and corrupt Battista regime.

In 1941, Luis arrived in Beijing, where he studied Mandarin Chinese, and was then sent to Shanghai, where he studied theology. In China itself he was ordained a priest by one of the first Chinese bishops in 1945. He was forced to cease his work due to the escalation of World War II and the Japanese occupation of China.

Father Suarez resumed his work after the war and his superiors stationed him in Xian County, in Hebei province. He was arrested, briefly imprisoned and expelled from the newly formed People's Republic of China in 1949, following the Communist Revolution. While in prison, Fr. Luis had contracted typhoid fever, consequently he was assigned to Macau to recover his health.

### *An open heart*

When Fr. Luis first came to Macau in 1951 and for several years after that, the enclave city was full of refugees from China. Many were sick, alone, jobless, hungry, with children to feed. Fr. Luis himself was also sick and poor, just arrived in a new place where he did not speak the language. But at least he had a community to support him, a little house to live and some friends who could help him get some food to share. He immediately put these things in operation to serve those in need.

He had only spent few months in Macau, when Fr. Luis started to care for the refugees. He had no big plans, he didn't think about tomorrow. He used the official Jesuit residence, which was called Casa Ricci, as a temporary shelter for the mainland Chinese refugees. This led to the establishment of Father Luis' first charity in Macau, the "Ricci Centre for Social

Services”. The center furnished refugees with housing, educational opportunities, documentation, child care and employment.

Even the local government was sending the new arrivals to Fr. Luis for food, lodging, clothes, etc. He took care of them for a couple of weeks, and then he had to tell them to move on, so that he could take new arrivals. In the evening he was teaching catechism, and 5000 people were baptized in Macau.

Then the “Matteo Ricci School” was started, mostly for refugees: he convinced two people to move out of a building so that the school could start, and he found a flat for them elsewhere. Fr. Luis fed not only their stomachs, but their hearts. To do so, he decided to reopen the old St. Agustin Church. His goal: make them feel happy, let them gather together, form community, pray together, sing together. That was also the beginning of the famous “Perosi choir”, which sang in the Requiem Mass for Fr. Luis’ funeral.

In this simple way, Fr. Luis accompanied the Macau people throughout a very difficult and special moment of their history and lives: Don’t ask for an “entrance ticket”. Don’t ask for “passports” or for “political identities”. Don’t make people wait. Everybody should be welcomed and received. Fr. Luis’ heart was always open to everybody, because he knew that Jesus visits us in each person who is in need.

### ***Champion in networking.***

Fr. Luis realized that no matter how much rice he gave to those in need, there was always enough rice to give. It was at that time that God started to teach him a very important lesson: “Just rely on Me, not on yourself”. Fr. Luis never forgot that lesson, no matter how big or small were the problems or challenges he had to face. He also learnt that to rely on God means also to learn to rely on people, on his friends. He realized that everybody has a desire to help others, no matter how poor he or she is, provided you give them an opportunity to do so. He became a specialist in looking for friends and collaborators.

Fr. Gendron SJ, Provincial of the Chinese Province, said on the occasion of Fr. Suarez’ death: “I remember a conversation we had in September of 2010, less than one year ago. He had one important message for me: “Please tell our local superior to let me go to China at least once every three months. I

really need to go because I have to let our benefactors know the concrete situation of the lepers in China, so that they will continue to support the work.”

Notwithstanding his extreme old age, Fr. Luis knew a lot about what we now call “networking.” People need real stories (a bit like the pictures one posts on a blog), stories that move them and Fr. Luis needed stories for his letters. He told me he had between 2000 and 3000 benefactor friends around the world, and each of his letters would go out in several different languages.

He kept his network of friends alive for some 40 years. Many Jesuit Mission Procurators from different countries knew about Fr Luis and they were amazed by his fundraising ability. He was really the voice of the poor. Several times he told me: “This is the money of the poor, wherever they are.”

### *Three simple principles*

The Jesuit Provincial continues: “In the same conversation, Fr. Luis told me: ‘I am intellectually poor, but what I have I use for the poor’. Over the last few years, I realized that Fr. Luis had a few basic principles to guide his life, principles which he repeated to me year after year. Basically three principles: “To make people happy is the best way to be happy.” He was indeed a happy man! Second principle: If you want to help people, first you have to see with your own eyes.”

“His third principle was: Superiors are very busy, do not trouble them! This is a bit ironical, but it reflects the stance of Fr. Luis: simple, uncontroversial dedication to charity to the helpless. No problem with the superiors. In a more intimate sphere, Fr. Luis told me that in order to live in the presence of God he used to repeat several times a day two Ignatian prayers: the “Suscipe” and the “Anima Christi.” Every evening he used to prepare the meditation and mass for the following day. Very candidly he told me that once he starts praying, he often falls asleep. But this is OK: He is well in the hands of the Lord. “After all, I am a poor man, also in my prayer!” he confessed.

“The first time I met Fr. Luis was six years ago. That evening, he was in his room fixing a pair of pants. He then told me a story: “Fifty years ago, Macau was very poor. Myself, I only had two pair of pants. Every day I washed one, and I used the other one. One morning I discovered that somebody had





Elpidio “Jojo” dela Victoria

# **A LIFE FOR GOD AND THE VISAYAN SEA**

*In the last decades a new reason for martyrdom has embellished the Church: the integrity of creation. From the layman Chico Mendes, who was named “The Gandhi of the Amazon”, to Father Neri Lito Satur who fell victim of the illegal logging in Bukidnon, the crown of glory belongs to the new champions of Nature. In Cebu, Elpidio “Jojo” dela Victoria, husband, father and government official, gave his life for the integrity of the Visayan sea.*

In our lives, we find strength for our faith and motivation to live according to our values from people who, dead or alive, have struggled or are still struggling to live in coherence with their convictions. Sometimes it is our parents, a teacher or a friend who become source of inspiration for their honesty, generosity or any other particular value. Most probably these persons will never be declared officially “saints” by the Church and we will never see them on the altars, but when we are touched by their example, we recognize them for what they are: stewards of God’s kingdom.

Elpidio (“Jojo”) P. dela Victoria was one of them. While he was still alive, he helped, encouraged and uplifted people, and after his tragic death, he continues to be source of inspiration for those who knew him, both within and outside the environment where he lived. Involved in many activities, working as a government employee, committed to his family and Christian Community, he lived his life in an intense way. He died on April 12 2006, Holy Thursday, one day after being shot in front of his house in Talisay City (Cebu) in the Visayan Region, Central Philippines.

At the moment of his death, he was in his tenth year as Bantay Dagat (Guardian of the Sea) and Officer in Charge of Cebu City Markets, jobs that required a lot of his time and energies and that in the end took up his life. But he was also fully involved in the Christian Community as President of

the Parish Pastoral Council and the Kapunugnan ni San Jose (Society of St. Joseph), in St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Tabunok, Cebu, his parish.

Elpidio was born on September 13 1959. He went through his schooling with success, according to the tradition of his upper middle class family, and graduated in Criminology. When an adolescent, he considered the possibility of becoming a priest, but, eventually, he was attracted by family life and he married Evelyn and had a son, Vincent: with them he began a new journey in life.

### ***Building the family of God***

A typical day in the life of dela Victoria family would have a starting point together at about 6 AM when they would gather for a moment of prayer, the rosary or a short meditation on the Gospel. Although he had a very hectic working schedule, Elpidio never failed to allot “quality time” for his family and friends.

Throughout his life, he was finding in family life the strength to go ahead in his daily commitment to his Christian Community and his country. Concern about the needs of his family occupied most of his energies in his younger years. But little by little his horizons widened to progressively embrace the boundaries of the community, as God’s family, and even of nature.

His wife remembers this process with serenity and joy: little by little his interests, his circle of friends and acquaintances, “his problems” were not only those related to the four walls of his family but became wider to include as his brothers and sisters, the poor in the Christian Community, and then the concern for nature, for the environment, especially the sea.

He promoted the regularization of hundreds of couples who had not received the sacrament of marriage, by finding sponsors for them and sharing with them through different organizations in the parish, especially Couples For Christ. “His family” was also the poor children in the remote chapels of his parish who benefited from the feeding program supported also by the Kapunugnan ni San Jose and the Parish.

The fishermen folk became his brothers when he was conducting seminars on responsible fishing or when seeking the application of the laws so that

poor people could go on with their lives and also when promoting a responsible commercial fishing.

His family became even larger through the Holy Masses that were broadcasted on the radio every Sunday. He was the anchorman accompanying the celebration of the Holy Mass in two parishes. Through his net of friends he managed to find support for these activities although they went well beyond his responsibilities in the work he had in the government or even beyond the concerns of most Catholics. To say it plainly and simply, like the Good Samaritan, he considered everybody, the little ones in particular, his brothers and sisters and to bring them closer to God became his overriding responsibility.

### *When job and faith meet*

Nobody has been indicted for his assassination and his death is still surrounded in mystery, but the common opinion is that it was because of his job in the preservation of the environment that he made enemies and was eliminated. There is no doubt that some people did not accept his proposals regarding the safeguard of the habitat: a ten years rest for the Visayan Sea, once one of the richest reserves of fish in the world, and his fight against illegal fishing, including the implementation of laws regarding the use of dynamite and cyanide in fishing activities.

This is why, very soon after his killing, he was proposed as “Earth’s Day” martyr. He comes to join another famous victim of the struggle for nature in the Philippines, Fr. Neri Lito Satur who was gunned down in Bukidnon, on October 14 1991, because of his fight against illegal logging. In the international scene, it is still vivid the memory of the champion of the rubber workers, Chico Mendes, who fought for the preservation of the Amazonian forest and fell victim of his commitment in 1988. He was named: “The Gandhi of the Amazon”. More recently, almost in the same area, it was an American nun, Dorothy Stang, who paid with the sacrifice of her life her heroic stance for the same cause(February 12 2005).

Elpidio’s life can be seen in the light of an “activist” but could also be seen under the light of his faith. In fact, many people work from morning to evening, leaving their faith in the church and distinguishing clearly the

responsibilities deriving from their own job. For some others instead the commitment coming from their faith can be so strong that the wee hours also will be included in the working schedule, if that is required. By doing so, life becomes a unifying project in which the values in which we believe are the leading path for all our activities; our faith becomes the framework of our whole life and our job a mere excuse to live our life with enthusiasm. That is how Elpidio worked.

While some people choose to remain as mere spectators in front of the challenges that we may face in society and in the church and some others spend energies in sterile criticism, there are others who choose to play an active part in the process of transformation. The common description of people who knew Jojo personally and worked with him is the definition of a “servant leader”, someone who led people by example and who was ready to stand up for his principles and values. In the words of his parish priest at the time of his death: “He was deep and passionate to help the poor and to serve the parish with much dedication, humility and conviction.”

### ***“There is a God and I trust in Him!”***

The life of people like Jojo who care about the poor as the family of God and who are concerned about the environment becomes a challenge for us all. We might feel discouragement because the East Asian Region and many other places in the world face big challenges in matters of environment and of course entire regions don't live in harmony but in the midst of violence and war. We might feel that the task ahead of us is too big or the implementation of new strategies to better society belongs to the authorities. But probably the question remains: How much can we do?

It doesn't probably matter if it is in our hands to change the situation of an entire country or just to better our own little environment, what really matters is the fact that a person is committed in his own “little world” but with his eyes and heart looking toward wider horizons. This personal concern will lead each one of us to a deeper and clearer commitment to others and to God's creation. Once we have understood this and begun to move in this direction, we will live our mission here on earth.

Jojo was not perfect, he was a bit too much talkative... and probably people who knew him better could add more defects to this list. He, however, belonged to that category of people who seem just “ordinary” and yet have

