

## PART TWO

### MISSION TESTIMONIES

“Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church.”

(*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 9)

Baptised  
and sent

October  
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EXTRAORDINARY MISSIONARY MONTH OCTOBER 2019

Baptized and sent: the Church of Christ on mission in the world



## SAINT THÉRÈSE OF THE CHILD JESUS (1873-1897)

Thérèse Martin was born in Alençon, France, on January 2, 1873, to Louis Martin and Zélie Guérin, who were canonized together in 2015. After the death of her mother on August 28, 1877, Thérèse moved with her family to the city of Lisieux. Some extraordinary graces accompanied Thérèse's human and spiritual maturation and allowed her to grow in her awareness of the infinite Mercy of God that is offered to every person. On the day of Pentecost in 1883, she had the unique grace of being healed from a serious illness; through the intercession of Our Lady of Victories. In 1884, she received her First Communion and at that time experienced the grace of intimate union with Christ.

Thérèse had a great desire to follow her sisters, Pauline and Marie, into the Carmel of Lisieux to live a contemplative life. While on a pilgrimage to Italy, during an audience that Pope Leo XIII granted to the faithful of the Diocese of Lisieux, she boldly implored the Holy Father to obtain permission to enter Carmel at the age of fifteen. Having obtained his permission, Thérèse entered the monastery in 1888 and professed her vows on September 8, 1890.

Her journey of holiness was strengthened by trusting God during moments of great trial, to which she gave witness in her writings, letters, and prayers. Her teaching is also evident in poems and small theatrical performances written for recreation with the sisters. As a collaborator in the formation of novices, she undertook transmitting her spiritual experiences condensed into *The Little Way of Spiritual Childhood*. She also received the task of accompanying two "missionary brothers" through her sacrifice and

prayer, an opportunity to live out the apostolic and missionary vocation that drove her to bring as many people as she could to encounter the Lord who is so thirsty for souls.

On April 3, 1896, during the night between Holy Thursday and Good Friday, Thérèse experienced a first manifestation of the illness that would eventually lead to her death. During this period, she focused definitively on her vocation to be a beating heart within the Church that is loved, loves, and generates love. As her state of health deteriorated, she was transferred to the infirmary. Earlier, during her dark night of faith she would affirm that “I am not dying, but entering into life” And so on September 30, 1897, at the tender age of 24, she expired saying, “My God...I love you.”

Canonized by Pius XI on May 17, 1925, she was proclaimed the universal patroness of the missions two years later, together with Saint Francis Xavier. On October 19, 1997, St. John Paul II proclaimed her a Doctor of the Church. Her liturgical feast is celebrated on October 1.

In St. Thérèse’s autobiographical writing, *The Story of a Soul: Manuscript C*, she describes the force with which God attracted her into the vortex of union with Himself: “I understand, Lord, that when a soul allows herself to be captivated by the odor of your ointments, she cannot run alone, all the souls whom she loves follow in her train; this is done without constraint, without effort, it is a natural consequence of her attraction for You. Just as a torrent, throwing itself with impetuosity into the ocean, drags after it everything it encounters in its passage, in the same way, O Jesus, the soul who plunges into the shoreless ocean of Your Love, draws with her all the treasures she possesses. Lord, You know it, I have no other treasures than the souls it has pleased You to unite to mine” (*Story of a Soul: Manuscript C*, 334-335).

The ardor of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face was lit and nourished by a life of union with her Lord through incessant prayer, meditation on his Word, the sacramental life, and the community of her

sisters in the monastery. Contemplation was a way to develop a deeper compassion for all realities. Those who make themselves an absolute possession of God also become God's gift to everyone, and their existence, entirely and freely given to the service of divine praise, proclaims and diffuses the primacy of God and the transcendence of the human person created in his image and likeness. The ardor of this great little saint is expressed by her total trust in God and in her desire to share her experience of encounter with God with everyone else, in a universal embrace of communion. She saw that trust in God was a powerful means of conversion; living to respond to Jesus' desire to be loved, she wanted to love him and make him loved, to offer him love for Love. Thérèse's greatest desire, holiness, is inseparable from her desire for the salvation of all people, with particular attention to the poorest. The special apostolate that a contemplative lives within the four walls of her monastery mark out a space reserved exclusively for the Lord and is linked to the heart of the mystical body of Christ, a heart that loves and transmits love, allowing each one to live their specific charism, mission, identity, in service of the Kingdom.

A life offered to God in union with the sacrifice of Calvary obtains the grace to be able to serve Him with fidelity, creativity, and energy spent on behalf of all – this is the fundamental truth in which pastoral care of souls and missionary work are rooted. It is a fusion of active and contemplative life that takes place in the heart of one who responds to the Lord's call and develops in the mystical body of Christ, in which the various members harmonize their specific mission, sustaining and mutually enriching each other. This is how even a place reserved exclusively for praise of the Lord, the cloistered monastery, becomes suitable for missionary work, as a place of intercession and of prayerful and fraternal participation in missionary efforts.

“I would want to preach the Gospel on all the five continents simultaneously and even to the most remote isles. I would be a missionary, not

for a few years only but from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the ages. But above all, O my Beloved Savior, I would shed my blood for You even to the very last drop...Martyrdom was the dream of my youth [...], but I cannot confine myself to desiring one kind of martyrdom. To satisfy me I need all [...] Jesus, if I wanted to write all my desires, I would have to borrow Your Book of Life, for in it are reported all the actions of all the saints, and I would accomplish all of them for You” (*Story of a Soul: Manuscript B*, 251-252).

Thérèse willingly offered her sufferings to support the vocations and works of missionaries, and she gave explanations to her sisters who observed her efforts without understanding the strong motivations that led her to them. Thérèse exhausted herself in life, but her great zeal led her to express the desire not to rest even after death. She desired to continue living her mission to help her brothers and sisters and to bring them to Love, with even more determination once her soul was united to her Lord.

In the exchanging of letters with her spiritual missionary brothers, she underlined how the apostolic weapons given to them by the Lord Jesus would be used with greater ease by virtue of the prayer and love made available to them by her. She insisted on the beauty of the Little Way and had traveled to get to the Heart of the Lord, bringing with her all the missionaries and souls entrusted to them. In a prayer that was particularly rich in scriptural references, Thérèse addressed God:

“O my Jesus! I thank you for having fulfilled one of my greatest desires, that of having a brother, a priest, an apostle [...] You know, Lord, that my only ambition is to make you known and loved. Now my desire will be realized. I can only pray and suffer, but the soul to whom you unite me by the sweet bonds of charity will go and fight in the plain to win hearts for you, while on the mountain of Carmel I will pray that you give him victory.

“Divine Jesus, hear the prayer I offer you for him who wants to be your Missionary. Keep him safe amid the dangers of the world. Make

him feel increasingly the nothingness and vanity of passing things and the happiness of being able to despise them for your love. May he carry out his sublime apostolate with those around him. May he be an apostle worthy of your Sacred Heart” (*Prayer of 1895*).



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## SAINT FRANCIS XAVIER (1506-1552)

St. Francis Xavier is known as the greatest missionary saint of the modern age, so much so that Benedict XV, in his Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (1919), compared him to the apostles. Francis Xavier was born on April 7, 1506, in the castle of Xavier in Navarre, Spain, and died on December 3, 1552, on Shangchuan Island, 14 kilometers off of mainland China. He was one of the first companions of St. Ignatius of Loyola, and together with Ignatius, Teresa of Avila, and Philip Neri, he was canonized by Gregory XV in 1622, the same year the Pope created the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*de Propaganda Fide*), known today as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. In 1748 Pope Benedict XIV declared him *Patron of the East* and in 1904, Pius X named him *Patron of the Propagation of the Faith*. Finally, in 1927, with St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Pius XI proclaimed him *Patron of the Missions* (*San Francesco Saverio: Le lettere e altri documenti*, edited by A. Caboni, Città Nuova, Rome 1991, 35). He is therefore one of the most significant figures of the Tridentine Church, sometimes defined as “a Church for souls.”

The life and work of Francis Xavier are situated in a time marked by the reform of the Church, the struggle against Protestantism, and the mission *ad gentes* that began in the wake of the great oceanic journeys by Europeans of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These resulted in a new understanding of world geography and a missionary springtime on the threshold of the modern age. In this context, Francis Xavier carried out a gargantuan evangelizing effort that garnered him the title of *Apostle of*

*India and Japan*, which can only be adequately understood and appreciated in the light of the living and travel conditions of that period. In fact, from 1541 to 1552, this great missionary saint traveled over 63,000 kilometers by sea and on land in the countries he evangelized.

The life of Francis Xavier unfolded in two stages. The first was the European stage from 1506 to 1541, which was marked by his encounter in Paris with Ignatius, who would often repeat Jesus' words: "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his life?" (Mt 16:26). Ignatius soon convinced Francis to be among his first companions of the great adventure that became the Society of Jesus. The second stage, from 1541 to 1552, consisted of his Asian missionary journeys characterized by an apostolate that was totally devoted to the mission *ad gentes*. He passed through India (1541-1545), then the Moluccan Islands (1545-1549), and Japan (1549-1552), until his death on the island of Shangchuan, not far from the coast of mainland China, worn out by his relentless and tireless efforts in bearing witness to Christ. Through him the "spectacle of holiness" reached lands and peoples who were not yet known to the Church, where the proclamation of the Gospel would be heard for the first time, and the peoples could welcome the gift of universal salvation that comes from faith in the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Xavier's relationship with Ignatius and the experience of friendship in Christ among the first members of the Society of Jesus are the two first and permanent elements that marked Francis' spiritual continence. In fact, the permanent centrality of the Person of Jesus Christ is foundational for the Society of Jesus, so called because there was no one to direct its members, except the Person of Jesus Christ whom they wanted to serve exclusively. It follows, therefore, that the living presence of the Risen Christ among those who live in friendship with him and with each other – a reality that marked the Society of Jesus in a particular manner – is indissolubly linked to belonging to the Body of Christ in history, which as a whole is the Church guided by the Pope as successor of Peter.

Francis' spirituality and missionary activity were, in fact, based on what St. Paul experienced in his missionary journeys: "For the love of Christ impels us, once we have come to the conviction that one died for all; therefore, all have died. He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh; even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer" (2 Cor 5: 14-16).

Naturally, all this happened in the concrete context in which Francis lived and carried out his apostolate. From his letters, it is possible to glean important details. For example, in a letter dated October 28, 1542, Francis writes to Ignatius saying: "When I arrived in these places, I baptized all the children not yet baptized, imparting the sacrament to a great multitude of babies too young to know the difference between their right and left. As soon as I arrived in the villages, the children would not let me recite the office, eat, or sleep until I first taught them some prayers. Then I began to understand why the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.... I have seen great talents among them and if someone taught them the Holy Faith, I am sure they would be good Christians" (Caboni, *San Francesco Saverio*, 102-103).

"Here, where I am, many neglect to become Christians because there is practically no one concerned with taking care of godly matters. And so I am often tempted to go to universities in your part of the world, especially to the University of Paris, and cry out like a man that has lost his senses to the members of the Sorbonne, who have so much knowledge but don't seem to want to make it flower: 'How many souls are prevented from entering paradise and are condemned to hell because of your negligence!'" (Caboni, *San Francesco Saverio*, 110-111).

Such texts make clear that the spirituality of this saint is inseparable from his apostolate for the salvation of souls, an apostolate made up of itinerant journeys, kerygmatic preaching, basic catechetical instruction,

and acquiring knowledge of the place and sharing in its conditions of life, even where there was extreme poverty. His apostolate was characterized by an “affable manner, full of understanding and respect for all the people who approached him, [which] was certainly one of its most beautiful and attractive human gifts, but it certainly served to hide, under a veil of reserve and in the best of ways, that intense spiritual life and that intimate union with God that burned in his heart” (Caboni, *San Francesco Saverio*, 38).

One should also add to his missionary experience moments of suffering and trial. In a letter dated April 9, 1552, Francis wrote to Ignatius about his experience in Japan. “As for the experience I have of Japan, for the Fathers who will go there to fructify souls, especially those who go to the University, two things are necessary beforehand: the first is that they have been put to the test and have been persecuted in the world, and that they have a lot of experience and a lot of interior knowledge of themselves, since in Japan they will be persecuted more than they may have ever been in Europe. It is a cold land with there are few garments. They will not sleep in beds because there are none. Food is scarce. They despise foreigners, especially those who go to preach the law of God, until they come to taste God themselves. The priests of the local religion in Japan will persecute them continuously. I also don’t think that those who will go to the University will be able to bring the things necessary to celebrate Mass because of the many thieves present in the places where they will go. Among the many pains and tribulations they will have to face is the lack of consolation from the celebration of the Mass and of the spiritual strength given to those who receive the Lord. In fact the virtue that is required by the Fathers who will go the Universities of Japan is CHARITY!” (Caboni, *San Francesco Saverio*, 422).

Notwithstanding all of these challenges, Xavier lived through the hardships, pain, suffering and trials in peace with trust and joy that came from the grace of God, which he often refers to in his writings. He was also greatly helped by the witness of authentic and faithful friendship he experienced in the letters he received from Ignatius and his friends. The

love of Christ, which was manifested to him in Paris in the encounter with Ignatius, was the experience that accompanied Francis and expressed itself through his person and his life dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel and to the salvation of the men and women that he met in the Far East in the first half of the sixteenth century.



## SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1182-1226)

In 1206, Francis Bernardone, the son of a rich merchant from Assisi, Italy, began a journey of profound conversion that radically changed the tenor of his life. From being a carefree and vain young man, he became a sincere and impassioned seeker of God. About two years later, in his beloved little church of Saint Mary of the Angels, listening to the Gospel passage on Jesus' sending of his disciples, Francis was struck hard. When he heard that the apostles should not possess gold, silver, or money, but only preach the kingdom of God and repentance, he exclaimed joyfully, "This I want, this I ask, this I yearn to do with all my heart" (*Vita Prima di Tommaso da Celano*, 22: *Fonti Francescane* [FF], 356). The Gospel showed him the way and drove him to mission.

His conversion matured when, in the church of San Damiano, he heard the crucifix speak to him the divine will that he restore the Lord's house, which lay in ruins. The image of the crucifix became for him the mirror in which the faces of all crucified people were reflected. Francis literally put into practice the words of the Gospel, stripping himself of all material goods, even clothes. In a symbolic gesture, bishop Guido covered him with an episcopal cloak in the square of Assisi, meaning that the bishop would protect him from that moment forward.

As soon as Francis had formed his first group of eight companions, he sent them to four corners of the world to proclaim the word of God. He was well aware that God had entrusted a universal mission to his community, and he sought the recognition of the Supreme Pontiff. This global evangelizing sensibility was also expressed in the meeting between Francis

and Cardinal Ugolino. Contrary to the rapid and chaotic expansion of the Order, Francis said, “Do not think, sir, that the Lord sent brothers only for the good of our regions. I tell you in truth that God has chosen and sent brothers for the spiritual good and the salvation of the souls of the people of the whole world; they will be received not only in the Christian lands, but also in those of the non-believers” (*Leggenda perugina*, 82: FF, 1638).

The proclamation of the Gospel was a natural consequence of the total adhesion of Francis to Jesus Christ. The Christological criterion was decisive for the “Poverello” (Poor Fellow) in moments of doubt and perplexity. The *sequela Christi* implied not only poverty, itinerancy, and fraternity, but also missionary commitment. Francis ardently desired to dedicate himself to apostolic work, even if it meant the sacrifice of himself in the manner of Jesus. The yearning to achieve conformity with the Lord gave rise to the idea of bringing the Good News to non-believers.

After two unsuccessful attempts to reach the Holy Land and Morocco (1212-1215) and after sending Brother Egidio to Tunis and Brother Elias to Palestine, Francis joined the crusading expedition and arrived in Egypt in 1219. In the Christian camp in the city of Damietta, on the Nile delta, he served as a spiritual assistant and took care of wounded soldiers. During a ceasefire, Francis and Brother Illuminato went to the Muslim camp and asked for an audience with the sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. “To the Saracens who had taken him prisoner along the way, he repeated, ‘I am a Christian. Lead me to your lord.’ When Francis was brought before him, observing the appearance of a man of God, the cruel beast was changed into a gentle man, and for several days he listened to Francis with great attention as he preached Christ before him and his people.” (Giacomo da Vitry, *Historia Occidentalis* 14: FF 2227). Al-Malik al-Kamil, whom several contemporary sources agree was a wise and generous man, welcomed the brothers with courtesy and benevolence. Francis did not limit himself to exchange cordialities, but with simplicity, frankness, and strength he professed the Christian faith and announced the *kerygma* of salvation in Christ. Unlike

the words of many Christians and even papal addresses of that time, the “Poverello” did not use offensive language when speaking of the Muslim faith, nor did he attack the religious sensitivity of his interlocutor. The objective of his mission, however, remained well defined, and that was to convert the sultan and then – according to the practice of medieval missionaries – also the people subject to him. Some sources recount that when his fervid preaching did not bring the desired results, Francis resorted to another approach and proposed a trial by fire as the ultimate verification of his words. The sultan, seeing the panic and the anger of his advisors, did not accept the challenge, but he was deeply impressed by the friar’s faith and courage. His presence and his spiritual discourses revealed another face of Christianity and brought to light a lively and sincere experience of God. Francis’ journey to the East was apparently unsuccessful, since he did not convert the sultan and did not obtain the palm of martyrdom. However, the “Poverello” earned a friend and entrusted his Order with the task of continuing the mission and peaceful dialogue with the Islamic world. His lived experience allowed him, after returning home, to develop a missionary project for his Order with particular attention to the Muslim brothers.

Francis’ absence from Italy caused a crisis in the government of the community of brothers. The young order with an international character urgently needed precise and effective juridical regulation. Francis was the first founder of a religious order who had inserted an entire section dedicated to the missions into its legislation. Chapter XVI of the *Regula non bullata*, written in 1221, is a true “treatise on missionary methodology” and together with chapter XII of the *Regula bullata*, approved in 1223 by Pope Honorius III, lays out a program that is valid for all the friars. For the first time, the proclamation of the Gospel was not just a task of individual charismatic personalities, but the whole Franciscan Order was encouraged to follow concrete operational guidelines for carrying out the mission.

The novelty of the missionary plan conceived by Francis manifests itself in the title of chapter XVI of the *Regula non bullata*: “Regarding those who

go among the Saracens and the other non-believers.” While at that time the crusaders were “against” (*contra*) the Muslims, the “Poverello” sent his friars not only “to” (*ad*) them, but even “among” (*inter*) them. The creation of a Western colony was completely foreign to the Franciscan spirit. The prerequisites for effective missionary activities were solidarity and friendship with the local people and knowledge of Islamic culture. Later Francis presented two ways of behaving as missionaries in the Muslim territory: “One way is for them not to engage in quarrels or disputes, but to be made subject to every human creature for the love of God and to profess that they are Christians. The other way is that, when they see it pleases the Lord, missionaries announce the Word of God so that the non-believers come to believe in God Almighty, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of all things, and in the Son Redeemer and Savior, and are baptized, and become Christians” (*Regula non bullata*, Chapter XVI, 7-10: FF 43). In this passage we see a new and original missionary strategy of Francis. Given top priority is the witness of one’s life animated by love of God. One’s mere presence must be meaningful and eloquent. The example of fraternity is the most effective and credible method of evangelization. The brothers must therefore renounce all claims of superiority and domination, respect the different customs, and insert themselves, as Christians, in the local context. Through the practice of Christian virtues, silent witnesses of the Gospel are required to confess their faith with courage and humility. The second element is the explicit proclamation of the Word of God, which can only take place after a careful assessment of the circumstances and after patiently waiting for the opportune moment. The missionary cannot then take possession of the word and he cannot be the stubborn usurper of the Good News; rather he must immerse himself in listening to God and discerning his will. Francis does not lose sight of the main objective of the mission, that is, the conversion of the non-believers. The decision to believe must be a personal choice and not a hasty one, which will come as the result of the efficacy of the witness and the proclamation of the friars.

The missionary journey of the “Poverello” in the East left traces in his spirituality and prompted him to assimilate some forms of piety and prayer that he found in the Islamic environment, as we read in some of his letters. In the *Letter to the Rulers of Peoples (LRP)*, Francis suggests creating in Christian countries someone whose role would be that of a public announcer and as in the manner of a muezzin, could call people together to prayer: “And you must give the Lord so much honor among the people entrusted to you that every evening an announcer proclaims or with other signs announces the praise and thanks to the Almighty Lord God from all the people” (LRP 9: FF 213). A remote echo of Francis’ proposal was the initiative of Brother Benedetto of Arezzo, former provincial minister in the Holy Land, to whom we owe the use of the bell during the recitation of the Angelus, a practice that was later received and propagated by the Franciscan Order throughout all of Christendom.

The idea of mission is present in the life of Francis from the beginning of his conversion. It comes from his desire to live the Gospel and to follow in the footsteps of the Divine Master. The creation of the nativity scene for Christmas of 1223 in Greccio, as well as the gift of the stigmata, manifest his profound spiritual and bodily identification with Jesus Christ, source and reason of his faith and his mission. Sick and weakened by a life of hardship, Francis died in Assisi on the evening of October 3, 1226.

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## BLESSED PAOLO MANNA (1872-1952)

“In Father Paolo Manna, we see a special reflection of the glory of God. He spent his entire life for the missionary cause. On every page of his writings the person of Jesus emerges as alive, the center of life and the *raison d'être* of mission.”

These words of St. John Paul II, spoken during his homily for the beatification of Father Manna on November 4, 2001, summarize the spiritual portrait of this great apostle of evangelization *ad gentes*, considered by scholars to be a precursor of the Second Vatican Council.

Paolo Antonio Manna was born in Avellino, Italy, on January 16, 1872, the fifth of six children. After elementary and technical studies in Avellino and Naples, he continued his studies in Rome. While studying philosophy at the Gregorian University, he heard the Lord's call to missionary life and entered the seminary of the Institute for Foreign Missions in Milan, where he completed his theological studies. He was ordained a priest in the cathedral of Milan on May 19, 1894.

His superiors sent him to Burma (now Myanmar) and on September 27, 1895, he left, for the Toungoo mission. Although suffering from poor health, he pushed himself with tireless dedication in the evangelization<sup>1</sup> and human development of the Carian peoples (in particular the Ghekhù, about whom he later wrote a well-noted book). Exhaustion from his travels, malarial fever, and the onset of tuberculosis forced him to return home on July 7, 1907.

<sup>1</sup> Father Manna even evangelized the parents of the first beatified native of Burma (now Myanmar), Isidoro Ngei Ko Lat, a catechist who was martyred together with Fr. Mario Vergara, PIME. The two were beatified together on May 24, 2014, in the cathedral of Aversa, Italy.

In Italy, Fr. Paolo threw himself headlong into an intense and diversified schedule of missionary work, putting to good use his skills as an acute observer of the ecclesial landscape on a global level, lecturer, publicist, and learned writer. “The whole Church for the whole world” became his motto. As “a soul of fire,”<sup>2</sup> he infused his books with an ardent vision of faith as it related to the multiple and complex problems of the mission *ad gentes*. He offered bold and penetrating analyses, with intuitions that have at times been judged by scholars to be “prophetic.”

In 1909, he was appointed director of the magazine *Le Missioni Cattoliche*, which acquired new impetus through his expert and dynamic leadership. He published pamphlets and books and wrote articles on missionary themes that were near and dear to his heart. He launched various initiatives of missionary cooperation: adoptions, scholarships, and leaflets of prayers for the missions. He founded new periodicals, such as *Propaganda missionaria* for families, *Italia missionaria* for young people, and, later, *Venga il Tuo Regno*, also for families, especially in southern Italy.

In 1915, Father Manna took the first steps towards the foundation of the Missionary Union of the Clergy (today PUM), which Pope Pius XII called “the gem of his life.” Decisive support for the realization of this project came from Bishop Guido Maria Conforti, the bishop of Parma and founder of the Xaverian Missionaries who was canonized in 2011. The statutes of the Union, presented to the Pope by Conforti himself, were approved on October 31, 1916. In his Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (1919), Benedict XV praised the Missionary Union of the Clergy, expressing the desire that it be “instituted in all the dioceses of the Catholic world.”

The basic idea, fully shared by Bishop Conforti, was that to set the whole people of God in a state of mission, it was necessary to start with the clergy. Father Paolo was convinced that “every priest by nature, by definition, is a missionary,” but he constantly needs to revive the flame of apostolic zeal in

<sup>2</sup> This is what Manna was called by Father Gian Battista Tragella (1885-1968), a famous missiologist, historian of PIME, a great friend and collaborator of Manna, and his first biographer.

his heart. “The missionary is the man of faith *par excellence*: born of faith, living by faith, for this he willingly works, suffers, and dies... Without faith the missionary cannot be explained and does not exist; and, if he exists, he is not a true missionary of Jesus Christ” (Manna, *Virtù Apostoliche – Lettere ai missionari*, EMI, Bologna 1997, 89).

In 1924, Manna was entrusted with the new and particularly demanding responsibility of serving as Superior General of the Institute of Foreign Missions of Milan, which became the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) in 1926 at the behest of Pius XI, who joined it to the similar Missionary Seminary of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Rome. In the ten years he led the organization, Manna’s missionary passion was revealed above all in “family conversations,” letter-meditations addressed to his confreres and published in a bulletin called *Il Vincolo*, which provided inspiration, information, and communication between PIME members throughout the world. Later collected in a book called *Virtù Apostoliche*, these writings are considered to be a classical expression of missionary spirituality.

Father Paolo was strongly convinced of the central role of prayer in the life of the missionary. “Be men of interior life, men of prayer.... It is worth knowing how to preach, but it is worth much more to know how to pray. The missionary who knows the language well and knows how to preach, but who prays little, will expound the truth of our holy religion excellently, but will leave souls cold. The missionary who has deep intimacy with God in prayer, even if his exposition leaves something to be desired, will always have the gift of transfusing the spirit of Jesus Christ into souls, which is after all what preaching must first obtain. The first will teach about Jesus Christ, the other will reveal him. You make the difference! ‘If he who teaches is not a person of interior life, his tongue will say empty things’ (St. Gregory)” (Manna, *Virtù Apostoliche*, 100).

Manna’s thought was enriched and clarified following a long missionary journey to the East which lasted about two years (1927-1929). His obser-

vation of the diverse realities he encountered – environmental, cultural and ecclesial – and his meetings with numerous people and missionaries in the field would lead to ninety pages of notes, comments and daring innovative proposals that were entitled *Osservazioni sul metodo moderno di evangelizzazione* (Observations on the modern method of evangelization). These writings, sent to *Propaganda Fide*, would remain unpublished until 1977.

In 1934, having finished his service as Superior General of the Institute, he began another great work, the founding of a new women’s missionary community, the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. This work went forward following the mandate of the PIME General Assembly and was completed by his successor, Bishop Lorenzo Maria Balconi in Milan on December 8, 1936. This new women’s institute recognized Father Manna as the one who “inspired” its missionary charism.

From 1937 to 1941, Father Manna was the international secretary of the Missionary Union of the Clergy. He maintained a network of relationships with Apostolic Nuncios, bishops, and priests from all over the world. He continued to write letters, books, and articles. Particularly sensitive to the problems posed by the divisions among Christians, he became a “prophet of ecumenism.” In 1941, he published *I fratelli separati e noi* (The Separated Brethren and Us), which was also published in several other languages. The work was well received among non-Catholic Christians, both in the East and the West, even if their positions remained distant. In 1950, he wrote *Le nostre Chiese e la propagazione del Vangelo* [Our Churches and the propagation of the Gospel], and the ideas contained in this work were taken up by Pope Pius XII in the Encyclical *Fidei Donum*.

Father Paolo Manna died in Naples on September 15, 1952, and his martyred remains rest in the city of Ducenta. He was beatified by John Paul II on November 4, 2001.

## VENERABLE PAULINE MARIE JARICOT (1799-1862)

Pauline Marie Jaricot was born into a faithful, Catholic family immediately after the French Revolution, on July 22, 1799. She was the seventh and last daughter of Antoine and Jeanne Jaricot who were silk merchants in Lyon, France, a city whose Christian roots date back to the second century and which boasts of having the Father of the Church Saint Irenaeus as its second bishop.

Pauline was baptized on the day of her birth. Her parents had asked a priest loyal to the Pope to baptize their last daughter in the family home, because their parish priest of San Nizir had taken the oath required by the revolutionary government, an oath that undermined the authority of the Church in France. Clearly, Pauline lived during a time of civil instability and during a period of profound social change, carrying out a work that became crucial for the activity of evangelization.

From all the accounts of her life, it is clear that she was a happy and lively girl, very determined and even stubborn. In her autobiography – which should be read with caution, as Pauline was very severe with herself – she wrote, “I was born with a fervid imagination, a superficial attitude, and a violent and lazy character. I would have been totally taken up with other things... [but] God gave me a loyal heart, which easily surrendered to devotion.” She was very fond of her brother Phileas, born two years before her, who was determined to become a missionary in China. When Phileas announced his intention, Pauline immediately said she wanted to go with him, to care for the poor and the sick and to arrange the flowers in the church.

During her adolescence and early adulthood, she was inconstant in her devotion. She alternated between moments of intense prayer, which developed in her a desire to spend long periods in church before the Blessed Sacrament, praying through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On other occasions she was very eager to participate in social events where she wore elegant clothes and was admired and courted by young men while she fantasized about the possibility of idyllic marriages. On April 16, 1812, at the age of thirteen, after a careful and reverent preparation, she received her First Communion with great devotion.

Pauline's life, however, changed drastically at the age of fifteen, after she fell from a stool while she was cleaning at home, hitting the floor violently. The fall seriously damaged her nervous system, preventing her from properly moving her limbs and from speaking normally. Though the doctors tried various therapies, they became doubtful about the possibility of recovery. Her mother worried so intensely about her daughter's health that she too became ill. This illness got worse at the unexpected death of her eldest son Narcisse at the age of twenty-one. Antoine Jaricot decided to have his daughter moved to a small village outside Lyon, in the hope that separating mother and daughter could help them both to heal faster. Unfortunately, however, on November 29, 1814, Jeanne Jaricot died. Out of fear of further worsening Pauline's health, her family decided not to inform her of her mother's death.

The local parish priest invited Pauline to resume her religious practice, and she freely decided to ask for the sacrament of reconciliation and to receive the Eucharist. This experience of forgiveness and spiritual nourishment had a profound effect on her. From that moment on, she began to recover the use of her limbs, and when she was finally told of her mother's death, she admitted that she had suspected it. As soon as she managed to walk, she asked to be brought to the Basilica of Notre-Dame of Fourvière in Lyon, so she could pray before the magnificent statue of the Madonna presenting the child Jesus to the world.

From that point, Pauline decided to devote her life exclusively to serving the poor and the sick, visiting hospitals and the terminally ill every day, putting bandages on their wounds and offering words of comfort. Her ministry to the needy was accompanied by a life of intense prayer. She received the Eucharist daily and prayed for the conversion of sinners and for the evangelization of the world. A devotion to the Sacred Heart grew in her, and she became part of the Association of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. This led her to create a new association called *Reparation*, and she invited many women in Lyon, some of whom worked almost as slaves in the silk factories of the city, to join. Her meditations before the tabernacle inspired her to write and publish the book *Infinite Love in the Divine Eucharist*, a source of consolation and spiritual nourishment for many.

At that time, her brother Phileas was studying at the seminary in Paris. He informed Pauline that the Paris Foreign Missions Society wanted to send priests to Asia and asked her to find a way to raise enough funds to ensure the success of the enterprise. It was at that moment Pauline had an idea that would change history: she decided to invite every member of her Reparation Association to find ten new members who would pray and offer a penny a week for the evangelization of the world, or, as was said in Pauline's day, for the propagation of the Faith. Groups of ten members were led by a leader called a *dizeneire*, groups of one hundred members by a *centenaire*, and groups of one thousand members by a *millenaire*.

The idea was simple: to pray and collect funds personally, creating a network of personal relationships. The group leader of the ten would meet its members and collect the pennies every week, the leader of the hundred met and collected the money from the leaders of the ten, and finally the group leader of the thousand from the heads of the hundreds. The substantial funds raised were divided and sent all over the world. The idea spread and the Society for the Propagation of the Faith was founded, which soon moved its work out of France to become a worldwide phenomenon. On May 22, 1922, as a result of a decision made by Pope Pius XI, it became

the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith. In this way the Holy Father wanted to express his paternal solicitude for the local churches arising from missionary activity.

Pauline's reputation as a devoted and resolute woman in the faith earned her the great respect of the Holy Father, cardinals, bishops, and contemporary saints, some of whom asked her for help and advice. The founder of the Society for Holy Childhood (today known as the Pontifical Society of the Missionary Childhood or Holy Childhood) consulted with her to find the best way to raise funds for children in the missions of various countries. Later, when her health began to worsen, Pauline decided to make a pilgrimage to Rome, but she fell ill there. While she was confined to a bed in a convent near the Church of the Trinità dei Monti, at the top of the staircase known as the Spanish Steps, the Holy Father visited her to encourage and give her his blessing.

In spite of all these enormous spiritual and missionary successes, Pauline's life was full of physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. Pauline had never considered the religious vocation; she was convinced that she had been called by God as a lay woman to dedicate her humble existence to the support of the poor and the missions. Falling into a state of poverty, she was forced to join the list of the poor of Lyon to receive something to eat. Her love for God, for Our Lady, and for the missions never wavered. She died in peace on January 9, 1862, and was later proclaimed Venerable by Pope John XXIII. Her cause of beatification is being examined by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and we pray that she will soon be recognized as a blessed.

It is worthwhile to recall that Pauline had another important missionary prayer initiative. In 1826, encouraged by the success of her personal approach in the organization of the Missionary Society through the creation of small groups, Pauline used the same approach to start a Living Rosary. She began to organize her friends and collaborators in groups of fifteen people, based on the number of the mysteries of the Rosary. She asked each

member to commit to pray a decade of the Rosary daily and meditate on a mystery a day, for a whole month. In this way, the entire Rosary was recited daily and all fifteen mysteries were meditated upon by each group. At the beginning of the month, the person in charge of the group personally redistributed the mysteries amongst the members, making sure that each received a different mystery upon which they would meditate during the prayer of the Rosary during the four following weeks. Every month the whole life of Christ was meditated upon by the group. Through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, God's help was sought, making the prayer of the Rosary a "living" reality in support of the mission of the Church, especially for the proclamation of the Gospel to those who had not yet received it.

Pauline's dream of the Living Rosary soon became a widespread phenomenon all over the world. In 1831, she wrote, "The groups of fifteen continue to multiply with incredible speed in Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, England, and in various parts of America. The Rosary has spread its roots to the Indies and especially to Canada." Pauline's hope was that the Living Rosary would unite people, scattered throughout the world, in fervent prayer for the mission of the Church.

The initiative of the Living Rosary was so successful that after Pauline's death in 1862, there were more than 150,000 groups, with 2,250,000 members in France alone! Today the Living Rosary is still practiced in many parts of the world and the groups of fifteen have expanded to become groups of twenty in order to include the new Luminous Mysteries, established by St. Pope John Paul II.

## CHARLES DE FORBIN-JANSON (1785-1844)

Charles de Forbin-Janson was born in Paris in 1785 into a noble, military family. Only four years later, the French Revolution forced his parents into exile in Germany, which led him to experience the life of a refugee, persecution, insecurity, fear, and poverty. This is one of the many significant “details” that serve to orient his life-story around two points of reference: the vulnerability of childhood and mission as a paradigm for the apostolate.

After returning home and receiving First Communion, the adolescent Forbin-Janson showed his charitable sensitivity by joining an organization that helped the most disadvantaged in prisons and hospitals. But it was during meetings held in the seminary chapel of the Paris Foreign Mission Society that he had the opportunity to hear news from the mission in China. The missionary dimension thus made a subtle but early impact on his life. Charles had a promising career ahead of him when Napoleon appointed him to be a supervisor in the Council of State. However, perceiving the call of God, he did not allow himself to be seduced by this opportunity, and in 1808 he entered the Sulpician seminary in Paris. He was ordained a priest in 1811, and after serving in diverse places he returned to Paris where he provided Christian formation for children in a local parish.

His passion for the missionary apostolate, which marked his ministry from its onset, manifested itself in a special way by his dedication to “popular missions” that were developed to revive the faith in post-revolutionary, de-Christianized France. He manifested both a convincing eloquence and a profound love and generosity for the poor, which led him to give away his

own clothes to the needy. This phase of his life ended with his departure for the Holy Land in 1817.

In 1824, De Forbin-Janson was consecrated bishop of Nancy-Toul, a diocese in the North-East of France. At that time, he maintained a very close contact with the missionaries who wrote to him and asked for his help. He was particularly attentive of the situation of the missions in China, having once considered the idea of being a missionary. In fact, when the revolution of 1830 forced him to leave his diocese, he went to the Pope to ask to be sent to the Far East. Alas, his desire could not be fulfilled, even though Pope Pius VIII consented to his request.

Bishop De Forbin-Janson continued to carry out a great ministry of charity and welfare, until another providential event provided an opportunity for him to follow his inclination for evangelization *ad gentes*. He was invited by some missionary bishops in North America to visit that continent, where he would remain from 1839 to 1841. In Canada, surrounded by its natural beauty, he developed a way to proclaim the Gospel to people of the country's first inhabitants. Later, he also visited the United States of America. In all of this, his desire grew to create a foundation for the missions.

Upon his return to France, news about many children – and especially little girls – in China who were harshly abandoned or killed without ever being able to receive baptism continued to move him. He received agonizing requests for help from the priests of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, which he himself had considered joining. The idea of saving the innocence of children in mission lands through the innocence of Christian children in Christian lands made a profound impact on his heart, where the two points of reference of his life definitively came together: childhood and mission.

With these in mind, in the summer of 1842, Bishop De Forbin-Janson went to Lyon to talk with Pauline Jaricot, the young lay woman who, twenty years earlier, had laid the foundations of the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith. From this decisive dialogue, he began to

perceive a way to organize help for children in China, which blossomed into inviting the children of the diocese to carry out a “double gesture”: the daily recitation of the Hail Mary with a short prayer for the children of the mission, and to offer a dime every month for children in mission lands.

The bishop diligently dedicated himself to this project of mobilizing Christian children for the benefit of their brothers and sisters in mission lands. And so on May 19, 1843, the “Holy Childhood” (referring to the childhood of Jesus) was founded. Finally there was an answer to the restlessness that he endured for almost forty years!

To extend the initiative, he traveled home and arrived in Belgium, where he received the support of the royal court and the Apostolic Nuncio, Bishop Gioacchino Pecci, who would later be elected Pope Leo XIII. The Society of the Holy Childhood was immediately welcomed in France and gained memberships from all over the world, but not without some resistance. Contrary to the expectations of some skeptics, the new ministry did not weaken, but rather strengthened the work and mission of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. It also addressed vocational issues, thus anticipating the creation of the Society of St. Peter the Apostle founded in 1889.

In contemplation of the Lord’s childhood, De Forbin-Janson discovered an exceptional way of understanding the mystery of the Incarnation and what it means to become one with Christ and share his saving love. In the episodes of the Gospel in which Jesus refers to children, he said, we find “a new language of teachings and example” that manifest “Jesus’ clear desire to restore children the rights of which they had been deprived and to augment their privileges.”

To explain the significance of the Society and to organize its functioning, four months before his death, De Forbin-Janson announced the creation of the *Annals of the Society of the Holy Childhood*, a sort of two-way correspondence between the children of the more established churches and those of the missions. The project would be formally inaugurated in 1846.

Exhausted, Bishop De Forbin-Janson, died near Marseilles in July of 1844, when the Society of the Holy Childhood was barely one and a half years old. Being entirely dedicated to the Society he founded, he would never fulfill his dream of being a missionary in China, nor see the fulfilment of another one of his dreams, the sending of religious sisters to China to provide for the needs of disadvantage children in the missions by their maternal care. His initiative was immediately supported by the popes, which is maintained to this day, and can be summarized in words of encouragement that Pope Gregory XVI addressed to Bishop Forbin-Janson when the Society was created 175 years ago: “Continue to establish the Society. In truth, it is the work of God. It has our blessing.” In 1922, Pope Pius XI, formally recognized it as “Pontifical” in his *Motu proprio*, *Romanorum Pontificum*.

Baptised  
and sent

October  
2019

## JEANNE BIGARD (1859-1934)

Jeanne Bigard was born on December 2, 1859, in Coutances, a small town in Lower Normandy, France. Her mother Stéphanie Cottin was a woman of character and affectionate love. Between mother and daughter such a symbiosis of feelings and ideals developed that the two became almost inseparable from each other.

Due to her frail health, Jeanne spent her school years in the family's home in Caen, the city where her father, a magistrate, had moved for work. The level of instruction that she received at home was certainly higher than that received by many of her peers, considering the high cultural level of the Bigard family, but it did not grant her the experience of much freedom, carefree playfulness, or friendship.

Jeanne's childhood took place during the era of the full development of the modern network of missionary cooperation, which had its roots in pre-Napoleonic France. The Paris Foreign Missions Society became the focus of the missionary reawakening and the driving force of some missionary associations that, with prayer and spontaneous help, set out to support missionaries sent to the Far East and North America.

With the initiative of several people, especially Pauline Jaricot (1799-1862), the Society for the Propagation of the Faith had been established in Lyon in 1822. During its first three decades the organization's work spread to several European countries, including Italy, stimulating popular interest in the missions, through edifying publications like the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*, which told stories of adventurous and helpful experiences of missionaries, but also shed light on the various problems of the indigenous world.

Through reading the *Annals*, Stéphanie and Jeanne Bigard, already in close relationship with the Paris Foreign Missions Society, came to know some missionary priests working in the Far East, of whom they would later become confidants and supporters. At the same time the missionary forces were multiplying, Europe began to perceive an urgent need to establish a local hierarchy in the mission territories, free of any political pressure and autonomous in its pastoral exercise. The Bigards, thanks to their ongoing contacts with the missionaries, sensed the problem and began to think of an adequate response. The Paris Foreign Missions Society, which they visited often, had long since incorporated into its efforts the immediate establishment in the indigenous churches a hierarchy composed of local leaders. But the implementation of this plan was not easy.

At the Vatican, the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* took up the problem of indigenous clergy with resolve, referring to the famous Instruction of 1659,<sup>3</sup> which encouraged missionaries to be attentive to the formation of the local clergy. With the Instruction of 1845,<sup>4</sup> apostolic vicars in the mission lands who were directly connected with *Propaganda Fide* were invited to hand over responsibility for the missions to indigenous priests and not to fear letting European missionaries act subordinately to them. Persecutions, with the probability of a mass expulsion of foreign missionaries, made the creation of an indigenous clergy an even more urgent task. So as to guarantee the growth of the local churches in mission territories, for many years the formation of the indigenous clergy remained the central issue. The two Bigards dedicated themselves to address this concern.

The starting point was a letter addressed to them dated June 1, 1889, by the bishop of Nagasaki, Giulio Alfonso Cousin of the Paris Foreign Missions Society. Concerned that he would, for lack of funds, have to send boys back to their families who could have been excellent seminarians and, later, good

<sup>3</sup> Congregation *De Propaganda Fide*, *Istruzione* 1659, *Collectanea* 1 (1622-1866), n. 135, 42-43.

<sup>4</sup> Congregation *De Propaganda Fide*, *Collectanea* 1 (1622-1866), n. 1002, 541-545.

priests,<sup>5</sup> he asked the Bigards to become supporters and promoters of his seminary. He suggested the idea of “adopting” a seminarian who would later bring to the holy altar the memory of the “parents” who had supported him, both during their life and after their death.<sup>6</sup> For Jeanne and Stéphanie, the letter sounded like a call. Support of the indigenous clergy was the vocation to which they could offer their lives without reserve. They immediately devoted themselves to raising funds for the seminarians of Nagasaki and at the same time gathered information from the bishops and apostolic vicars of the Paris Foreign Missions Society on the status of indigenous clergy in their countries.

They wanted to solve the central problem of the mission by ensuring the presence of the local clergy. The foundation of the Society of St. Peter the Apostle went through various stages. At first, to meet the requests of Bishop Cousin and of other missionaries, scholarships were awarded to seminarians and sacred furnishings for mission churches were made. Jeanne understood that her work would have to include support of all of the missions throughout the world,<sup>7</sup> because the whole missionary world needed priests.

The Society wanted to invite people throughout the world to contribute what they could to support:

1. Creation of perpetual grants
2. Adopting a seminarian
3. Prayer, sacrifices, and work

But to guarantee a good foundation, two indispensable elements were necessary: the grace of God and the blessing of the Pope. Leo XIII offered to the occasion his encyclical *Ad Extremas Orientis*,<sup>8</sup> with which he supported the urgent need for the formation of indigenous priests.

<sup>5</sup> P. Lesourd and A. Olichon, *Jeanne Bigard. Fondatrice della Pontificia Opera di S. Pietro Apostolo per il Clero Indigeno*, translated and edited by P.F. Casadei (Rome: Ed. PPOO.MM., 1979), 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical *Ad Extremas Orientis* (24 June 1893), *Acta Leonis XIII*, 13 (1894), 190-197.

Missionaries who ignored the language and customs of the place were considered foreigners, while indigenous priests would carry out the ministry more easily. Equally troubling were the number of foreign missionaries who could not keep up with the increase in conversions.

The Society of St. Peter the Apostle already had, to its credit, a thousand associates and a long list of scholarships, worth one hundred thousand francs, for Asian and African seminarians. A sign of approval from Rome was highly anticipated. The Pope's blessing came in 1895, when the French episcopate also approved the Society of St. Peter the Apostle for the indigenous clergy of the missions, which thus entered fully into the universal Church. *Propaganda Fide* assured its full support to the Society through its prefects Cardinal Ledochowski and Cardinal Jacobini. The latter, in a letter, anticipated its inclusion in the Pontifical Mission Societies, which took place on May 3, 1922, at the behest of Pius XI.

The solitude and abandonment experienced by many founders and foundresses also affected Jeanne. Alone at the bedside of her dying mother, Stéphanie (January 5, 1903), Jeanne offered to God her suffering and the love of those who had helped and followed her. Afraid of spiritual darkness Jeanne begged Jesus to be her traveling companion "until the day I lose myself in your love."<sup>9</sup> She was worried about the continuation of the Society, which she eventually entrusted to the religious congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.<sup>10</sup>

The long illness that led to her death on April 28, 1934, reveals the mysterious ways God works, often offering an abundance of his gifts in response to people who know how to totally give their lives unto the cross.

The Society of St. Peter the Apostle was now fully part of the life of the

<sup>9</sup> P. Lesourd and A. Olichon, *Jeanne Bigard. Fondatrice della Pontificia Opera di S. Pietro Apostolo per il Clero Indigeno*, translated and edited by P.F. Casadei (Rome: Ed. PP.OO.MM., 1979), 88.

<sup>10</sup> The Institute of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary was founded by Elena de Chappotin de Neuville (1839-1904) who took the religious name Mary of the Passion. Approved on July 17, 1890, the institute, because of its essentially missionary character, obtained the approval of its Constitutions by the Congregation *De Propaganda Fide* on August 7, 1922.

Church. For the first time, it appeared in a document of solemn teaching, Pope Benedict XV's *Maximum Illud*, as the competent authority in the area of seminaries and local hierarchy. On May 3, 1922, Pius XI declared it a "Pontifical Society." He also consecrated the first bishops of China, Japan, and Vietnam. Pius XII followed suit by consecrating the first apostolic vicars of Africa in 1939.



## ANNA DENGEL (1892-1980)

Anna Dengel was born in the Austrian town of Steeg in the state of Tyrol on March 16, 1892. Following the premature death of her mother (which occurred when Anna was only nine years old), she and her brothers were raised by her father who, after having remarried, had four other children. Anna was deeply affected by the loss of her mother and this event influenced her work and, above all, the commitment she put into the care of women and mothers. Hers was a wealthy family, and her father devoted himself to raising his children.

After completing her studies in Hall and Innsbruck, at the age of seventeen, Anna started working as a German teacher in Lyon. At that time, she learned of a school that trained women as nurses. Working there was Dr. Agnes McLaren, one of the very first women physician of the era. Dr. McLaren's main goal was to provide medical care for women in India, especially Muslim women, who could not be treated by male physicians because of Islamic laws. At age 72, when she received the blessing of Pope Pius X, Dr. McLaren departed for India where and in 1910, she founded St. Catherine's Hospital for women and children.

Initially she tried to persuade religious orders to provide medical assistance in India and other the mission territories, but her attempt failed because of a twelfth-century ecclesiastical decree that forbade nuns from studying and practicing medicine. Dr. McLaren then began looking for young European and American women who wanted to become nurses or doctors and were willing to move to India to carry out this mission. The then twenty-year-old Anna Dengel became aware of this urgent need and immediately

considered this to be exactly what she was waiting for. She wrote as much in a letter saying, “This is the answer to my greatest dream and heartfelt desire: to be a missionary with a specific goal, to carry out such an urgent task that only a woman can achieve. This is my dream from childhood.”

The correspondence between Anna and Dr. McLaren immediately proved to be complicated, since the doctor did not speak German and Dengel did not know English. The doctor encouraged the young Tyrolean to study medicine in Cork, Ireland, because it was necessary to obtain an English qualification to work in India, which was still an English colony. Unfortunately, the two women never met because Dr. McLaren died in 1913.

Anna completed her studies in Cork in 1919. In December of that year she arrived in Rawalpindi (present-day Pakistan) and began working in St. Catherine’s Hospital. Her routine, which absorbed all of her energy, included work at the hospital, language study, visits to homes, and the concerns of everyday life. At least 150 patients each day went to the hospital for assistance and treatment. After about three years, Anna was assailed by an inner restlessness. A priest understood that Anna had received a religious calling and advised her to become part of a missionary order. But she found herself facing the same problem that had plagued Dr. McLaren: if she took religious vows, she would have to give up her career as a doctor.

In 1924, Anna entrusted the management of the clinic to an Indian doctor and returned to Innsbruck for a retreat. There she developed the desire to establish a religious order of doctors, an idea supported by the priest who led the retreat. She then went to the United States for six months in search of funds and women who shared her interest in the project. Soon a doctor and two nurses joined her. So on September 30, 1925, the Medical Mission Sisters were born in Washington, D.C. Since the nuns were still forbidden to practice medicine, the community was founded as a pious society without vows.

Anna Dengel worked many years to bring about a change in canon law and remove the prohibition against religious sisters practicing medicine.

In 1936, Pope Pius XI revoked the ban with the decree *Constans ac Sedula*, and in 1941 the community of the Medical Mission Sisters finally became a religious congregation with vows. Then in 1959, they received the decree of the Holy See which made it a Religious Institute of Pontifical Right.

The Institute, which began with four sisters now counts over 500 members working in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Many of the hospitals first established by the sisters are now being administered by the local population, which is what the founding sisters would have wanted. Today, the sisters no longer focus their attention solely on strictly medical or surgical services, but on promoting the overall integral well-being of people in need and their salvation in Christ.

Dr. Anna Dengel's most famous student was undoubtedly Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who received medical training with the Medical Mission Sisters in Patna, India. The two women did not meet in person until near the end of Anna's life and although they had not always followed the same line of thought, they both shared a profound commitment and love for charity towards the poorest of the poor. Both founded religious congregations, and their zeal was able to forever change the Church and the world.

In 1973, Dr. Anna Dengel passed on the direction of the Medical Mission Sisters to the next generation with these words: "The future belongs to you. Take care to understand the difficulties of your time just as I understood the difficulties of mine." In the spring of 1976, she had a stroke that left her partially paralyzed. She was still at the hospital in Rome when Mother Teresa came to visit her. Dr. Dengel recognized her old acquaintance and asked her to hold her hands, as is customary in India, as a symbol of heredity and spiritual blessing. She died in Rome on April 17, 1980, and was buried at Campo Santo Teutonico.

## BLESSED BENEDICT DASWA (1946-1990)

Pope Francis, in his decree of beatification, described Benedict as a “diligent catechist, a thoughtful teacher, a witness of the Gospel to the point of shedding his own blood.” Tshimangadzo Samuel Daswa was born on June 16, 1946, in the village of Mbahe in the province of Limpopo, South Africa, in what is now the Diocese of Tzaneen. He died a martyr for the faith on February 2, 1990, and was beatified on September 13, 2015.

When Benedict became a Catholic, he understood that there were aspects of African culture, such as the widespread practice of witchcraft, magic, and ritual murder, which he could no longer accept. His position against these profound and obscure problems of his culture led him to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom. His brutal death by stoning and beating has made him a hero to all Christians in Africa and to all those throughout the world who struggle to be free from the slavery of sorcery. Benedict Daswa lived his Christian vocation with contentment and enthusiasm, but at the same time with modesty and humility, as shown by his Christian witness in various areas of his life. After his baptism, and especially after getting married in the Church to Shadi Eveline Monyai in 1974, Benedict became a guide for the young and spent many hours and weekends with them to catechize and teach them.

When the first pastoral council was formed in his parish, he was elected its president. He helped teach catechism to children and adults, leading the Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest, visiting the sick and the non-practicing, and helping the poor and needy. In church, he helped start a nursery school. Every once in a while the small Christian community

gathered at his home and during these meetings the Rosary was recited and the Word of God was shared.

In the family, Benedict was a model husband and father, totally devoted to ideal of the family being a “domestic church.” In the classroom, he was not only concerned with providing students with a good level of education, but above all instilling in them fundamental moral values so as to form their personalities. Being a skilled and motivated sportsman, Benedict imparted to young people the value of hard work, discipline, fairness, and team spirit. As principal of the school, he was respected and scrupulous, and he motivated and trained his staff to provide the best possible education to the students, involving the parents as collaborators in the entire educational process.

In the public sphere, Benedict made no secret of his position against witchcraft, magic, and ritual murder, which still have the power to prevent the development and progress of a society. Witchcraft allegations are often driven by jealousy, fear, and suspicion towards those who appear to be more engaged and successful in their undertakings. Benedict realized the need to free individuals from these paralyzing effects, allowing them to take personal responsibility for their lives and become mature adults.

This is why his role in helping people achieve true inner freedom was important not only for the Church, but for the whole of society. Both in the local community as a counselor and advisor to the village chief, and in the ecclesial community as a catechist and prayer guide, Benedict demonstrated a spirit of genuine Christian love, respect, generosity, honesty, and freedom. But above all, and in every situation, Benedict was a man of prayer whose spiritual life was constantly nourished by the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and the Word of God. This great mystery of faith and love meant everything to him. It was the center of his life.

He was never ashamed to admit his great faith in God for it was God who gave him strength. People who knew him very well testified that the growth in his relationship with God was clearly visible, as was the fidelity

with which he lived the values he had embraced at his baptism. He wanted Catholics to be proud of their faith and to assume a real responsibility towards the Church he loved so much. This meant working at the local level for priestly vocations and religious life, being active in the Church and supporting her financially.

His position against witchcraft was not very popular, because he was opposed to something rooted in local culture. There were others who, like Benedict, considered the world of witchcraft as the fruit of evil, fear, mistrust, enmity, injustice, and violence, which they thought people should abandon and free themselves from. But most of them, including religious ministers, were silent for fear of reprisals. Benedict was different. He spoke openly and forcefully in public, opposing those who resorted to witchcraft. Benedict Daswa never compromised. He always adhered to his Christian faith.

He defended those who refused to pay to consult the *sangoma* (the shaman), because he did not want people to pay for something that was false. Above all, Benedict did not want any innocent man to be killed or banished from the village as an alleged sorcerer. What normally happened is that through rumors and gossip, a finger was pointed at someone, often an elderly woman or some other vulnerable person. People didn't seek any proof of guilt, but turned to a *sangoma* who usually confirmed their suspicions. The one accused had no opportunity for defense.

Between November 1989 and January 1990, flooding struck the village where Benedict lived with his family. On January 25, 1990, during a storm, the roofs of some huts were struck by lightning and caught fire. It was widely believed that when lightning struck a house, it was caused by a person who was a sorcerer. According to traditional culture, sorcerers had to be captured and killed, as well as anyone who protected them, because they posed a threat to society. This was traditional culture. Benedict was aware of the growing pressure against him.

So the following Sunday, the village leader called a council meeting to address the issue. Benedict had not yet arrived when it was decided that

some members of the community would have to consult a *sangoma* in order to find the sorcerer who had sent the lightning. But first they would have to raise the money needed to pay for it. When Benedict arrived, he immediately tried to change their minds, pointing out that their decision would lead to the death of innocent people. The meeting ended with their firm resolve and Benedict's refusal to collaborate. His enemies gathered a group of young people and adults to kill him. Friday, February 2, 1990, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, became a feast day for Benedict Daswa's entry into paradise.

The most significant aspect of Benedict's witness has to do with his ability to critically embrace what was good in his culture, but to bravely challenge the cultural elements that hindered the realization of life to the fullest. Benedict firmly believed that marriage was a relationship of partners for life, a faithful sharing of life and love. In a rural, patriarchal, and traditional African community in apartheid-era South Africa, Benedict gave a prophetic witness to a respectful attitude towards women's equal dignity. He believed in a faithful and monogamous marriage that finds its full meaning in the Christian sacrament. As testified by his sons, he was never ashamed to help Eveline, his wife, in household chores that were generally reserved to women. He prayed every day with his family and encouraged all parents to pray with their children. He organized regular family reunions and acted as a mediator and counselor for couples in difficulty. And finally, Benedict was a fervent teacher and educator, becoming the principal of the Nweli Primary School where he taught for many years. And perhaps above all, as pointed out by those who knew him, he was a profoundly humble man, who always used the power of confrontation and dialogue that came to him from his faith and friendship with Jesus.

He never renounced his African culture, but embraced its best aspects, purified and matured by faith. His story reflects his sincere commitment to the values of Ubuntu ethics, a commitment to the common good and the service of life. The example he offered through his daily life – as a lay

person, a family man, a diligent catechist, and a thoughtful teacher – is what many South Africans today consider the most significant legacy of his life: not against their culture, but for the good of their culture and that of every culture and nation.



## CATERINA ZECCHINI (1877-1948)

**M**other Caterina Zecchini was born in Venice, Italy on May 24, 1877, and died there on October 17, 1948. We have scant information about her youth: baptized on June 3, 1878, in the church of St. Giacomo dell'Orto, she was confirmed at the church of Saints Geremia and Lucia on May 25, 1885. Known to be very sensitive, yet she possessed an exuberant, lively, and witty character. When she was ten years old, after completing elementary school, Caterina began working at home helping her father, a wine merchant, with his accounting. She developed an ever growing concern for the poor, especially for children of her parish whom she met on the streets and whom she often brought to her home to give them food and clothing.

This charity that grew in her heart was destined, through the grace of God, to grow in time until she could no longer limit herself to helping the occasional poor person. She felt the need to work with all her strength for the spread of the Kingdom of God throughout the world by serving those whom Caterina called the true poor: those who did not yet know God. In 1905, Caterina had an encounter with the Dominican Fr. Giocondo Pio Lorgna, which was a fundamental moment in her spiritual life. For over twenty-five years, until his death, he was her spiritual director, helping her to grow in her love for the cross and the Eucharist.

Caterina experienced the Eucharistic encounter as a meeting with a real person – with God, whom she called “annihilated and hidden”, but whom she knew to be the only one with the power to transform a person’s life. After receiving the Eucharist, she grew in an ever stronger desire for per-

fection and for union with God. While Eucharistic contemplation led her to an authentic knowledge of herself and her own nothingness, it also gave her the strength to spread her wings and cast her gaze farther away, where many sisters and brothers needed her help.

Her communion with Christ generated a call to mission, which manifested itself in the presence of deep sentiments of love, in what she experienced as Christ's thirst for souls. She wrote, "I felt a great thirst for souls.... Give me, Jesus, many of these souls, I want to bring them back to your feet, beautiful and purified" (September 16, 1912). Contemplating Christ in his passion, under the Crucifix and in the Eucharistic presence, sharing the anxiety of love, Caterina longed to satisfy this thirst in the way that Christ himself had chosen: through suffering. Thus, was born the desire to offer herself with Christ and in Christ as a victim for her brothers and sisters. On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Catherine offered herself to the Lord's Merciful Love; an act that was a synthesis of her journey, of her many desires and intuitions that came together into one great ideal: "I feel immense desires in me. I would like to be an apostle of your love, O great God! To die as a martyr of charity, to spend every moment of my life to make that Love known, for the Glory of God and for the good of souls."

In the light of the Eucharist, we can understand the various missionary activities Caterina undertook. One was the publication in 1915 of what she entitled the "Apostolic Page", which called for a monthly day of prayer and of offering one's daily toils for the missions, for missionary vocations, for the spiritual and material needs of missionaries, and the conversion of those who still do not know Christ. Another was an Hour of Adoration, to which she invited people to pray for the missions around the world before the Eucharistic Christ. A third was the St. Catherine of Siena Missionary Union, a group of women, bound by private vows, who met monthly to offer a few hours of work for the missions and adoration for the same purpose, accompanied by a priest who would lead them on a journey of missionary formation.

The double movement of work and adoration also marked another initiative by Caterina, the missionary laboratory, which later became the diocesan missionary laboratory. She would say that “only prayer and work would have had the efficacy of realizing the goal that Zecchini proposed to the faithful for the non-believers.” Finally, she organized the Institution of the Little Apostles of the Holy Childhood and an amateur theater company. The proceeds of the recitals were offered for the missions.

Caterina’s experience of offering herself as a “victim,” along with her ever deepening thirst for prayer and progressive emptying of herself before God were clear signs of a vocation that could no longer be limited to one person. It blossomed into a new religious institute. The intuition for this work came to her, once again, before the Eucharistic Jesus.

The idea of forming a religious community came to her at Castel di Godego in 1912. It would be a community completely devoted to the universal mission of the Church. But it would take many years of reflection and discernment, as well as a journey of faith and a careful search for the will of God with the help of some priests, before the idea would become reality.

In October of 1918, Caterina was forced to take refuge in Novara because of the ravages of war. There, in Santa Maria delle Grazie church she met Fr. Luigi Fizzotti, a Passionist priest, who heard her confession. Even though she did not reveal much about her plans, she was urged by her confessor to begin the work of organizing the new institute without delay because it was the work of God. Fr. Luigi always remained close to Caterina, supporting her in her role as foundress, helping her make her way through letters and recommendations and when it came to giving an institutional face to the work, he was its principle sponsor.

Caterina then asked the Cardinal Patriarch of Venice, Pietro La Fontaine, to bless the work she had begun, which by now included a number of companions that had joined her spiritually. On November 10, 1922, the Cardinal signed a decree establishing a Pious Union, but it was only

on May 30, 1923, that Caterina Zecchini and her first two companions entered the first cenacle of community life. On the very next day, the Feast of Corpus Christi, they formally consecrated themselves to God in the presence of Fr. Lorgna. This first stage of the community lasted from 1923 to 1933 an involved intense engagement of prayer and sacrifice, before the community would be officially recognized by the Church.

On April 10, 1933, after various difficulties, delays, and obstacles of all kinds, the Constitutions and Rules of the *Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Sacrament* were approved. “It was given a yes,” reads the diary of the Patriarch, who wanted the decree to be dated on Good Friday. This date is certainly appropriate because – the decree reads – “we are now in the nineteen hundredth centenary of the Redemption. It is the day when the Lord shed his blood for the human race. And the new congregation, aside from that which is common to all religious institutes, calls on its daughters to work among the faithful for the non-believers, helping Catholic Missions with spiritual and material works, which relates very well with the purposes of Redemption itself.” For Caterina and her companions, it was an early Easter.

She herself had expressed it thus in the first Rule of 1923: “A work that is fully imbued with an apostolic and Eucharistic spirit, which has the mission of gathering into the heart of Christ the souls of the poor non-believers and thus increasing the number of those who worship him.” As a cornerstone for her institute, Caterina insisted upon love for the Church, particularly in its maternal and missionary nature. Therefore, this work had to possess a general apostolic character as its primary quality (Rule of 1923): “All missions without exception will have the suffrage of our prayers, sacrifices, offerings.”

Universal missionary contemplation lived in this way produced a definite choice in Caterina. “We want to exercise our mission here among the faithful, for the benefit of the non-believers. We seek, therefore, with the help of the Lord, to strive most earnestly for the spiritual and material good

of Catholic missions and to spread the missionary idea in every class of people” (to Patriarch Pietro La Fontaine, July 25, 1922). Caterina’s life and spirituality found strength and meaning in the Eucharist, the very source of the life of the whole Church and her mission.

Caterina knew that the ideal that motivated her was realizable only through suffering. She never refused the cross, even when in the last years of her life it came to visit her in the form of a painful illness and a series of misunderstandings. Still she found strength and courage before the tabernacle, praying at length, even at night, to ask for graces for the institute and for the extension of the kingdom of God throughout the earth. After a life completely dedicated to the Eucharistic-missionary ideal, her death, which occurred on October 17, 1948, fulfilled what she had written many years before in the institute’s Rule: “At the end of our mortal life, the last note of the love that our poor heart will emit will be that of the dying Christ: ‘Consummatum est, – It is accomplished!’”

Baptised  
and sent

October  
2019

## BLESSED CYPRIAN MICHAEL IWENE TANSI (1903-1964)

**B**lessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, the first blessed of Nigeria, was born in 1903 in Igboezunu, on the edge of the forest, near the ancient city of Aguleri in southern Nigeria, located in what is now the Diocese of Onitsha. Only a few years before, in 1890, the Alsatian Catholic missionaries had brought the first announcement of the faith to the region; they were soon followed by Irish missionaries who belonged to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

His parents, peasants, were pagans who practiced the traditional religion of the Igbo people. In 1909, at only six years old, little Iwene was sent by his parents to the town of Aguleri. There, in the Christian neighborhood called Nduka, he lived in the house of a maternal aunt whose son, Robert Orekie, a Christian, was a teacher in the mission school. At the age of nine, he was baptized and was given the name of Michael. His peers described him as a studious boy who demanded very much of himself. He had a strong influence on his companions, who were fascinated by his decisive and precocious personality, both on human and religious levels, and by his profound piety.

In 1913, Michael moved to Onitsha, where he enrolled in Holy Trinity Primary School and in 1919, he obtained the diploma that enabled him to teach. In 1924, he assumed the post of principal of St. Joseph School. He felt the call of God to the priestly life, and in 1925, at the age of 22, resolutely overcoming the opposition of family members, entered the newly established St. Paul Seminary in Igbariam, becoming the first indigeneous vocation of the area. By 1932, the confidence he had inspired in his

superiors was so great that he was entrusted with the role of treasurer of the Training College. On December 19, 1937, he was ordained a priest by the missionary Bishop Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp. in the Cathedral of Onitsha.

Michael demonstrated his exceptional gifts throughout the first twelve years of his priesthood, which has been confirmed by the many testimonies of those who witnessed his zeal and his complete abandonment to God. Michael's first assignment was in the parish of Nnewi. Elisabeth Isichei, in her precious book *Totally for God: The Life of Michael Iwene Tansi*, summarizes his strongest pastoral characteristics: "personal asceticism, great capacity for commitment and physical resistance, goodness towards the sick and the poor, concern for the sanctity of marriage and the spiritual formation of women, as well as personal charisma."

In 1940, he bravely managed to dispel a superstitious myth about land that had been given to the missionaries, which was known as "the cursed forest." It was expected that anyone who entered would die or otherwise contract some kind of terrible disease. The first thing that Fr. Michael did was travel through the forest, sprinkling it with holy water. When he emerged unscathed, the people took courage and cut down the forest. The next step was to build a church and a school, a rectory and houses of welcome. They were rudimentary buildings, but he helped build them himself, offering a concrete example of being a tireless worker. Seeing a priest working so hard prompted many people to help him, and his example inspired others to undertake similar endeavors throughout the region.

As for women, he cared about their dignity and put forth much effort to protect their virginity. To do so, he organized houses in his parishes which accommodated young women so as to prepare them for marriage and to deter them from living with their future husband before marriage. The Legions of Mary that he established assisted him in every village of the parish by informing him of sick people who wanted to be baptized, promoting the morality of the inhabitants, and preparing the catechumens. He committed himself to the building of schools and to making sure that there

were qualified teachers. He built houses in which to welcome the oldest students, one for boys and one for girls. He attended to a good number of orphans, and he made sure that each of them received a suitable education.

Fr. Michael seemed to have a special gift to encourage priestly vocations; at least seventy priests came from his parishes. He was a good preacher. People were touched by what he said and remembered his teaching. He was critical of some pagan customs and superstitions and, even when he could not completely eradicate them, he still managed to weaken their hold on his parishioners.

Amid the whirlwind of pastoral activities, he perceived the beauty of the contemplative life. During a retreat day with the clergy, Archbishop Charles Heerey expressed the wish that a few of his priests embrace a monastic experience, in order to bring the seed of contemplative life into the diocese. Father Tansi, without hesitating, declared himself ready to put his bishop's proposal into action, along with the assistant priest at his parish, Fr. Clement Ulogu. In July 1949, contacts were made with the Cistercian Abbey of Mount Saint Bernard in Leicester, England, which agreed to welcome the two priests. Michael arrived at Mount Saint Bernard on July 3, 1950, accompanied by Archbishop Heerey.

Under the action of the Spirit, the man who had been an authentic pioneer and "manager" in the young missionary church of the diocese of Onitsha made himself a humble and docile monk in his new way of life. He embraced the austerity and silence of everyday Trappist life, where no one except the novice master, Fr. Gregory Wareing, had any idea of the magnificent work he had done as a priest. One of the memories shared by those who knew him at Mount Saint Bernard is the image of him praying in the chapel of the Madonna, with his head bent to one side, as if he were listening to his Lord speaking to him.

The original idea with which the two Nigerians had entered the community was to receive formation in monastic life, with the aim of then bringing it to Nigeria, but the difficulty of making a foundation with only

two people soon became clear. Eventually they freely asked to be admitted to profession at Mount Saint Bernard and to wait until the community was able to send a group. In 1963, the monastic community decided to establish a foundation in Africa, but in Cameroon rather than Nigeria. This disappointed Fr. Michael, but he accepted it as God's will.

When the group for the foundation in Cameroon was appointed, Fr. Michael was chosen as the novice master, because he seemed to be the right person to form the future African vocations. The first four founders left Mount Saint Bernard on October 28, 1963, to prepare the buildings for the rest of the group's arrival, scheduled for the spring of the following year. But God's plan for Fr. Michael was different, and it was made manifest in a very short time.

In January 1964, he was struck with acute pain in one of his legs, which swelled enormously. The doctor diagnosed thrombosis and proposed hospitalization. Urgently admitted to the Royal Infirmary in Leicester, he was diagnosed with an aortic aneurysm. During the night he got worse, and on the morning of January 20, 1964, in a spirit of total poverty and detachment, Fr. Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi took the last step of his long journey of faith and love in silence.

On January 22, 1986, twenty-two years after his death, with great solemnity before a gathering of faithful from all parts of Nigeria, the process of his canonization was opened in the Cathedral of Onitsha. By that time, a few monastic communities of contemplative life had already begun to flourish in the area. The remains of Fr. Michael were exhumed in 1988 and returned to Onitsha. During the reburial Mass, a miracle occurred when the bishop allowed seventeen-year-old Philomina Emeka, who had been suffering from inoperable tumors, to approach and touch Fr. Michael's coffin, and she was immediately healed. The miracle led to his beatification celebrated by Pope St. John Paul II on March 22, 1998.

## VENERABLE DÉLIA TÉTREULT (1865-1941)

“**F**or God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). Over a hundred years ago, these words deeply touched the heart of Délia Tétreault. In 1916 she wrote: “God has given us everything, even his Son. What better means of repaying him – as much as a weak creature can do in this world – than by giving him sons, the chosen, who also will sing his mercy forever and ever?”

Awestruck by the unmerited love that God has for us, Délia Tétreault responded with gratitude. A woman with a universal heart, Mother Mary of the Holy Spirit (her religious name) was the founder of the first female missionary institute in Canada and played a decisive and undeniable role for the missionary Church. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in Canada and in particular in Québec, the Church occupied a prominent position in a society marked by Jansenism, in which women were hardly recognized. The means of social communication were still quite undeveloped and the written word played a major role in the transmission of news. In this socio-ecclesial context, Délia Tétreault, inspired by the Holy Spirit, brought a breath of fresh air to her society. Her bold vision and creative action contributed to the opening of her country and her Church to the world.

Délia was born on February 4, 1865, in Sainte-Marie de Monnoir, today Marieville, Québec. Frail in health and orphaned by her mother, she was adopted by her aunt Julie and her godfather Jean Alix at the age of two and lived a happy childhood. From a young age, Délia loved to hide in the barn reading the *Annals of the Holy Childhood* and of *the Propagation of the Faith*,

which she found in an old chest. The missionary narratives fascinated her and the first fruits of her vocation began to take shape. At that time, she had an inspired dream: “I was next to the bed, and suddenly I saw a field of ripe wheat that stretched as far as the eye could see. At a certain moment all those spikes turned into children’s heads, and I immediately understood that they represented souls of ‘pagan’ children.”

The visit of some missionaries from the Canadian Northwest deeply moved her heart. She said, “Although I felt an inexpressible admiration for the apostolic life, I would never have dared to undertake it. Indeed, apostolic life did not seem possible to me, since there was no community of religious missionaries in Canada.” At eighteen, after being refused by the Carmel of Montreal, she entered the Sisters of Charity of St. Hyacinth, but an epidemic sent her home. A decisive event marked her brief time in that community. “One evening,” she recounted, “while I was with the postulants in a small room, it seemed to me that Our Lord told me that I should later found a congregation of women for the foreign missions, and work toward the foundation of a similar society of men, a Seminary for the Foreign Missions modelled on the one in Paris.”

Some years passed when she met Fr. John Forbes, a missionary in Africa. Délia planned to leave for Africa with him, but she fell ill the very night of their planned departure. Jesuit Father Almiré Pichon, helped her found *Bethany*, a project dedicated to social works in Montreal. Troubled by doubts, she worked there for ten years but felt that the Lord was calling her to something else. Later at Bethany, Délia met Fr. Gustave Bourassa and Jesuit Fr. A.M. Daigneault, both missionaries from Africa, who supported her in her missionary desire. Other men and women of God, especially Archbishop Paul Bruchési of Montréal, played a fundamental role in her vocation.

A strong missionary spirit enflamed the Church in the early twentieth century. But Canada was not considered among the great donor countries on a universal level, both for the Pontifical Mission Societies and for missionary vocations. Donations and resources passed through foreign religious

communities operating in Canada. Young people who aspired to missionary life had to be trained abroad. In 1902, after many trials, Délia and two companions founded an apostolic school in Montreal for the formation of young girls for missionary communities.

In November 1904, while Archbishop Bruchési was visiting Rome, Father Gustave Bourassa, a supporter of the young community, died in an accident. He had asked Bruchési to speak to the Pope about this nascent community and, despite his hesitations, the archbishop did so with Pope Pius X. The Pope exclaimed, "Establish it, establish it ... and all the blessings of heaven will descend upon this foundation." On December 7, the Pope conferred on it the name of the Society of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, indicating the whole world as its field of apostolate. On August 8, 1905, Délia made her perpetual profession. "All mission countries are open to you." She could only give thanks. Her missionary dream had become reality.

The founder realized that it was time for the Church in Canada to offer its contribution for service to the universal mission of the Church. She endeavored to awaken and form the missionary conscience in the country, creating fertile ground in which missionary vocations would emerge and where the resources needed to support missions in other countries would be found. The first request came from the bishop of Canton, China. In 1909 Délia sent him six young sisters. She would, in time, open a total of nineteen missions in the Far East. Among the requests she received from bishops, Délia Tétreault favored the works of mercy: kindergartens and orphanages for abandoned children, communities for leprous women, and houses for the elderly or disabled people. In fact, she opened the first school for girls in Canton, a hospital for people with psychic disorders, and promoted formation activities for the catechists and the other religious in the area. The obstacles were numerous as evidenced by her voluminous correspondence, yet undaunted she encouraged her daughters from a distance, insisting on Christian values.

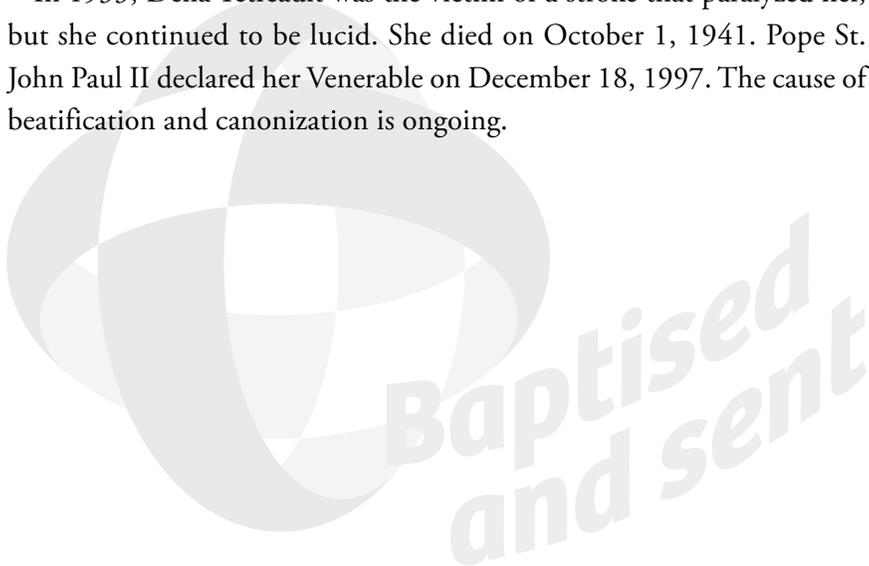
Because her health was fragile, Délia could never leave her homeland. But by God's providence, Canada benefited from her apostolic zeal for the mission. Among the preferred missionary works, she and her institute immediately became committed to promoting the Missionary Societies of the Holy Childhood and of the Propagation of the Faith. Both Societies were already present in Canada but were languishing because of neglect. In 1908, Délia and her daughters introduced the Society of the Holy Childhood to Outremont and Montréal. In 1917, Archbishop Paul Bruchési officially called them to revitalize the Society of the Holy Childhood in his diocese. They did everything in their power to inspire the local children to open their hearts to the needs of the other children in distant countries of the world who did not know Jesus. The sisters would visit all of the parishes and schools of Québec and elsewhere in Canada with boundless zeal.

In 1917, the Society of the Propagation of the Faith was experiencing a steady decline in support, and Délia was determined to address this problem with the same exuberance. During all of these years, the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception actively collaborated in the Pontifical Mission Societies at all levels, in Canada, South America, Haiti, and Madagascar. Délia Tétreault even exploited the power of the media to promote missionary formation in Canada and to support the missions abroad. In 1920 she launched the missionary magazine *Le Précurseur*, and an English edition was introduced in 1923. Many missionary vocations were born through exposure to these publications.

Seeking to fulfill the will of God, Délia persevered in trying to accomplish the second part of her dream: to collaborate in the foundation of a seminary for missionary priests and had a concrete plan to support this work. Discreetly, but boldly, she visited the bishops of the various dioceses, insisting that this initiative was not just a Canadian extension of the Paris Foreign Missions Seminary. As a result, on February 2, 1921, the bishops of Québec founded the Society of Foreign Missions of Québec.

From the very beginning, Délia invited the collaboration of the laity in support of the missions. She made them missionaries in their own areas of daily life. She introduced spiritual retreats for women and apostolic schools. She also answered an obvious need: to help the Chinese immigrants in the country. She opened hospitals, schools, and centers and inaugurated catechesis in Chinese. Her very compassion evangelized.

In 1933, Délia Tétreault was the victim of a stroke that paralyzed her, but she continued to be lucid. She died on October 1, 1941. Pope St. John Paul II declared her Venerable on December 18, 1997. The cause of beatification and canonization is ongoing.



October  
2019

## SERVANT OF GOD EZECHIELE RAMIN (1953-1985)

The missionary life and martyrdom of the Servant of God Fr. Ezechiele Ramin can be summarized by a sentence that he himself uttered during his homily at Sunday Mass on February 17, 1985, in Cacoal, Brazil, just twelve months after his arrival in that country: “The father who is speaking to you has received death threats. Dear brothers, if my life is for you, my death too will be for you.”

Ezechiele was born in Padua, Italy, on February 9, 1953 to Mario Ramin and Amirabile Rubin. He was their fourth child of six. The parents, of modest means, succeeded with great sacrifice to realize the dream of educating all their children, but their primary desire was to give them a solid human and Christian formation, which would prepare them to face the trials of life. He spent a peaceful childhood and adolescence, anchored to the values of faith and religious practice, study and work, sacrifice and sobriety, love and mutual help, simplicity and honesty. It was a family shaped above all by the mother’s total dedication. Her day was illuminated by the daily Mass and by the prayer with which she often accompanied her housework.

Ezechiele completed his scholastic career with the belief that study was important for life, beyond being his “work” of those years. An awareness of the poverty in which a great part of humanity – then called the Third World – lived, led him to carry out practical forms of solidarity with the oppressed. He joined the “Open Hands” association in Padua and offered his support to the summer work camps that financed micro-projects in the Third World through the collection of used paper, glass, iron, and rags.

Ezechiele always kept in mind the need to be aware of marginalization and poverty in society.

In a speech he offered on World Mission Sunday in October 1971, when he was just eighteen years old, Ezechiele said, “Christ is now on the road to Emmaus, in the streets. He is the face of the poor brother, the old man devoured by leprosy, the millions of hungry, the 600,000 undernourished children. Our Christianity is a strong commitment that can become, if we want, a witness of life to those around us, because one never arrives before God alone.” The experience of “Open Hands” was so intense and meaningful for him that he continued it in Florence in 1973-74, while he was carrying out a trial period with the Comboni missionaries.

At the end of the summer, when his parents asked him about which university he wanted to attend, he invited them to get in the car and brought them to the Comboni Missionary Institute in Verdara. He surprised them by saying, “Here is my faculty!” They were perplexed, as were all of the others to whom he communicated his plans, because he had never spoken about it before. It was a choice he had considered in silence. It matured in the secret of his conscience as he had walked between home and school, along high mountain paths or while cycling through his beloved Euganean Hills. It had not been an easy choice. He spoke of this during his encounter with a Comboni priest who was visiting his school to give a vocation talk, at the end of which he confessed to the priest, “You spoke of Jonah who was afraid of going to Nineveh. That Jonah who is afraid is really me.” Was it the fear of undertaking such an arduous missionary vocation, the fear of not having what it takes or being faithful to the end? In fact, we do not know the fears that may have weighed upon his heart during this time of discernment because the available correspondence dates back to 1972, after he had already made his decision; one that he would never turn back on. In fact, after his struggle making a decision, he was filled with peace and serenity that came from knowing that one has responded to an insistent call. “To bring Christ is to bring joy,” he wrote. “I follow the path of the

missionary, not on my own initiative, but because God sought me and continually asks me if I want to follow him.”

In September 1972, Ezechiele left Padua, his family and his friends, to begin the journey that would eventually lead him to the priesthood. On May 26, 1976, he asked to consecrate himself to God by taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and becoming part of the Comboni Missionary Congregation. When he had made his vows, Ezechiele was sent to England to learn English in anticipation of being sent to complete theological studies in Uganda. But because of the precarious political situation in that country and the difficulties related to obtaining a residence permit, he was sent to the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where he lived and studied until June 1979. During the summer holidays he was sent to an African American parish in Richmond, Virginia, in the southern United States. It was the America of the excluded, of the lost, of those left behind in the race for material success and of those who needed help, even an open ear to listen to their story. He said to one of his brothers, “Poverty was in every house.... I met people who were forty years old who asked me what they should do. I’ve been with alcoholics, with homeless people, with 13-year-old pregnant girls. They all just asked to be heard, to be understood.” In short, Ezechiele showed that he possessed a particular predisposition and sensitivity in grasping the needs of the poorest of the poor and a capacity to stand by their side.

After his experience in the United States, he went to Lisbon to learn the language of the people he was destined to serve for the rest of his life. He arrived in Brazil on January 20, 1984, and spent a few weeks in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. In March he moved to Brasília to take courses in Brazilian culture and pastoral care. As he got to know Brazil, he became aware, not only of the situation of the Church there, but also of the dramatic condition of the poor, especially of the farmers, who had been driven off their lands by the invasion of powerful multinational companies that occupied large pieces of land to raise livestock for meat

export to well to do countries. At the end of June, with his period of preparation completed, Ezechiele reached the Cacoal mission in the state of Rondônia, in Amazônia Legal.

In those days, along with the very difficult social situation of the country, the state of Rondônia was racked by two disruptive forces. On the one hand it was sustaining a constant migratory influx, especially from the northeast. On the other hand, its traditional native lands were being invaded. In fact, more than half of the aboriginal population of Brazil lived in Rondônia. During those months, an area on the outskirts of the Cacoal parish at the border between the states of Rondônia and Mato Grosso had become a hotbed of tension, because a group of landless farming families had settled there to work some of its uncultivated land.

Father Ezechiele knew the area and the conflicts that were present there, since it was part of his pastoral assignment. He travelled to the most afflicted area on July 22 and 23 to minister to the people and to work together with the president of the local trade union. In one of the communities that he visited, the settlers' wives pleaded with him to go and convince their husbands to stop tilling the land that was now claimed by one of the multinational companies. The presence of these itinerate farmers on land claimed by a large corporation could lead to armed confrontation and result in many unnecessary deaths. In fact, they had already been threatened and intimidated by the corporation's armed guards. The women said that Fr. Ezechiele was the only one who had the moral authority and credibility to convince their husbands to withdraw and wait for more opportune times, a credibility that he gained during his months of pastoral care of the people. On the following day, just before dinner, Fr. Ezechiele presented the situation to his confreres, members of his religious community. Some of them agreed to come out to act as support the next morning, given the extreme gravity of the conditions of the farmers. These were critical moments and there was some dissension from the established plan even though Fr. Ezechiele emphasized the

enormous danger that the farmers were in and the heartfelt appeal made by their wives.

A swarm of anguished thoughts and worries must have besieged him that night, because very early the next morning on July 24, while his confreres were still asleep, he decided to leave with the community's jeep together with a friend who was a member of the trade union. At 11:00 a.m., they arrived in the town of Aripuanã (Mato Grosso), a hundred kilometers from Cacoal. They found a dozen of the farmers gathered together and nearby there was a group of men hired by the landowners to act as guards. Fr. Ezechiele and his friend spoke to the farmers, encouraging them to avoid any violence or provocation, given the danger of possible uncontrollable accidents with the armed guards.

The meeting was brief and Fr. Ezechiele was convinced that he had persuaded them to peaceful and nonviolent resolution of the tensions. As they headed out, the armed guards drove ahead of them with an off-road vehicle. After a few kilometers Fr. Ezechiele and his traveling companion found the road blocked by the guards' vehicle. They had time to guess what was about to happen and gunshots rang out. They both jumped out of the jeep but the gunmen focused their fire on Fr. Ezechiele. He shouted, "I am a priest! Men, let's talk!" There was no mercy. He was shot 75 times before he could reach the dense forest. A true execution. It was about noon on July 24, 1985. Fr. Ezechiele's companion slightly wounded by the jeep's windows, after hours of walking in the forest, found the farmers who had left the meeting place. Picked up by a truck bound for Cacoal, at one o'clock in the morning he informed Fr. Ezechiele's confreres. They immediately left to inform the police and the bishop, but the police would not agree to escort them to the site of the shooting until morning.

Fr. Ezechiele's body lay fifty meters from the jeep, riddled with bullets. No doubt they wanted to kill a priest who represented the local diocese that clearly sided with those suffering poverty and injustice, the indigent landless farmers. It is worth noting that Fr. Ezechiele always wore a

cross. It was ripped off during his execution. A larger wooden cross was erected upon the site of his death. It, too, was torn down. But, in the end, the community that now bears his name has replaced the wooden cross with one made of durable concrete.



## SERVANT OF GOD FELICE TANTARDINI (1898-1991)

The Servant of God, Brother Felice Tantardini, a lay missionary of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) in Burma (Myanmar), was born on June 28, 1898 in Introbio, a small village north of Milan, in the Italian province of Lecco. He was the sixth of eight children. As a soldier in World War I, he was taken prisoner by the Austro-Hungarians and later escaped from a prison camp. He entered the PIME in 1921, and in 1922 was sent to Burma where he remained until his death on March 23, 1991. He would return to his native land only once, in April 1956, but returned to Burma in January the very next year. His earthly story does not include any particularly sensational events. What is striking and arouses admiration is “the extraordinary in the ordinary” in this man, rich in humanity and overflowing with faith; someone who made his life a total gift in the service to the Gospel and to his brothers and sisters.

The first virtue that stands out from the overall picture of his life is faith. The criteria that inspired his words, his writings, his actions, and his relationships with people were derived, not from calculation or human logic, but from the Gospel. His gaze was one of faith. We can truly say that he saw and judged things, events, and people with the eyes and the heart of Jesus, whom he loved deeply. In his journey of faith, he let himself be “formed” docilely by an exceptional educator – his “dear Madonna,” whom he invariably invoked with affection and filial tenderness. Brother Felice’s faith was constantly nourished by the Word of God, prayer, and the Sacraments, from which he would draw light and strength to face every challenge and trial, with a smile on his face and peace in his heart,

never complaining about his hardships. We know this from excerpts of testimonies taken during official depositions for his beatification cause:

“He had a pure and simple faith. God and Our Lady were his everything.” “Every morning he had at least an hour of meditation and then he rang the bell. And this he did every morning, without ever getting tired.... He was also faithful to Eucharistic adoration, which he would engage in especially in the evening, after work.” “When he prayed, he was truly attentive.... He seemed to be talking to God as if he saw him.” “His devotion to the Madonna was proverbial: he was always holding the rosary.”

To understand how and with what spirit he worked, the following two testimonies are particularly relevant.

A Burmese nun declares, “He was a man full of virtues, completely dedicated to his work.... And he never wasted time. He was a man who was all about prayer and work, and his work was all for God.... He preferred to do the work in silence and in secret.... It was a way of being attentive and totally dedicated to God and his service.”

A Burmese priest attests, “I remember him as a man who worked a lot, who was enthusiastic about his work and was able to inspire those who worked with him. I remember that he was very careful not to require of someone a more difficult or demanding job than one he could do.... He was always very serene and joking, so he made us all happy and satisfied in our work.” In a word, Brother Felice loved to work joyfully for the Lord. He knew how to teach others about work, which means about life. After all, life is not worth living without a task to accomplish!

“Faith work[s] through love,” says St. Paul (Gal 5:6). It was from his love of God that Brother Felice’s love flowed towards everyone; a love that was manifested concretely in his attentive service to others, especially those most in need: the sick and those suffering from Hansen’s disease and other disabilities, without making distinctions of the creed that one professed.

Self-giving was also expressed in the obedience he practiced in an exemplary way. He happily went everywhere that the bishop or his superiors sent him, and he was particularly happy to have been sent to help the forest dwellers. He said that people in the city enjoyed a certain well-being and had workers at their disposal, while those in the forest were often abandoned and in need of everything. He willingly, but discreetly and hidden from others, stripped himself of everything to help the poor, keeping for himself only the bare necessities. He was well liked by everyone but remained humble and even a bit shy. In fact, humility seemed to be part of his very nature.

The spirit of sacrifice and the ability to face the difficulties, trials, and adversities of life with patience and courage are part of Tantardini's rich human and Christian heritage. We know that he did not grow up in comfort and spent years of military service and imprisonment during the Great War, which tempered young Felice's character. This was followed by his missionary experience in a land and a time marked by misery, hunger, conflict, famine and Japanese and Chinese invasions and bombings during the Second World War; all of which brought unspeakable sorrow and suffering. We also know that he risked his life in the midst of the bombings during the Japanese invasion, which lasted two years. But he always managed to get by with the special protection of the "good God" and the "dear Madonna," as he said. His own ingenuity also certainly played a role in all of this.

But time passes for everyone. His physical health had taken its toll from his work, many an exhausting journey and even some surgical interventions that resulted in postoperative complications. Nevertheless, it was rare for him to complain, always careful not to burden others. Sustaining him through all the tribulations were his rock-like faith and his fidelity to prayer. He could not have been able to cope with so many trials without strong internal motivation and special help from Above, which he sought assiduously with humility and trust.

He died at the age of 93, on a mission that had not yet been completed. It was Saturday, March 23, 1991, Mary's day, just as he had desired. He is, no doubt fulfilling his promise from heaven to be a missionary, but now "no longer beating the anvil, but hammering steadily at the heart of the good God" for the salvation of those poor and humble people he so loved.



## JEAN CASSAIGNE (1895-1973)

**B**ishop Jean Cassaigne was born in Grenade-sur-Adour, in the Landes region of France, on January 30, 1895. He lost his mother prematurely and was sent by his father to Spain to study in a college run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He returned to France around age seventeen to help his father in his work, but he felt attracted to the missions and expressed his desire to become a missionary. Just as he was preparing to enter the Rue du Bac Seminary, he learned of the declaration of war between France and Germany. He then enlisted at the age of nineteen. He spent five years at the front as a liaison officer, participated in the Battle of Verdun, and was decorated with the Military Cross. After demobilization, in 1920 he entered the Seminary of the Foreign Missions of Paris, was ordained a priest on December 19, 1925, and left for Indochina on April 6, 1926. He was first sent to Cai-Mon, an important Christian community in the province of Ben-Tre, Vietnam, to learn Vietnamese.

Arriving at the mission, like others, Jean Cassaigne, dedicated the first months of his missionary life to the study of the local language and customs and was introduced to pastoral care in the Vietnamese context, in the large parish of Cai-Mon. The following year he was sent by his bishop, Isidore Dumortier, to Djiring (Di-linh) on the highlands of the Upper Dong Nai, to establish a new Christian community among the peoples of the mountains of this region, inhabited by the Sré, also called Koho. At the time, the Djiring region was populated almost exclusively by ethnic minorities, because the Vietnamese had not yet settled in the highlands.

From the moment he arrived, Jean carefully studied the local language, which was very different from the Vietnamese language, and soon began to compile a lexicon and a conversation manual. The young missionary quickly began to make contact with the animist populations, but they were wary and probably afraid of the bearded stranger. It is possible that the people of the forest (called Moïs, or “savages”) had never seen a white-skinned European. Little by little, however, with his smile and his amiability, Jean succeeded in approaching them.

He discovered then the misery of those people, forced by various circumstances to move away from their natural environment. Obligated to leave the forest where they usually found their subsistence, undernourished, without clothes, they were easy prey for any kind of disease. And among them, Jean discovered the sickest and unhappiest of all: the lepers, rejected by their families, abandoned in the forest, without shelter or care, waiting only for death to put an end to their suffering. Those poor people, excluded from society, deeply moved his missionary heart. It was then that he made the commitment to devote all his strength to serving them. Slowly, the Moïs accepted his presence and began to seek him out.

At that time, many French plantation owners, who had obtained land concessions from the colonial government to farm the Djiring plateau, asked the mission to create a Christian community. The Paris Foreign Missions Society found the proposal interesting and worthy of being welcomed. Bishop Dumortier, for his part, saw a providential opportunity to begin evangelization in that region. The mission then acquired a house, which at the same time served as a residence for the missionary and as a school for the children of the mountain populations. With the help of some men, Jean Cassaigne built for them the small village of Kala, not far from the village of Djiring. Made up of huts on stilts, as inhabitants of the country often constructed their homes, Jean called it the “City of Joy.” And then, little by little, he gathered the lepers around him. He considered them his own children, provided them with food, and cared

for them every day. In 1929, the village of lepers was enlarged and there were already a hundred patients.

In 1930, Father Cassaigne had baptized his first two catechumens and several families asked to become Christians. At the center of the village there was an infirmary where he distributed medications and other medical care three times a week. He took care of the lepers himself and, with religious instruction, prepared them to die as Christians. In one corner of the village was the lepers' chapel where, on Sundays, prayers were recited in Koho and catechism lessons were held.

In 1935, Jean, with the help of his faithful catechist Joseph Braï and the collaboration of a hundred lepers, founded an autonomous village in Kala, near Djiring, to gather and care for the Moï lepers of the region. A few months later, he had the joy of baptizing twenty-six catechumens in a completely new chapel. It was the beginning of the first Christian community of mountain populations, which would continue to develop in the future. By 1936 there were two hundred.

In 1937, a visitor of the Daughters of Charity, Sister Clotilde Durand, moved by the dedication of this missionary who personally treated the lepers, promised him the help of the order. Four Daughters of Charity arrived at the village in February 1938 and began to treat lepers.

In 1941, a telegram from Rome pulled Jean Cassaigne away from his lepers. The Pope had appointed him bishop, making him responsible for the Apostolic Vicariate of Saigon. Despite his disinterest in honors, he had to agree to "go down" to Saigon. He received episcopal ordination on the feast of Saint John, June 24<sup>th</sup>. A crowd of three thousand people gathered in the cathedral of Saigon for the ceremony, and among them was an important delegation of the people of the mountains in traditional costume, coming to represent the Christian community of Djiring.

In Saigon, Bishop Cassaigne brought his personal style with him. Though he certainly carried out his responsibilities and respected the expectations of his ministry, in his daily life, Cassaigne remained a simple and welcoming

man. He always left the door open; everyone – poor and rich, without distinction of race or social background – was welcome without appointment. He maintained this burdensome task for fifteen years, through which he faced many difficulties, both during the Japanese occupation and during the Franco-Vietnamese war. During this turbulent period, he put his energies at the service of all, organizing aid and relief for those most in need, without preferences or exceptions. The Japanese themselves paid homage to the love of neighbor and the dedication shown by Bishop Cassaigne.

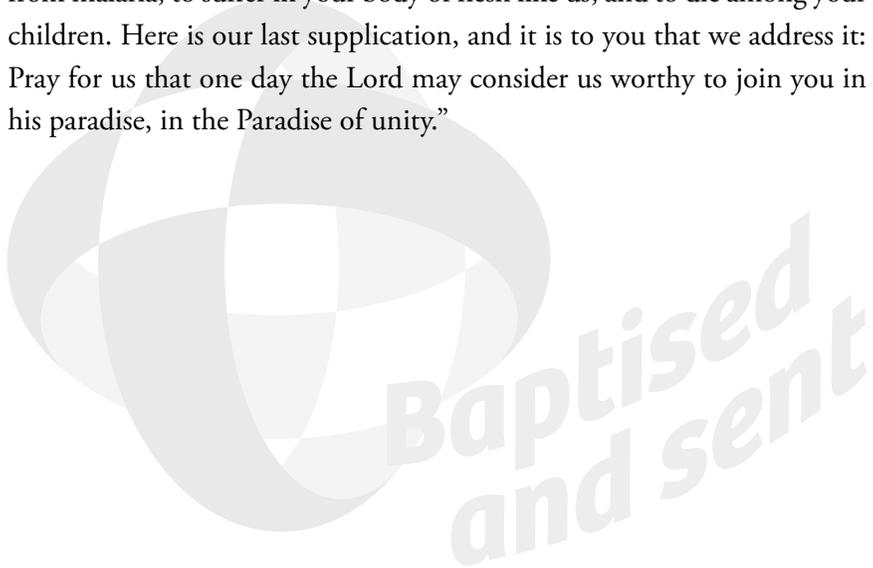
He, however, had one desire in his heart: to return to live with his dear mountain people. When he learned that he had also contracted leprosy, he submitted his resignation as apostolic vicar of Saigon to the Holy See. The Pope accepted it, giving Cassaigne the great joy of returning to live among his lepers in December 1955. From that point, he would never leave them again.

Returning to Djiring, his only concern was to provide adequate material assistance to his people, and above all to offer them the spiritual help that made them happy people. He loved them so much, was so close to them, and mingled with them so intimately that, struck himself by leprosy, he chose to live out this suffering alongside them. And at the end of his life, despite his pains and bedridden by illness, he always maintained joy, a radiant and communicative joy that one day made him say to his friends, “The good Lord loves me, because he chose for me the best prayer, which is suffering, the one he reserves for friends.”

Bishop Cassaigne died on October 31, 1973, and, according to his wishes, was buried in the small cemetery of the leper colony, where he himself had dug the grave for his first convert. The gratitude of the lepers to Bishop Cassaigne was expressed in a moving way on the day of his burial by one of the lepers, who took the floor on behalf of his sick brothers and addressed this message to him:

“O Father, you have shown us the true way to heaven, and this leper colony is your work. Thanks to you, we did not lack anything: food, clothes,

medicines. You sought them for us.... Dearest Father, deprived as we are of everything, we can only thank you and pray to the Lord for you. Today we want to live your teaching, to keep alive the bond of love between us and the way you loved us, to suffer in our flesh of sorrow, as you taught us to suffer during your life among us. Father, when you were alive, you wanted to identify with us, you wanted to contract leprosy like us, to suffer from malaria, to suffer in your body of flesh like us, and to die among your children. Here is our last supplication, and it is to you that we address it: Pray for us that one day the Lord may consider us worthy to join you in his paradise, in the Paradise of unity.”



October  
2019

## BLESSED JUSTUS TAKAYAMA UKON (1552-1615)

Among the many saints in the history of the Church in the Land of the Rising Sun (42 saints and 393 blessed, including European missionaries), all martyred *in odium fidei* during several waves of persecution, the story of Justus Takayama Ukon is special. He was a layman, politician and soldier; in fact, he was a feudal lord and a samurai. Unlike the others, he was not put to death, but renounced a social position of very high rank, nobility and wealth, in order to remain faithful to Jesus Christ and the Gospel.

He was born with the name Hikogoro Shigetomo between 1552 and 1553 in Takayama Castle, near Nara, Japan, the son of Takayama Zusho, who later became lord of the castle of Sawa. Takayama was his family name and derived from the territory that was their feudal property. His family was part of the noble class, or *daimyō*, lords of a castle with its properties. They were second only to the shogun (lords of several territories of which the different *daimyō* were faithful allies, providing them with an army and professional fighters, the samurai) who were often at war with each other to broaden their areas of influence.

In 1563, his father was appointed by his shogun to judge a Jesuit missionary, Father Gaspar Videla, who had been proclaiming the Gospel in Kyoto, the future imperial city. The Gospel was brought to Japan by the great missionary, Jesuit Father Francis Xavier in 1549, and spread rapidly. Listening to Father Videla, Justus's father was so impressed that he decided to become a Christian. He was baptized and took the name Darius. Returning home to his castle accompanied by a catechist, he instructed and baptized many of his soldiers, his wife, and his children, including

his oldest son Hikogoro, who at the time was about twelve years old and who received the name Justus. From that moment on his father became a protector of Christians.

For Justus, the son and heir of an important *daimyō*, it would be his natural vocation to become a samurai, a warrior always ready to defend his family, his estate, and his lord, the shogun. Given the frequent conflicts between the *daimyō*, he participated in wars and fights, and distinguished himself by his valor. His forced convalescence, after being wounded in a duel, was providential for him and he became convinced in 1571, at the age of twenty, that even though he would remain a samurai he would have to put his skill in handling weapons at the service of the weakest members of his territory, especially widows and orphans.

In 1573, his family received a new estate, and since by now his father was too old to manage the family's affairs, Justus became the *daimyō*. Two years later he married Giusta, a Christian, and had three sons (two of whom died as infants) and a daughter. He built a church in the imperial city of Kyoto and a seminary in Azuchi, on Lake Biwa, for the formation of Japanese missionaries and catechists. Most seminarians came from the families of his estate.

Justus used a customary Japanese tea ceremony as an opportunity to evangelize. During the ceremony relationships were strengthened and friendships deepened, and Justus would transform the moment by proclaiming the Gospel to all present and by entering into dialogue about the Christian faith with other nobles. In the first period of the shogun, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who rose to power in 1583, increased his influence among the nobles, several of whom chose to become Christians. But Toyotomi, who had become so powerful that he could unify all of Japan under his authority, began to fear Christians and in 1587 issued an edict that prohibited the practice of Christianity in the country and ordered the expulsion of foreign missionaries and exile for native catechists.

All of the great feudal lords accepted the arrangement except for Justus, who preferred to renounce his estate and suffer exile rather than obey.

Toyotomi suddenly died, but his successor proved to be even worse than he was. The persecution of Christians became widespread and intense, with the aim of eradicating what was called “the bad plant” or “the perverse religion.”

On February 14, 1614, Justus Takayama and his family were captured and transferred to Nagasaki, where they awaited execution together with the missionaries who were gathered there. After months of jail, on November 8, 1614, Justus and three hundred of his companions were sentenced to exile and loaded on a Chinese junk to Manila in the Philippines. During his time in prison, he had hoped to share the fate of the martyrs of Nagasaki. He was certain that he would be killed and had waited for the end with great serenity. The expulsion and the slow voyage on the loaded ship into the unknown served to help Justus deepen his faith. Although received with honors by the Spaniards, exhausted by imprisonment and the long voyage, he died in Manila on February 3, 1615, forty days after his arrival in the Philippines.

The example of Justus is important and valuable. He lived an authentic, honest, sincere, and profound Christian life. He was recognized as a martyr, because even though he was not directly killed by his persecutors, he was forced to abandon all his wealth and social status and to endure a voyage and exile that contributed to his death. He was very happy to have received from God the gift of the Christian faith, and he was a contagious witness to all those he met – nobles of his rank, superiors, subjects, and friends.

He was beatified in Osaka on February 7, 2017, during the pontificate of Pope Francis.

## BLESSED LUCIEN BOTOVASOA (1908-1947)

Lucien Botovasoa was born in 1908 in Vohipeno, a small village in the Diocese of Farafangana, on the southeastern coast of Madagascar, more than one thousand kilometers from the nation's capital. His parents were poor farmers, like many others in this region, always struggling with weather-related risks. They followed the traditional religion but were open-minded. When the villagers discovered the Christian faith, many converted and asked for baptism. Among them was Lucien, baptized at the age of 13 on Holy Saturday, April 15, 1922. His parents converted to the Christian faith much later. Lucien was confirmed the following year, April 2, 1923. From his childhood, Lucien was intent on living his faith with commitment and seriousness.

Lucien's ideal of life was to be a good Christian, an apostle of Jesus in the heart of the world. What most characterized his martyrdom was his love for his compatriots and his persecutors. It is no coincidence that he was called Rabefihavanana, the Reconciler.

Following the motto of the Jesuit Fathers, *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, Lucien studied in Ambzontany Fianarantsoa, at Saint Joseph College, for four years. After he obtained a teacher's diploma, he returned to Vohipeno as teacher and assistant director of the parish school. Even then, he still had the desire to read and continue to learn everything. He was a wonderful educator and an exceptional, competent, conscientious, and zealous teacher, explaining all the school subjects to his students with clarity and kindness. But he was also a Christian teacher and always concerned himself with the religious education of children, to whom he taught catechism both

during school hours and after classes. Every evening, after school, he read the stories of the saints to those who wanted to hear them. But what he loved most of all were the lives of the martyrs; he knew how to tell them with a very particular fervor that set fire to the hearts of those who listened.

On October 10, 1930, Lucien married Suzanne Soazana. The couple had eight children, of whom only five survived. Lucien loved his children, educated them, and taught them to pray. But he also spent a great deal of time taking care of the children of others, visiting the sick, teaching in the evening, leading various groups – the Crusaders of the Heart of Jesus, the Honor Guard of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Young Malagasy Catholics – to learn the catechism. Suzanne, at home, had a great challenge: she wanted her husband to leave the role of teacher to become an accountant. Lucien, however, continued his service of forming others in the Christian life with joy and generosity. He spent much time at church, playing the harmonium and conducting the choir, not only during Sunday Mass, but also weekdays at the early morning six o'clock Mass.

Around 1940, looking for a book on the life of a married saint to be taken as a model, Lucien discovered the Franciscan Third Order (since 1978, called the Secular Franciscan Order) and studied the Rule. With Marguerite Kembarakala, who had formed him to the faith, he established a first community of brothers in Vohipeno. The rule was demanding, and Lucien applied it to the letter. Lucien Botovasoa began to excel in piety and poverty. Every night he got up several times to pray kneeling at the foot of the bed, then he went to church at six for an hour of meditation before the tabernacle. On Wednesdays and Fridays, he enlivened the family meal but, following the rule, he fasted himself, provoking Suzanne's discontent.

In October 1945 and then in June 1946, political elections were held in Madagascar. The two political parties wanted Lucien Botovasoa as their candidate. But Lucien categorically refused their invitation, insisting, "Your politics are nourished by lies and can only end in blood."

Sunday, March 30, 1947, Palm Sunday, Lucien's father sent Lucien and

his brother into the forest. The two took refuge there as insurgents attacked the city. The fighting lasted until Wednesday. The massacres carried out by the political party known as the Parti des déshérités de Madagascar resulted in a bloody Holy Week. The result was a total massacre, with eighteen churches and five schools burned. Naturally, on Easter, it was not possible to celebrate the Eucharist in the parish church. On the Second Sunday of Easter, Lucien returned to the city after having taken his family to safety in the forest. Here he succeeded in bringing all the refugees together in a common prayer, in which Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims participated. Lucien commented on the Gospel, urging everyone to revive their faith and to have the courage to face martyrdom in the event that it was necessary. He spoke and led the song with intense joy.

On April 16, 1947, King Tsimihono, the local leader of the Malagasy Democratic Renewal Movement (MDRM), summoned everyone to eliminate all the party's enemies from the city, including Lucien. On Thursday, April 17, the king offered a key position to Lucien Botovaso, inviting him to become the secretary of the MDRM. Meanwhile Lucien had communicated to his wife that they would condemn him. Suzanne wanted him to hide, but Lucien refused and, taking a picture of St. Francis from the wall, said, "He will guide me."

After a quiet lunch with his family and some prayer, Lucien replied to those who had come to arrest him without the slightest hesitation, "*I am ready.*" He was taken without the least resistance. He knew he would die and when they called him, he came forward. Sitting at the king's right hand, in the place of honor, he said aloud, "I know you are going to kill me, and I cannot fight it. If my life can save others, do not hesitate to kill me. The only thing I ask of you is not to touch my brothers."

If he had accepted the role as MDRM secretary, he would have saved his life. But he said, "You kill, you burn the churches, you forbid prayer, you let the crucifixes be trampled, and you destroy the sacred images, rosaries, and the scapulars. You want to desecrate our church, turning it

into a ballroom. Yours is a dirty work. You know how important religion is to me. I cannot work for you.” About thirty boys from Ambohimanarivo, mostly his old students, accompanied him to the Mattatoio, the place where executions took place, at the south exit of the city, in a place called Ambalafary. Lucien said, “Tell my family not to cry, because I am happy. It is God who takes me. May your hearts never abandon God!” He walked like a free man, a conqueror.

The group of boys arrived at the place of execution. Three men designated by the king were already in place. To reach them, the procession had to cross a canal. Before crossing it, Lucien asked for time to pray and was given it. He prayed, “O my God, forgive my brothers, who now have a difficult task to face. May my blood be shed for the salvation of my country!” Lucien repeated these words several times. He also prayed in Latin, and perhaps intoned the song of Lent that he loved so much: “Save, O Lord, save your people, may your wrath not remain forever upon us!”

Then they wanted to tie his hands, but he refused, saying, “Do not bind me to kill me. I bind myself.” And he crossed his wrists one on top of the other, holding the cross of the rosary in his hand. Once on his knees, he prayed again, repeating the words already spoken before: “O my God, forgive my brothers.” He forgave the executioners first and interceded for them, while they mocked him: “Your prayer is too long! Do you think it will save you?” Some of those who had remained on the other side of the canal were shouting insults. But Lucien answered, “I have not finished! Leave me a moment longer.” He raised his hands to heaven and prostrated himself three times on the ground, like Jesus during the Passion, then turned to them saying, “Hurry up now, because the spirit is ready but the flesh is weak.” While they killed him, the executioners mocked him, saying, “Now go play your harmonium.” Given up for love of Christ and his Church, Lucien’s body was thrown into the Matitanana River. Recognizing his martyrdom and his witness to his faith, the Catholic Church beatified him on April 15, 2018, in Vohipeno, Madagascar.

## MON FILOMENA YAMAMOTO (1930-2014)

**M**on Filomena Yamamoto, a Japanese Xavierian Missionary of Mary, left this earth on April 28, 2014, in Miyazaki. She was 83 years old.

About ten years earlier, she had recounted in a Xavieran publication how she had come to know Christ:

Thinking of the environment in which I grew up and of the events that preceded the grace of baptism, I clearly see the loving hand of God who guided me in a silent and hidden way. I was born to a Buddhist family of the Zen current. In the house there was an altar where the mortuary tablets of our ancestors were venerated. Every morning we offered a cup of tea and a little cup of rice, and we stopped to pray with folded hands. When pilgrims passed by on their way to some temple or when poor people came, we would offer them rice to eat.

We had a profound connection with the temple. As a child I often went to visit it. I listened to the monk's sermons and I wondered why people are born and then die, why there is suffering and why those who do good in the world so often are the ones who suffer while those who do evil succeed and live in comfort. I would often dwell on these thoughts, but I did not dare to ask adults, because I had the impression that they would not be able to answer me.

Through nature, with the marvelous spectacle of changing seasons, I believe the Lord spoke to me. I felt that, above the deities of the ancient religions of Japan, there must be a God who created heaven and earth and that I had to look for the true religion. I prayed to find it, but I did not know where to find it.

When I was 23, I left my town to go to Miyazaki. Invited by a friend, I began to attend the Catholic Church and catechetical lessons. At the beginning,

I felt a certain resistance towards faith in one God, because Japanese culture is imbued with the presence of many deities that are not exclusive of each other. But, continuing the study of Christianity, when I could listen to the passage about the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord and understand the marvelous work of redemption, I felt within me the firm conviction that I had finally found what I had sought for years.

From her early youth, Mon wanted a life entirely dedicated to others, but it was only when she met Christ that she found the way to do it. While still a catechumen, she was fascinated by the idea of giving her whole life to the mercy of God. She said, “When I was still a catechumen, the Xaverian missionary Father Sandro Danieli lent me the autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, and I read of the offering to merciful love that she made of herself. It was the first time I came across this idea. Later, entering the Xaverian missionaries, I was surprised to discover that the founder, Father Giacomo Spagnolo, had a deep devotion to the Merciful Omnipotence of God and that all of us, in our perpetual profession, entrusted our life to Merciful Omnipotence of the Lord.”

Love for Mary helped to guide her choice. When Mon entered the Xaverian Missionary Sisters of Mary in 1961, the Xaverians had been in Japan for only two years. One of them, named Maddalena, remembered, “Mon was a sister who was faithful to the choice of her life. She created harmony in any community that her obedience led her to. Her serenity, her humor, her simplicity gave everyone the opportunity to be welcomed. She was a ‘true’ person of the Gospel, one of those people to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. Accepting everything, and living in the present moment, she offered everything with Jesus and in prayer. She was at peace and spread peace.”

Another Xaverian sister in Japan added, “Open-minded, she was able to face new and unexpected situations beautifully, with a spark of humor. She kept up to date on world and national problems so that she could

take them to prayer and share them with us and with the people she met. She gave special attention to visiting the sick, the elderly, and the lonely.”

A Xavierian father who met her at the beginning of her missionary service remembered, “In the parish there were many sick people, and Mon asked me to go with her to visit them and bring Communion to them. It was the first time I had done this ministry, and Mon helped me in countless ways. From her I learned how to approach the sick, how to pray with them, how to comfort them, and how to bring Jesus into their lives. Mon opened the way for me to be a true missionary. She showed an acute sensitivity to the physical suffering of others, but her gaze penetrated the deepest recesses of their hearts, and she wished to prepare them to welcome the salvific work of the divine Doctor.”

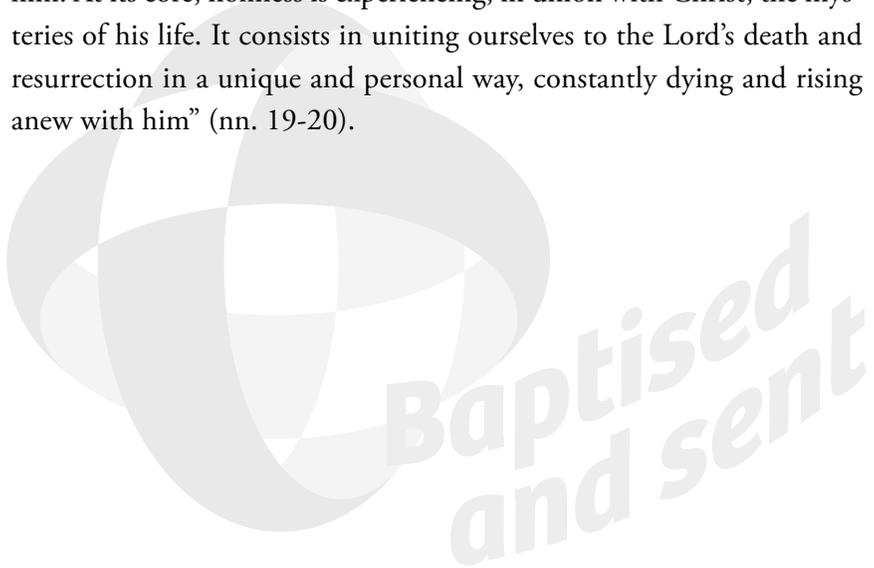
The Director of Shinmeizan Center for Interreligious Dialogue offered this testimony: “I owe much gratitude to Sister Yamamoto Mon, not only because for three years she generously contributed to the life and activities of Shinmeizan, but also and even more for the quality of her presence and for her example of religious life. Always serene and jovial, she was however also very serious and precise in the observance of community life and in other aspects of religious life. Prayer was very important in her life. She was sober and simple and avoided useless chatter, hardworking and very diligent in carrying out the work entrusted to her.”

In 2011, Mon was diagnosed with a malignant tumor. “I went to visit her in the hospital,” wrote a Xavierian missionary friend. “Even then I remember her concern for others. She had made of her room a ‘little church’ where she was in the company of Jesus. While doing chemo she had the opportunity to prepare for death and talked about it with those who went to see her, leaving behind a testimony of faith and serenity from her unconditional trust in Jesus.”

When she saw her smiling, she wondered if she was really ill. She had words of thanks for everyone: “It is thanks to your prayers...” she always said. During her various convalescences, her serenity struck many people:

“People who have faith are different,” they said. In her last days, she prayed continuously, “Lord, come quickly and get me.”

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis wrote “Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel. That mission has its fullest meaning in Christ, and can only be understood through him. At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. It consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him” (nn. 19-20).



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## BLESSED PETER TO ROT (1912-1945)

**P**eter To Rot, the first blessed of Papua New Guinea, was an exemplary husband and father and an exceptional catechist. In 1945, he was killed by Japanese soldiers because of his courageous defense of Christian marriage.

The island of New Guinea is surrounded by numerous archipelagos and includes mountainous terrain difficult to traverse and is inhabited by thousands of diverse ethnic groups that speak about eight hundred different dialects. The missionaries brought the Gospel to the region in 1870, and in 1882 the first group of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus arrived at Matupit (now New Britain Island). To everyone's surprise, the head of the village of Rakunai, Angelo To Puia, announced that he wanted to become a Catholic along with most of the villagers. Maria Ia Tumul, Angelo's wife, gave birth to their son Peter in 1912. He was the third of their six children. Angelo To Puia made sure that all of the children were baptized, and he taught them the fundamental truths of the catechism, while Maria taught them to pray.

As a child, attending the missionary school, Peter showed himself to be an exceptional and hard-working student, particularly interested in religion. The boy had a particularly lively personality, but he was also thoughtful and helpful. Even though he was the son of a great chief and could have let others serve him, he was happy to serve others and even to climb palm trees to collect coconuts for the elderly villagers.

In 1930, the parish priest told Peter's father that his young sons might have vocations to the priesthood. To Puia, however, answered wisely, "I

don't think the time is right for one of my sons or another man from this village to become a priest. But if you want to send him to the school for catechists in Taliligap, I'll agree."

The missionary work to be done in Oceania was immense, but there were few missionaries, and for this reason the local youths were encouraged to become catechists and to work with them. Peter dedicated himself to his new life at St. Paul's College, filled with spiritual exercises, lessons, and manual work. The school had a farm that made it largely self-sufficient. Peter offered a fine example to the other students by tending attentively to the work that needed to be done on the farm. He was a "joyful companion" who often ended quarrels among his peers with his calming words. Through frequent confession, daily communion, and the rosary, he and his fellow students succeeded in combating temptation and increasing their faith, thus becoming mature Christians and "apostles."

In 1934, Peter To Rot received his catechist's cross from the bishop and was sent back to his native village to help the parish priest, Father Laufer. He taught catechism to the children of Rakunai, instructed adults in the faith, and led prayer meetings. He encouraged the people to participate in Sunday Mass, and he was a trusted counselor for sinners, helping them prepare for confession. He further committed himself to zealously fighting the practice of witchcraft that was common among many, even among some who called themselves Christians.

In 1936, Peter married Paula Ia Varpit, a young woman from a nearby village. Theirs was an exemplary Christian marriage. Peter showed great respect for his wife and prayed with her every morning and evening. He was also devoted to his children and spent a lot of time with them.

In 1942, during the Second World War, the Japanese invaded New Guinea and immediately confined all the priests and religious in concentration camps. Being a layman, Peter was able to stay in Rakunai. After this, he began to take on many new responsibilities, guiding Sunday prayers and urging the faithful to persevere, witnessing weddings, bap-

tizing newborns, and presiding at funerals. He also led the villagers into the forest, where a missionary had taken refuge after he had managed to escape the Japanese, so that everyone could receive the sacraments in secret.

Although the Japanese initially did not totally forbid Catholic worship, they soon began to loot and destroy churches. So To Rot built a wooden chapel in the bush and created underground hiding places for the sacred vessels. He continued his apostolic work with caution, visiting the Christians at night because of the numerous spies in the area. He often went to Vunapopé, a distant village, where a priest gave him the Blessed Sacrament, and with the special permission of the bishop, To Rot carried communion to the sick and the dying.

By exploiting the divisions within the population of New Guinea, the Japanese reintroduced polygamy to win support from several local leaders. They implemented a plan to counteract the “Western” influence on the native population. Out of lust or perhaps simply out of fear of reprisals, many men took a second wife.

The catechist, Peter To Rot felt that he had to speak out and would say, “I will never stop telling Christians about the dignity and great importance of the sacrament of marriage.” He even stood in opposition to his own brother Joseph, who was publicly advocating a return to the practice of polygamy. Another of his brothers, Tatamai, remarried and denounced Peter to the Japanese authorities. Peter’s wife Paula feared that her husband’s determination would endanger their family, but Peter responded, “If I have to die, that’s fine, because I will die for the kingdom of God among our people.”

Pope St. John Paul II would later teach, “The primary communion is the one that is established and develops between husband and wife. By virtue of the covenant of married life, a man and a woman ‘are no longer two but one flesh’ (Mt. 19:6; cf. Gen 2:24). Such a communion is radically contradicted by polygamy. This, in fact, directly negates the plan

of God which was revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive” (*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 19).

One day in 1945, while Peter To Rot was planting beans in a field occupied by the Japanese, he was arrested by police officers who had just searched his house and found several religious items. During the subsequent interrogation, Peter admitted that he had led a prayer meeting the day before, and the chief of police, Meshida, struck him. When he professed against bigamy, he was arrested. As he later told his family, “for Meshida, that was my principle crime.”

Peter was kept in a small, windowless cell from which he was released from time to time just to look after the pigs. His mother and his wife brought him food. Once Paula took their two children with her (she was pregnant with the third) and begged her husband to tell the Japanese that he would stop working as a catechist if they released him. “It is not your concern,” Peter said. Making the sign of the cross, he added, “I must glorify the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and thereby help my people.” He asked his wife to bring him his catechist’s cross, which he kept with him until the end. That same day he confided to his mother that the police had called a Japanese doctor who would come to give him some medicine, adding, “I’m not sick! Go home quickly and pray for me.” The next day a policeman arrived at Rakunai and announced, “Your catechist is dead.”

To Rot’s uncle, Tarua, went to the place with Meshida to identify the body. A red scarf was wrapped around the martyr’s neck, which was swollen and wounded. An injection mark was clearly visible on his right arm. Judging by the smell, the “doctor” had injected a cyanide compound. The poison had worked slowly and the soldiers had strangled and stabbed Peter in the back with a knife. Peter To Rot was buried in the Rakunai cemetery and his tomb became a place of pilgrimage. His brother Tatamai repented

and, after the war, rebuilt the church of Rakunai with his own money as an act of contrition. In the fifty years following the death of To Rot, the village of Rakunai has seen at least a dozen priests and religious come from among them for the Catholic Church.

During his pastoral visit to Oceania in 1995, Pope John Paul II beatified Peter To Rot in Port Moresby. The Pope preached, “Because the Spirit of God dwelt in him, he fearlessly proclaimed the truth about the sanctity of marriage.... Condemned without trial, he suffered his martyrdom calmly. Following in the footsteps of his Master, the ‘Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (Jn.1: 29), he too was ‘led like a lamb to the slaughter’ (Cf. Is. 53: 7). And yet this ‘grain of wheat’ which fell silently into the earth (Cf. Jn. 12: 24) has produced a harvest of blessings for the Church in Papua New Guinea!... Thanks to the Spirit of God that dwelt in him, he boldly proclaimed the truth about the sanctity of marriage.”

Baptised  
and sent

October  
2019

## BLESSED PIERRE CLAVERIE (1938-1996)

In January 2018, Pope Francis approved the beatification of Bishop Pierre Claverie and his eighteen companions. The murder of Pierre Claverie, a Dominican and the Bishop of Oran in Algeria, was the latest in a series of tragic killings that cast the Church of Algeria into grief between 1994 and 1996. The other victims were seven Trappist monks, four missionaries of Africa, a Marist friar, and a number of religious belonging to different congregations. Their deaths are inscribed in a dark decade during which between 150,000 and 200,000 people were killed due to religious violence and repression. It was precisely their free choice not to flee this violence for the love of Christ and the Church, which allows us to call these Christians “martyrs.”

Pierre Claverie was born in Algiers in 1938. He was a native son of colonial Algeria. In adulthood he confessed that he had lived all his youth among the Arabs without ever meeting them: “I lived my childhood in Algiers in one neighborhood of this cosmopolitan Mediterranean city. Unlike other Europeans, born in the countryside or in small cities, I never had Arab friends. We were not racist, just indifferent. We ignored the majority of the population of this country. The Arabs were part of the landscape of our outings, the background of our encounters and our lives. They were never companions.... I had to listen to numerous sermons about love of others, because I was a Christian and also a scout, but I never realized that even the Arabs were my neighbor. A war was needed for that bubble to burst,” he explained much later, recognizing that he had lived all his youth in a “colonial bubble.” This awareness, which corresponded to the

outbreak of war in Algeria and its proclamation of independence, constituted for him a real watershed, which led him, in 1958, to religious life in the Dominican order.

Pierre studied in Le Saulchoir, where his teachers were the great Dominican theologians whose work helped frame the ecclesiology proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council: Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, and André Liégé. He graduated in 1967 with a solid intellectual and spiritual formation, which served him well later on. In the letters he wrote to his family, his precocious intellectual maturity shines through: “This morning, during prayer, I finally discovered the Triune God, who has always seemed to me to be simply a theological argument. I believe that it is the essence of Christianity – beyond the life of Jesus, his teaching, his Church, he reveals God to us, not only as a Father God, but giving us the image of what we are called to be: those who participate in a current of love that unites the Father to the Son through the Holy Spirit,” he wrote in May 1959.

Ordained a priest, Pierre joyfully joined the small Dominican community in Algiers which, under the guidance of Cardinal Duval, contributed to the existence of a new type of Church, a Church for a country whose population was predominantly Muslim. For this reason, he learned Arabic well enough that he could teach it to others. But above all, “he learned Algeria,” establishing a magnificent network of Algerian friends who meant a great deal to him. As the country began the process of reconstruction after a bloody war (1954-1962), there was a lot to do in the education and training of leaders. Pierre Claverie made his contribution with the priests and religious of Algeria who put themselves at the service of their neighbors, collaborating in the development of the country. It was a very happy period of his life. He offered a beautiful homage to these friends, present in the Cathedral of Algiers on the day of his episcopal ordination: “my Algerian brothers and friends, I owe to you who and what I am today. You welcomed me and supported me through your friendship. I owe to you my discovery of Algeria. Although it is my country, I lived in it as a stranger throughout

my youth. With you, learning Arabic, I learned, above all, to speak and understand the language of the heart, that of fraternal friendship through which peoples and religions communicate. In this regard, perhaps I am weak and fallible but I believe that this friendship withstands time, distance, separation. Because I believe that it comes from God and leads to God.”

His solid formation led him to participate decisively in the theological reflection of a Church that needed to rethink the meaning of its presence in Algeria. It was not there to proselytize among Muslims. On the contrary, through the witness of faith and its gratuitous action in the service of the country and of its humblest people, the Church could offer an active presence of evangelical love and help heal the wounds inherited from the colonial past and the war of liberation. Only the fruitfulness of witness and the work of the Holy Spirit can convert hearts and move them in freedom towards Christ and his Church. In this capacity, Pierre Claverie assumed the direction of the diocesan center of studies in Algiers and collaborated with the bishops on the drafting of theological documents that attempted to articulate the meaning of a Christian presence in a Muslim world.

In 1981, his strong personality and personal charisma earned him the nomination as bishop of Oran, in the west of the country. His diocese had few faithful, but it was international, and Pierre loved his role as a builder of communion, not only among Christians of different origins, but also with Muslim friends of the Church. He made the choice to make the property and buildings of his diocese available for the needs of the country: libraries for students, a reception center for people with disabilities, a training center for women. With his Muslim collaborators, he established relationships of trust and friendship that would prove to be precious during the tragic decade of the 1990s. God alone can bring a heart to conversion. The Christian faithful are few in number, but a true Christian witness can be given to all the Muslims with whom Christians live and work daily.

On the occasion of a conference at the Paris mosque in June 1988, Pierre rejected political hypocrisy and stressed, without hesitation, that “in the

ensemble of relations that have marked the relationship between Christians and Muslims, dialogue has not always been the rule.” Indeed, he said, the opposite had often been the case. “Polemics and controversies.” Continuing his frankness, he pointed out the obstacles. Beyond the vicissitudes of history, he said, the underlying problem is the difficulty of “acknowledging and accepting otherness.”

When dialogue was limited to words, often ambiguous, sometimes misleading, Pierre Claverie preferred encounter, since the latter involved people. He maintained that nothing could be done if it did not start with creating bonds of trust and friendship. This is what allows things to be accomplished together, allows people to face common challenges and even more complex questions. The Christian must be able to explain why their faith in the Trinity is not polytheism; the Muslim, in turn, will be able to underline how the text of the Koran or the personality of Mohammed moved them, things that are so misunderstood by Christians. One of the miracles these meetings can achieve is to help heal the wounds of the past, which make the relationship between Christians and Muslims often hindered by tenacious fears and prejudices. The reciprocal and honest knowledge of a healthy dialogue between religions helps to promote religious freedom, the right to proclaim and to witness, the right to free conversion and religious adherence.

Beginning in 1990, Algeria fell into a decade of violence. The new political openness of a multi-party system after twenty-five years with a single-party regime favored the emergence of radical religious parties. At the time of the local legislative elections, these parties garnered the majority of the votes and were just about to take power when, in 1992, the military regime decided to stop the electoral process in order to prevent the establishment of a religious dictatorship. Frustrated by not being able to obtain power through voting, the fundamentalist fanatics tried to take it with arms. They began by assassinating hundreds of representatives of the state (judges, police officers), then moved on to the symbolic figures of an open

civil society (journalists, writers), and finally, they targeted foreigners. The murder of the first two Christian religious, in May 1994, was a trauma for everyone. The killing of the seven Trappist monks in 1996 scandalized the great majority of Muslims.

Pierre Claverie was the last Christian killed. It must be added that he had not only made the choice to remain in Algeria but also, and above all, to speak courageously, expressing himself publicly in favor of a “plural, non-exclusive humanity.” He said, “We are exactly in our proper place, since it is only in this place that we can glimpse the light of the Resurrection and, with it, the hope of a renewal of our world.” He was assassinated on August 1, 1996, along with a Muslim friend, Mohamed Bouchikhi, who had made the choice to stay with him despite the risks. His death shocked not only Christians but also many Muslim Algerians who, at his funeral, said they had come to weep over a man who was also “their” bishop.

Baptised  
and sent

October  
2019

## SIMON MPECKE (1906-1975)

Simon Mpecke was born in 1906 in Log Batombé, in Cameroon. In 1914, at age 8, Mpecke attended the elementary school of the Catholic mission in Édéa. It was a mission opened by the Pallottine order during the period German colonization. At age 11, Mpecke finished elementary school. On August 14, 1918, at the age of 12, he was baptized in Édéa by Father Louis Chevrat, and the day after he made received his first Communion. Later he became a teacher, first in the schools of the savannah and later in the central mission of Édéa. In 1920, he obtained a diploma of indigenous teacher from the Catholic mission of Édéa and in 1923, he became the head teacher of the mission.

On August 8, 1924, Simon entered the small seminary of Yaoundé. In 1917, he transferred to the newly opened major seminary of Myolyé, where he did two years of philosophy and four years of theology, completing his studies in December 1935. On December 8 of that same year he was among the first natives of Cameroon to be ordained a priest. This priestly ordination was an important stage in the history of the Church of Cameroon and inaugurated a new era for the country.

As his first ministry, Simon was appointed to serve in the Ngovayang mission, where he took a firm stand against the practices of traditional religions in the region. In 1947, he was appointed to the parish of the New-Bell district in Douala and the following year he became its pastor. He provided strong leadership and increased participation in several lay organizations. He supported the activities of Catholic Action and the parish school, demonstrating great availability and abundant generosity. Also in 1947, by chance,

Father Simon read an article that described the life of pagan populations in northern Cameroon. From then onwards he began to experience a great fondness for these people. The establishment of the fraternity of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus in his parish brought him closer to the spirituality of Blessed Charles de Foucauld. In 1953, Father Simon Mpecke joined the Secular Institute of the Little Brothers of Jesus and left for a year of novitiate in Algeria. He was one of the international founders of the Priestly Union “Jesus Caritas” and became its first member in Cameroon and for a while he thought of living permanently with the Brothers.

On April 21, 1957, Pope Pius XII published the Encyclical *Fidei Donum*, which inspired Fr. Simon to leave his native land to be a *fidei donum* missionary priest in northern Cameroon. In February 1959, at the request of Bishop Plumey, Father Simon went to Tokombéré to establish a mission to reach the Kirdi, a name that means “the pagans.” By this time the majority of the population in Southern Cameroon were Bantu Christians, the north was populated mainly by Muslims of Sudanese origin.

Dr. Joseph Maggi, a Swiss doctor, had already established a small hospital in the village, in a place where there were only a few leaders of the French colonial administration and technicians who were introducing the cultivation of cotton. The beginnings of the Catholic Mission of Tokombéré were an exceptional missionary experience. The task was not easy because Fr. Simon was not member of a local tribe and was, therefore, perceived as a danger. However, the fact that he was African made things easier. From the beginning, teaching the Kirdi became his daily preoccupation. His legendary goodness soon earned him the nickname “Baba,” which means father, patriarch, sage, and guide at the same time. Everyone – men and women, adults and children, Kirdi and Muslims – began to spontaneously call him Baba. At Tokombéré, Baba Simon lived out God’s promise to Abraham – whose exodus and mission, allowed the birth of a people.

Faith and friendship with Jesus convinced him that only love for the whole person would save him from the spiritual evil of sin and ignorance,

and from the material evil of misery and ethnic and religious discrimination. For Baba, school was a lifeline and his school brought hope to make people blossom in their fight against ignorance, tyranny, and fear, which was Baba's way of fighting for human dignity. He decided to bring education "home," giving everyone the opportunity to attend the "school under the tree," a school in the midst of everything, in the very heart of the Kirdi's life.

He went on to establish Saint Joseph School in Tokombéré and obtained permission to open other schools in Bzeskawé, Rindrimé, and Baka. He created a boarding school for the boys and another for the girls, which was run by the Servants of Mary. Baba Simon taught the Kirdis to love Muslims as their blood brothers and did the same with the Muslims towards the Kirdis. Through the school, the health clinics, his commitment against injustice, and an appeal to universal brotherhood, Simon helped bring about a real improvement of the living conditions of the Kirdi populations, too long neglected by the rest of the country. His concern for a constant dialogue with the leaders of traditional religions makes him a prophetic precursor of interreligious dialogue called for by the Second Vatican Council. He loved to travel and the first reason that motivated him to do so was to find the necessary assistance for his work with the Kirdi, especially for the students, inside and outside the community. His efforts brought him to France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, and Israel. He shared the life of the Kirdi, their poverty, and their struggle against misery. His evangelization was imbued with prayer, love for the Church, and charity with respect to their traditions.

After an extended stay in France to seek treatment for a sickness, Baba Simon died on August 13, 1975. He was buried in Tokombéré.

## BLESSED TITUS BRANDSMA (1881-1942)

**A**nno Sjoerd Brandsma was born on February 23, 1881, in Oegek-  
looster, in the province of Friesland in the Netherlands. Attending a  
high school run by the Franciscans of Megen, he began to experience his  
vocation. He entered the Carmelite monastery of Boxmeer on September  
22, 1898, and took the name Titus. In 1901, he published his first book,  
an anthology of the writings of St. Teresa of Avila, translating her works  
from Spanish into Dutch. After being ordained a priest in 1905, he was  
sent to Rome and attended the Pontifical Gregorian University. Back in  
the Netherlands, he taught, wrote, and published translations of the works  
of St. Teresa in Dutch.

Shortly before the establishment of the National Socialist Party in Ger-  
many, he was appointed president of the University of Nijmegen. A few  
years later, he was named an advisor for the Association of Catholic Jour-  
nalists. In his university courses on the ideology of National Socialism,  
he spared no criticism and openly denounced the system. As a Carmelite,  
teacher, journalist, and president of the Association of Catholic Schools,  
he firmly opposed Nazi pressure.

Arrested in his monastery, Titus was taken to the Scheveningen prison  
where he underwent a harsh interrogation but held fast to his convictions.  
In prison, he translated the life of St. Teresa of Avila into Dutch. He was  
transferred to the concentration camp of Amersfoort, where he was forced  
to work and live in very harsh conditions. Brought back to Scheveningen  
for further interrogation he was later moved to a camp at Cleves, where he  
found greater dignity and relief, both human and spiritual.

In June 1942, he was transported with other prisoners by cattle car to the Dachau concentration camp, where living conditions were harsh to the extreme: forced labor, lack of food, and bizarre scientific experiments using prisoners as guinea pigs, including Titus. Sick and worn out by this inhumane treatment, he was consigned to the camp hospital where he was put to death by an injection of carbolic acid administered by a nurse to whom he gave a rosary. The same nurse underwent a profound conversion and, years later, was a primary witness for Titus' beatification. His liturgical memorial is celebrated on July 27.

“Prayer is not an oasis in the desert of life; it is all of life.” In this beautiful expression this Carmelite priest, journalist and university professor indicates the intensity of his prayer life, which gave him the strength to carry out his apostolic activity with great balance and which nourished his courage to bear witness to the truth and to defend religious freedom during the time of Nazi brutalities. It allowed him to accept all kinds of poverty and deprivation by living out the commandment to love to the fullest. Quoting the words of Jesus, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you” (Jn 14:27), Titus proclaimed: “I would like to repeat these words, to make them resound all over the world, without worrying about who will listen. I would like to repeat them so often that those who have turned their heads the first time will have to listen to it, until everyone has heard and understood.... Our vocation and our happiness consist in making others happy” (Peace and Love through Peace Conference, St. Nicholas Church in Deventer, Netherlands, November 11, 1931). Titus also had a generous missionary heart. The international experiences of his religious family, especially during his time spent studying in Rome fueled his dream of being sent out as a Carmelite missionary to proclaim the Gospel *ad gentes*. Alas, this dream would never be realized, because his health was poor and so his religious superiors were reticent to send him abroad.

Although he could not leave for mission lands, he always maintained an attitude of universality, availability, dialogue, and openness to create bonds of fraternity in Christ. Life truly led him to live a special mission, because

his natural inclination to be a consoler of the afflicted found massive and heroic expression in the concentration camps. He died in the Dachau camp as a “missionary” in an “impossible” place, where he succeeded in bringing happiness and inspiring courage. Having reviewed numerous testimonies, St. John XXIII described Titus Brandsma as “a victim of his charity and of his constant defense of the truth.” While he was subjected to insults and beatings, he endured his torments with patience and treated his persecutors with sincere compassion, exhorting his companions to resistance and prayer for those who showed so much ruthlessness towards their neighbor. He was animated by the conviction that the divine light could shine through the priests of the camp, by their fraternity, hope, and trust in God, in whom they dwelt secure. Intimately united to God, he became a vessel overflowing with hope in places seemingly most distant from the divine gaze.

In fact, the mission fields he worked became his monastery, his place of prayer and welcome of the most disadvantaged. He made the university where he taught a place where the Gospel resounded by the example of his life. Drawing from the strength of his faith, he even made the printing house where he published and the concentration camps where he was imprisoned, places of profound encounter among people beyond all social distinctions united under the gaze of God. He was able to transcend and help others overcome situations of profound inhumanity. In the camps, he had words of consolation that expressed a deep certainty: “Entrust everything to the Lord. Do your best, and God will do what remains!” Because his only perspective was God, he was able to adapt to very different people and difficult situations. His solicitude in providing spiritual help enabled him to perform a precious service by administering the sacrament of confession and making himself available for spiritual direction.

To the nurse who administered the injection that killed him, he said, “Good priests are not those who say beautiful words from the pulpits, but those able to offer their pain for men. For this reason, I am happy to be able to suffer.”

## BLESSED VICTOIRE RASOAMANARIVO (1848-1894)

Queen Ranaivalona I, reigned over Madagascar from 1828 until her death in 1861. A relentless enemy of the Christian religion, she venerated *sampy* (a type of idol) and performed thousands of superstitious practices for her own protection and for that of her kingdom. Next to the Queen's family, the most powerful clan in the country was the one into which Victoire Rasoamanarivo was born. Her grandfather, Rainiharo, had been Prime Minister to the court for over twenty years. Two of his sons, Raharo and Rainilaiarivony, succeeded him in his duties.

Rainiharo had a daughter named Rambahinoro, to whom was born Victoire Rasoamanarivo. She was the third of seven or eight children from the marriage of Rambahinoro to a cousin. She was born in 1848, a year that seemed to be - as an old Malagasy proverb says - "like the long distance appointment a rooster has with the sun." That year was marked by both the industrial and proletarian revolutions and the reawakening of nationalism. In this context, Victoire's life would have a profound impact on her society, shaping its destiny and prompting the admiration of those who knew her.

In November of 1861, after the death of Queen Ranaivalona I, the first Catholic missionaries arrived in Tananarive (today Antananarivo). Victoire was thirteen years old and one of the first students to enroll in a school administered by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Clun. She distinguished herself by her modesty and devotion, and above all, by the care she took to attend Mass with piety and devotion every morning.

She was baptized at age fifteen, on November 1, 1863, and made her First Communion on January 17 of the following year. A few months

later, on May 13, she was married to Radriaka, her cousin, the eldest son of Rainilaiarivony. Later, she would insist that at that time she wanted to become a religious sister, but added that “Providence had decided otherwise.” Her new vocation, however, did not separate her from the Sisters. She continued to attend the school because the housework was carried out by servants.

Her difficulties began as her parents and their families tried to convert her to Protestantism, which was the state religion and the one most commonly practiced in high society. She was irreproachable and patient. She did not complain but pointed out to her husband the wrong that the families were doing to her dignity as a woman. Her husband, aware of how right she was, sometimes kneeled beside her to pray. She was further burdened by infertility and quietly endured the social stigma that came with it, as many wondered if this was the result of spousal neglect.

Rejected by her own, Victoire then began to make the Church her second home. Despite many threats, she would spend seven or eight hours a day there, beginning at 4 o’clock in the morning. She created an oratory in her own house where she frequently spent time on her knees, prolonging her prayers until late evening. Victoire had a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, so the rosary never left her hands. Her intense prayer life, rather than taking her way from her domestic duties, in fact, helped her to fulfill them with total dedication. She looked after her house, which included about thirty servants; she often visited the sick without any class distinction; she gave frequent alms; and she received poor and sick people in her house.

When the lay congregation of the Blessed Virgin was founded in 1876, Victoire was its President, endeavoring to instill in her companions a zeal for charity. She created a workshop for making clothes for the poor and for lepers. She also helped the poor churches, constructing a chapel of the sacred city of Ambohimanga. As a member of the Prime Minister’s family, Victoire was a lady of the court. Forced to present herself at the Palace, she

went there as a Christian, with her rosary visible in her hand, and prayed before and after lunch. At the sound of the bell, she apologized and took her leave to go aside to recite the Angelus. When she was asked for the reason, she simply replied, "It is the custom of us Catholics." There was no stiffness, ostentation, or bigotry in her, simply faith, fidelity to God, and absolute respect for others.

What most earned the admiration of the royal court was the heroic patience that Victoire demonstrated toward her unworthy husband for nearly three years. She never uttered the slightest complaint against him. However, his behavior was such that the Prime Minister, in agreement with the Queen, tried to arrange for her a separation and divorce from him. When Victoire became aware of their intentions, she begged her father-in-law to renounce the plan because, she said, Catholic marriage is indissoluble.

On May 25, 1883, a persecution broke out against the Catholic mission. All of the French missionaries were expelled and the Catholic faithful were accused of being traitors against the customs of the island, that is, of their homeland. On the very day the missionaries were expelled from Tananarive, an ordinance decreed by an unknown authority and publicized by civil and religious officials, proclaimed that since Catholicism was the religion of the enemies of the homeland, its followers would be considered traitors.

On the Sunday following the exodus of the missionaries, Catholics looked sadly at their closed churches, but did not even dare to approach them. At nine o'clock in the morning, Victoire arrived in front of the Cathedral. Seeing it closed, she sent a message to the Prime Minister asking if the queen had forbidden Catholics from entering the church. There was no such order. Then Victoire, approaching the official at the door, ordered the doors opened. "If you oppose this by force, my blood will be the first you will shed. You have no right to prevent us from entering our churches to pray." The doors were opened. Victoire entered first and many

Christians followed her. It was a first victory, a most important one, since it established the principle of freedom of prayer.

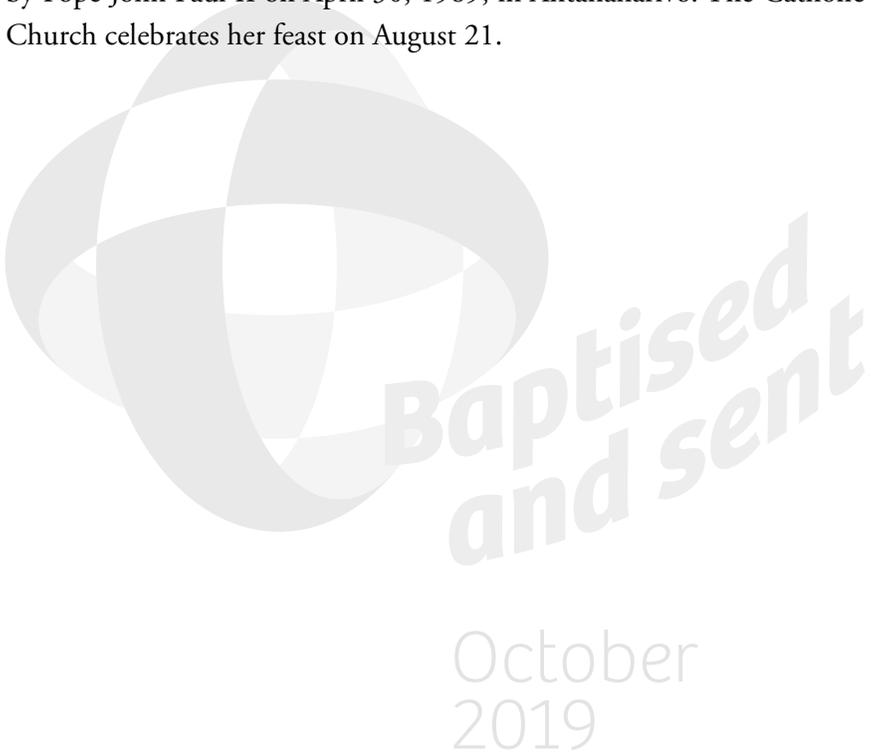
During the Franco-Malagasy war, the presence of missionaries of French nationality jeopardized the future of Catholicism, since it was seen the religion of the aggressor. Victoire had no prejudices against the French missionaries with whom she had excellent relationships but she wrote abroad to ask that, in view of the local situation, British missionaries be sent instead to Madagascar. But the expulsion was, in fact, applied also to the only English national missionary in the country, demonstrating opposition to Catholicism itself, regardless of the nationality of the missionaries.

Father Caussèque, a priest of the Cathedral, founded an association of men called "the Catholic Union," which became the instrument Victoire used to maintain faith and the practice of worship throughout the mission. The members of the Catholic Union reopened chapels, gathered Christians together, and restored schools. It was not easy. Victoire sometimes visited people in the main squares of the town, offering courage by her presence to those who were weak. Some reports of the time describe the expressions of enthusiasm that these visits aroused. "Have confidence," Victoire said. "The Catholic religion is not prohibited. The French left, but religion remains."

When the missionaries finally returned to their posts, Victoire resumed her simple, modest, and humble life. The only thing that still concerned her was her husband's conversion. She prayed and had prayers offered for that intention. Her last work of "spiritual maternity" concerned her husband. One evening, they brought him home drunk, after a fall that would prove fatal. Victoire convinced him to be baptized, which was administered on his deathbed in 1887. She mourned as a widow until her own death, which came seven years later. She had many Masses offered for her husband's soul and took the occasion of her mourning to wear even simpler clothes and to withdraw almost completely from the court. Her most cherished children were the humble: the sick, the poor, the cruelly

chained prisoners, lepers tormented continuously by their disease and banished by society.

After a brief illness, Victoire died on August 21, 1894. Two months later, the missionaries were exiled again, until 1895. On her deathbed, Victoire raised her hands to heaven and holding her rosary beads uttered three times, “Mother, mother, mother,” and then expired. She was beatified by Pope John Paul II on April 30, 1989, in Antananarivo. The Catholic Church celebrates her feast on August 21.



## VIVIAN UCHECHI OGU (1995-2009)

The striking heroism in the story of Vivian is in the remarkable way in which she expressed her Christian faith, having extraordinary influence on the lives of others from the tender age of nine and the courage with which she put into practice what she had been preaching when the opportunity came at the age of fourteen, opting to be killed rather than to be defiled.

Vivian Uchechi Ogu was born in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, 1995, the second of four children of Mr. & Mrs. Peter Ogu. The family was one of the most dedicated at St. Paul's Catholic parish on Airport Road in Benin City, and her father was among those asked to organize the laity of Ascension Catholic Church, a neighboring Mass center at the Nigerian Air Force barracks that was just down the road.

Vivian was baptized at St. Paul Catholic Church, Benin City on July 1, 1995, and she received her First Holy Communion at the same parish on March 21, 2005. She was in the preparatory class for the sacrament of confirmation, which was slated for 2010, at the time of her death.

In academics, Vivian was excellent and she consistently remained at the top of her class from her primary school until her death in secondary school. She combined her academic prowess with a self-determined goal to live an exemplary Christian life, a life she felt would inspire others to greater spirituality and love for humanity so as to give glory to God. Vivian attended the Nigeria Air Force Women Association School for her Kindergarten education. She then attended the Air Force Primary School, where she distinguished herself academically. For her secondary education,

Vivian attended the Greater Tomorrow Secondary School, also in Benin City. At the time of her death, she was in Senior Secondary II, dreaming and working towards becoming a lawyer so she could fight the cause of the poor and downtrodden, especially widows and orphans or, as she told one of her animators, an aeronautic engineer, so she could prove to the world that it was not just a profession exclusive to the male population. Vivian represented her school in many activities. She excelled in Mathematics, which was her favorite subject, and represented her school in the local “Cow-Bell Mathematics Competition.” For extracurricular activities, Vivian joined an interdenominational group where she held the post of Assistant Prayer leader, a post she held until her death. Her hobbies were, reading, singing, and dancing.

Her spiritual journey received new energy thanks to the Charismatic Catholic Renewal in which she began to participate with her parents. As she grew older, she took part in the Bible study courses of the “Joy Group.” She lived out her faith among her friends by exchanging advice and experiences. She was a steward in her class and played prominent role in the yearly Teen Camp meetings which began in 2007.

St. Paul’s Church encouraged the participation of children and young people in the Sunday Eucharist by offering a special Bible activity for them during the Liturgy of the Word and then having them join their parents for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After Mass, the children received further teachings from the parish catechists. It was here that Vivian, at the age of nine years, began to publicly demonstrate her zeal and courage in speaking to other children on the dignity of purity and virginity. Vivian joined the Sunday School Community as it was known then and later the choir. She was quite young but committed. She took part in all special events in the Church such as the yearly Children Day Celebration, the Annual Children Mission Day and the Christmas Carol Service as well as the end of year thanksgiving where the children are given the responsibility of organizing liturgical activities for the day. She took part in almost all the activities in the

parish community as much as her age then would allow. For liturgical celebrations, she would always take either the reading or prayer of the faithful.

After joining the children's choir in the parish her family started attending in 2005, Vivian found that the choir director was frequently absent from its practices and activities, and soon she had informally assumed the role of choir leader. She wanted so much to organize a skillful and disciplined choir that she developed, with her father's help, a formal statute instituting it. The proposal was approved by the parish council and thus the children's choir was officially established in the parish for the first time. Over the next four years, under Vivian's guidance, the choir grew from a small group of about twenty children to nearly sixty children at the time of her death. This choir frequently won first place in the various musical competitions organized by the Society of Holy Childhood, from 2007 right up to the most recent ones. With her deep conviction and love for God and her companions, Vivian proposed the idea of periodic sacrifice. She encouraged the children to engage in various acts of mortification for salvation, for their personal conversion, and for the material and spiritual needs of the neediest children in the parish and the world.

It is therefore not surprising that when the Pontifical Association of the Holy Childhood (PAHC) was inaugurated in the parish of St. Paul in 2006, Vivian was unanimously elected as the first president. During her tenure, she worked tirelessly to make the parish's PAHC chapter second to none in the archdiocese in terms of carrying out works and prayers. Among the projects that she coordinated there was, on the occasion of Children's Day in 2008, the collection of funds to cover the medical expenses of some disabled children at the Central Hospital of Benin City, and also to meet the needs of some children from the orphanages in Benin City. Two institutions that benefited from this generosity were the orphanages in Edo and Oronsaye. For Children's Day 2009, Vivian mobilized the entire parish to establish a solidarity fund for the less fortunate parishioners. Vivian was the official representative of the parish during the meetings and activities

of PAHC in the archdiocese. She was also the first member of to contribute to the creation and circulation of the archdiocesan PAHC newsletter, called “Friends of Jesus.” Vivian loved reading the Holy Scriptures and asking for explanations from her priests and teachers concerning the teachings of the Church. Moved by her love for the Word of God, she had decided to commit himself to writing her understanding of the Gospels. She had arrived at chapter sixteen of the Gospel of St. Matthew by the time she was killed.

Through the archdiocesan training courses organized for children by the PAHC, Vivian became aware of the story of Saint Maria Goretti. She would continually retell the story of her favorite saint when she invited his companions to a life of faith and friendship with Jesus and instructed them on the value of virginity. With her heroic death, Vivian offered a concrete example of this teaching.

On Sunday, November 15, 2009, while she was at home in the evening, armed thieves came and robbed her family and then took Vivian and her sister out of town to a rural area. The thieves tried to rape her, but when she vigorously refused, they shot and killed her. On November 27, 2009, after the Mass of Christian Burial in St. Paul’s Church, her body was transported to her hometown of Aboh Mbaise for burial. Having learned the news of her heroic death, the government of Edo State granted the land where she was martyred to the Archdiocese of Benin City. Two years later, the local government council of Ikpoba Okha officially named the road on which she was killed, “Vivian Ogu”.

Since 2010, the faithful of the Archdiocese of Benin City gather every year on November 15 at the place she was killed for an annual memorial of Vivian Ogu. On March 29, 2014, the Archbishop of Benin City, Augustine Obiora Akubeze, inaugurated the Vivian Ogu Society, with the task of making known the story of her exemplary life, preserving the land where she was killed, collecting testimonies of people about her virtues and about potential miracles, for the promotion of the cause for her possible beatification.

## WANDA BŁEŃSKA (1911-2014)

**W**anda Maria Błęńska was born to Teofil Błęński and Helena Brunsz on October 30, 1911, in Poznań, Poland. On December 9 of the same year, she was baptized in the parish of St. Martin, also in Poznań. Because Wanda's mother fell ill, the family moved to Puszczykowo, but Helena's condition did not improve. At only fifteen months old, little Wanda became motherless. In 1920, with her father and her brother Roman, she moved again, this time to Toruń. There she made her First Communion and attended the girls' high school. In 1928, she graduated, receiving a high school diploma and then took the first step to realize her dream, returning to Poznań to study at the School of Medicine.

Although she had to wait several years to go on a mission, during her studies, she worked sedulously in missionary organizations both in Poznań and at the national level. Initially she was part of a missionary group with the Marian Sodality Movement, where the idea of founding a Missionary Academic Circle was born.

On January 20, 1927, in the main hall of the University of Poznań and in the presence of Cardinal August Hlond, the Primate of Poland, the first Missionary Academic Circle was inaugurated. At that time about 150 people were involved. Soon, groups of this kind were established at the Universities of Krakow, Leopoldis, Lublin, Warsaw, and Vilnius. Today, the Poznań Missionary Academic Circle, reactivated in 2002, bears the name of Wanda Błęńska and sends young people each year for missionary experiences.

Wanda actively participated in the organization of the International Congress of Missionary Academic Circles held in Poznań from Septem-

ber 28 - October 2, 1927, which was boasted the participation of over two thousand people. At that time, the Association of Academic Mission Societies in Poland was founded and Wanda was appointed to the Central Council. For years she participated in national and international missionary conferences. In 1931, she became a member of the board of directors of the Poznań missionary group. She also participated in the editorial board of *Annales Missiologicae*, the first missionary journal in Poland, which, after the interruption of the war, resumed its publication under the new title of *Annales Missiologicae Posnanienses*. In 1932, Wanda received a diploma from Pope Pius XI to encourage the spread of the work of the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

Wanda graduated with a medical degree on June 20, 1934. After finishing her studies, she returned to Toruń, where she first worked in the municipal hospital, and then, until the end of the war, at the National Institute of Hygiene. In 1942, she entered the ranks of the secret military organization Gryf Pomorski, later incorporated into the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), the main resistance movement in Nazi occupied Poland. In 1978, she was awarded the Military Cross of the Home Army. On June 23, 1944, her name day, Wanda was arrested for her conspiratorial activity. In prison, she was sentenced to death, but in the end, after more than two months in prison, she was released.

After the war, she took over the management of a hospital in Toruń and worked in the Hygiene Department in Gdańsk. In 1946, she decided to go to her dying brother, Roman, who was living in Germany. Not having received her passport, she traveled clandestinely in the coal storage of a ship destined for Lübeck and was able to join her ailing brother. After his death, she was not allowed to return to Poland and remained in Germany, where she worked in Polish military hospitals. In 1947, she attended a tropical medicine course in Hamburg. She then moved to England, where she continued her education in the field of tropical medicine and was admitted to the Royal Association of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in

London. There she met a missionary priest member of the Congregation of the White Fathers, who told her about plans to build a leper colony in Fort Portal, Uganda. In 1950, Dr. Błęńska received an invitation to work in Uganda from the local bishop, and in March of the same year began her service at the Fort Portal hospital. Unfortunately, however, the leper colony was never built.

The hospitals of Nyenga and Buluba, built in the 1930s by Mother Kevin, foundress of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa, were the first centers for the treatment of leprosy in Uganda. For years only nurses and laboratory technicians worked there because there were no doctors. On April 24, 1951, Błęńska arrived in Buluba, on Lake Victoria, and began her work in St. Francis Hospital, where she remained for another forty years as a doctor and lay missionary.

At the beginning, the working conditions were deplorable, but Wanda modernized both institutions, bringing them to a high level of treatment and patient care. In 1956, she founded a training center for medical assistants for the diagnosis and treatment of leprosy, which today bears her name. She taught many students in several African countries, participated in the International Congress of Doctors on Leprosy and became one of the most qualified specialists in the world in the treatment of this disease.

In the early eighties, Dr. Błęńska entrusted the management of the center in Buluba to her pupil, Dr. Joseph Kawumie, though she remained there working as a medical advisor until 1992. In 1986, she went with Father Marian Żelazek to India, where for nine months she worked in a center for lepers in Puri. The two Polish missionaries were united by a sincere friendship for many years.

Wanda Błęńska won the hearts of the people of Uganda not only through her professional skills but also through her compassionate approach to the sick. She was called the Mother of the Lepers. Thanks to her work, she helped overcome the social stigma against those struck with Hansen's disease and took many actions to restore their dignity. She examined them

without gloves, unless a wound was open or when she was operating, because she did not want them to feel disrespected. Years later, she recounted, “First of all, I wanted to get my patients accustomed and familiar with their illness to lessen their fear. As with any disease, even with leprosy, one must become familiar. These patients are poor. There are always many people who make them feel afraid. Sometimes when an atmosphere of fear is created, it spreads, it is contagious. I always said to everyone, ‘Look at me, are my fingers infected?’ Obviously, I kept the usual hygienic principles. After examining a patient, I washed my hands. But I washed them not only after examining someone with leprosy, but after each patient, so that everyone could see that this gesture belongs to the habits of every doctor.”

Wanda Błęńska returned to Poland in 1992, but for two years she traveled between her two countries (Poland and Uganda). She re-settled permanently in Poznań in 1994. She went to Uganda for the last time in 2006. Despite her advanced age, she participated in the missionary life of the Church until the end of her life. Until the age of 93 she taught at the Warsaw Missionary Training Center. On June 7, 2003, the Institute for Lay Missionaries of the Polish Episcopal Conference was named in honor of her. For many years she visited schools, parishes, pastoral centers, and missionary groups, particularly inspiring children and adolescents. “When I talk to young people,” she said, “I always say: if you have some good and bright idea, cultivate it! Do not let it fall asleep, do not refuse it! Even if it seems impossible to reach and too difficult, do not be discouraged. You must cultivate your dreams!”

In addition to attending missionary conferences and conventions, Wanda organized medical and financial assistance for missionaries and missions, even with her own money. She was part of the group of organizers of the *Redemptoris Missio Humanitarian Aid Foundation* and was an honorary member of the foundation’s Council. A private school in Poznań and a school complex in Niepruszew both bear her name. She received numerous awards and honors, including the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* Cross, the *San*

*Silvestro* Medal, the *Order of Poland* (which she later decided to return), honorary citizenship of Uganda, the title of Doctor *Honoris Causa* from the Academy of Medical Sciences in Poznań, and, from children, the *Order of Smiles*.

Wanda Błęńska died in Poznań on November 27, 2014, at the age of 103. Currently, the Archdiocese of Poznań is gathering all the material concerning the life and sanctity of Dr. Wanda Błęńska to begin the process of beatification.

