

BLESSED FRANCIS CAPILLAS, O.P.—PROTOMARTYR OF CHINA

1648-1948

HYACINTH PUTZ, O.P.



IT WAS THE YEAR 1607. Less than two decades had passed since the Spanish Armada met disaster in the treacherous waters of the English Channel. The period of Spanish political greatness under Philip II was beginning to wane, and France had begun to emerge as a world power. Protestantism was less than one hundred years old. Yet already it had succeeded in spreading its venom throughout France, Germany, England, and the Low Countries. Catholic Spain was one of the few countries that remained almost entirely uncontaminated, for it had strengthened its faith by centuries of religious combat against the Moors and the Jews. It realized fully that the only true and lasting reformation of Christ's Church must come from within. From its confines, therefore, rushed numerous saints to fight the new foe at home, and to go to the end of the earth to battle against that perennial foe of Catholicism, the pagan world.

THE SAINT

On August 14 of this very year a son was born to Balthasar Fernandez and Anna Garcia de Capillas in the obscure village of Baquerin de Campos in the northwestern part of Spain. On the very day of his birth he was baptized Francis by his uncle, the pastor of the village church. Of the five sons that graced this blessed union Francis was the youngest. Unfortunately, like so many others of God's saints, little is known of his childhood. The only glimmer received at this early date that God had marked him out for great things is the fact that at the age of twelve, while he was at school in Palencia, his fellow students were wont to call him "The Saint" because of his angelic purity, his meekness, and his constant devotion to Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Alphonse, his oldest brother, became a parish priest at Baquerin de Campos, while Bernard, the next in age, entered the austere Order of Citeaux. Francis, as though in doubt which of his brothers to imitate, chose the Order of St. Dominic, the happy combination of both

the active and the contemplative life. He had been born in August, that month so dear to the hearts of all Dominicans, that month of the Assumption of Mary, of the feasts of St. Dominic and of St. Hyacinth. Francis's later life as a Dominican was to rival the lives of these two great saints in holiness and in zeal for souls. Moreover, he was to attain the glorious crown of martyrdom, that great and pure gift which had been denied to these, his illustrious forebears in the Order of Preachers.

Four years after his arrival in Palencia Francis forsook the world and presented himself at the Dominican Priory of St. Paul in Valladolid. Here he was received into the novitiate as Brother Francis of the Holy Ghost. Later as a student he gave himself to the assiduous study of St. Thomas Aquinas in the spirit of the great Spanish commentators. Here, too, where the memory of St. Louis Bertrand was still vivid, a smoldering desire to go to the foreign missions burst into flame. It was fanned into white heat by the reports of martyrdoms and persecutions in Japan, among the glorious victims of which were seventeen of his own brethren in the Order of Preachers. Day by day Francis was becoming more certain that the words of Jesus were meant especially for him: "Go ye into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature." In this atmosphere of study and of prayer he rapidly progressed in learning and in holiness, both of which were to stand him in such good stead in his later apostolic life.

TO FIELDS AFAR

Upon ordination to the diaconate he entered the recently organized Province of the Most Holy Rosary, that Province whose mission history is so glorious even to the present day. Almost immediately he was assigned to service in the Far East. Thus it was that June, 1631, found him and his companions aboard a Spanish ship in the harbor of Seville whence they embarked on that long and arduous journey that was to take them half way around the world. Surely more than a momentary pang of sorrow must have pierced his generous heart as they sailed down the beautiful Guadalquivir River to Cadiz, and then out on the broad Atlantic till his native land sank below the horizon; and greater still and much more permanent must have been the pain of departure from loved ones. Well he knew that this voluntary exile of love was for life, for in those days travel was slow, tedious, and extremely hazardous, and missionaries who left Europe for the Orient gave up all hope of ever returning. Yet he gladly made the sacrifice, for his Divine Master had promised: "Every one that hath left house

or brethren or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold and shall possess life everlasting."

On the voyage to the New World and then across the broad Pacific to the Philippine Islands. Francis became all things to the soldiers and sailors who took ship with him. Doubtless more than one heart, hardened to things spiritual by years of laxity and license, was moved to repentance by his kindness and generosity, by his readiness to console the afflicted, to tend the sick, and by his deep hatred for sin of all kinds.

The journey across Mexico was made on foot in imitation of the evangelical poverty of his holy father, St. Dominic. All the while religious observances were kept up in so far as was possible, and fervent sermons were preached to the Mexicans on more than one occasion. Upon reaching Acapulco on the Pacific coast, the missionaries again embarked on the final and most arduous lap of their journey, the thousands of miles of mysterious and empty ocean that separated the New World from the Philippine Islands. Six of Francis's companions died on this long sea voyage, martyrs to that consuming charity that made them give up all for the love of God and their fellowmen. Surely Francis must have invoked their aid many times to help him open the hearts of the heathen to the Gospel of Christ. Surely their intercession must have helped him to bear up under his later sufferings.

In May, 1632, they landed at Manila, and on June 5 of the same year Francis was raised to the dignity of the priesthood. Now he was ready. Now he could administer the Sacraments and celebrate Holy Mass, the very heart and center of Catholicism. Now he was, according to the words of St. Paul, "taken from among men and ordained for men in the things that appertain to God." Francis's whole priestly life was to be a beautiful commentary on these sublime yet simple words.

The Province of Cagayan was the scene of Francis's first labors. Though his heart was still in Japan, it was to be almost ten years before he was to leave the Philippines; and then it was to be not for Japan but for the vast and mysterious empire of China, where 450,000,000 souls without Christ were calling out across the China Sea for the means of salvation, as the Macedonians of old called out across the Aegean to St. Paul. Meanwhile he busied himself among the Filipinos. To those entrusted to his care he became a father, a physician, a comforter, a teacher.

At the time the Dominicans were in charge of a hospital at Tocolan, and there Francis was sent as chaplain. Here he took literally the words of Christ: "As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me." No task was too menial for him. He cleaned the rooms of the sick and made their beds; he washed them and took them for walks; he patiently did the countless other duties of hospital routine in addition to his constant spiritual ministrations which always took precedence. It is written of St. Dominic that he had a great and genuine compassion for suffering. Here, then, was a son according to the heart of the father; for the corporal, as well as the spiritual, works of mercy were Francis's never-ending practice.

Yet all the while he was bringing health to the bodies of the sick, he was chastising his own body without cease, for the Scriptures warn: "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway." Day and night he carried out his penances. He studied, read, and wrote his sermons on his knees. His very bed became the hard wood of a cross which he fashioned with his own hands. Always on his lips was the simple prayer: "Lord, here I am; that Thy holy will be accomplished in me, that is the one desire of my life."

Francis's capabilities and sanctity did not go long unnoticed, for soon he was made vicar of the convent of St. Ursula. Here he showed the same mildness and gentleness to those under his care as he had shown to his beloved sick. It was in the capacity of superior of this house that Francis took part in the provincial chapter held at Manila in 1641. During this chapter a group of missionaries was assigned to China. Francis, however, was made vicar of another house at Tuao, and with this new appointment, his hopes of going forth to Japan or China seemed to fade forever.

All his religious life Francis had been perfectly obedient, denying his own will in even the slightest things. Now, however, the one unquenchable desire of his life, to preach the Gospel to the heathen in China or Japan, could no longer be confined within his heart. Inspired by the Holy Ghost, he made it known to his superior. At first his request was refused, but when one of the newly appointed missionaries providentially fell ill, Francis was named to take his place.

He went to his new assignment at Tuao with a happy heart, and in the short time left before his departure for China, he endeared himself to his new charges as he had to others on so many different occasions. When word finally came that he was to depart, everyone under his care was sad. He alone was overjoyed, for now his hopes of many

years were on the verge of fulfillment. He was about to attain his heart's desire, to suffer the loss of everything for Christ.

THE CELESTIAL KINGDOM

Because of the piracy and brigandage of the Dutch, the mortal enemies of the Catholic Spaniards, Francis and his two companions, Fr. Juan Garcia and Fr. Francisco Diaz, were forced to remain on the island of Formosa in the midst of the typhoon-tossed China Sea for almost a year. When they finally disembarked in the Province of Fukién, it was April, 1642. Here they encountered a rather backward people, for this province is especially mountainous, and its inhabitants were thus cut off from contact with the rest of the Empire. Francis was assigned to Fogan, and there after some study of the difficult Chinese language, he began his ceaseless apostolic labors that were to terminate only with his death.

At Francis's mission there was already a little band of Catholics, some fervent, others still pagan at heart. Under his continual vigilance heathen customs were rooted out, conversions made, and the faith of those already Catholic was strengthened. Some of his Christians even went so far as to perform acts of heroic virtue. Others apostatized to save face or to attain temporal goods and honors. Francis had his joys and his sorrows, the same joys and sorrows, with few exceptions, that confront missionaries of the present day and that will confront them till paganism is no more, till "the peace of Christ in the reign of Christ" descends upon the whole world.

Because of the modesty of his bearing and the custody he kept of his eyes, the Chinese were accustomed to call him "the father who looks neither to the right nor to the left." Yet as in the case of every saint this did not interfere with his love or work for souls. As always he was prompt to visit the sick and the dying. No danger or difficulty could deter him from carrying out any of his priestly duties.

The ruler of Fukién at the time was very favorable to the Christians. His name was Lang-wu and he resided at Foochow. A Dominican tertiary who had defended the faith in his presence gained from the lips of this pagan dignitary a tremendous compliment for Christian morality. "The Christian religion," he said, "is true, good, and holy, for it teaches men to do good and to avoid evil." Needless to say the good will of so exalted a potentate was a boom to conversions from all classes among the Fukiéneses.

STORM CLOUDS IN THE NORTH

Such a happy state of affairs, however, was not to exist for long.

The famous Ming dynasty was then in the days of its final decline. Throughout the Empire there had arisen a revolutionary element. Chung Ching, the ruling emperor, incapable of putting down the revolt by his own power, made the fatal mistake of calling the Tartars to his aid—those same cruel and barbarous men among whom St. Dominic had wished in vain to spend his life, and in the midst of whom St. Hyacinth is said to have labored for many years. The revolt began in Peking before the doubtful Tartar aid could arrive. Chung Ching, having lost face, hanged himself. The Tartars arrived, defeated the revolutionaries, and pushed southward ravaging the whole countryside till they came to Fukien where the Catholic Church was enjoying such peace and prosperity under Lang-wu, the last Ming. These savage hordes brought this peace to a sudden and violent end. Here they were especially cruel, for they wished to blot out every vestige of the old dynasty and to establish themselves as despots over the whole of China.

To save themselves from torture and death and also to satisfy their jealousy, the pagans of the locality cast suspicion on the Christians. Because of their insidious lies, Christians and their religion were held in the most vile ridicule by the ruthless Tartars who thought only of plunder and destruction.

Francis and Fr. Garcia, his superior, retired to Tingchow which as yet had successfully defended itself against the attacks of the invaders. Fr. Diaz had been accidentally killed by a mob. For several months the two priests worked together in the besieged town. Then Francis received word that one of the Christians, living outside the walls, was gravely ill and in need of the last Sacraments. Immediately he begged and received permission from Fr. Garcia to go to the death-bed. He managed to slip safely through the Tartar lines and to reach the sick person in time. He was able to spend a few days hearing confessions and giving Holy Communion to the faithful thereabouts who for so long had been deprived of the consolation of the faith.

TORTURE AND IMPRISONMENT

Things went well with Francis till he began his return journey to Tingchow. He had not been on the road long when he was captured by a roving band of Tartars. When his identity had been established, he was led back in great triumph to Fogan, for to have captured a shen fu, or Christian spiritual father, was considered a feat worthy of rejoicing. Perhaps there would even be a special reward for the captors of so dangerous an enemy. This was to be the beginning of Fran-

cis's passion which was in so many ways to resemble that of his loving Saviour.

Like Jesus Who was sent from Herod to Pilate and from Pilate back to Herod, Francis was sent between the military mandarin and the civil mandarin. The military mandarin, having searched him in vain for money or for some incriminating evidence, could find no cause to put him to death. Thus Francis was turned over to the civil mandarin, a professed hater of all things Christian. Here he was accused of all manner of shameful things—of stirring up dissension in families, of disrespect for the dead, of unchastity, of inciting riots and revolt.

Francis declared in few words the real meaning and purpose of his religion, and added that he would rather die than deny it. In fact he would consider his death under these circumstances the greatest honor that could come to a Christian. The mandarin flew into a rage at these words and delivered him to the torturers till he should think better of his brashness.

At the hands of these brutal men the faith of the saint was put to the test by one of the most diabolical tortures ever devised by Oriental cunning. Francis's feet were roughly forced between three boards to which pressure was gradually applied until all the bones were broken and the flesh horribly mangled. One involuntary cry of anguish escaped his lips, but then he grew silent, mindful of Him for Whom he was suffering such grave torment. Thenceforth only prayers for his captors were heard from his parched lips, as Jesus prayed for those who were crucifying Him.

The mandarin was infuriated and demanded to know the secret of his love for suffering. Francis replied simply: "My body suffers, but my soul rejoices, for in suffering there is a likeness between me and Christ." He was then forced to read something from his breviary, supposedly a book of spells and charms. Opening at random to the office of St. Catherine of Alexandria, martyr and protectress of the Dominican Order, he described her life and death to his torturers and showed her as a model of all the Christian virtues. He went on to say: "You see that the law of the Lord of Heaven is not so vile as our enemies would have you think; at all times, in all the countries of the world great lords and ladies have embraced it, and today many of the most respected people of Fogan consider it an honor to observe it."

The mandarin, seeing that threats would be of no avail, tried to move Francis by a display of kindness. "If you do as I command," he said, "you will be great in my esteem and you will receive many favors and great riches."

Francis was, of course, deaf to such worldly allurements. He replied simply: "I should prefer to lose a thousand lives if I had them, rather than to abandon even for an instant my God, Who is my only good, my happiness and my delight."

Exasperated, the mandarin had him cast into prison side by side with the offscouring of the whole province, men accused of all manner of crime within the scope of human perversity. From the floor of this filthy dungeon Francis was able to write: "I know now what suffering really is." And this from one who had always imposed upon himself the most severe penances! Surely the pain of his crushed and bleeding feet must have been excruciating. Yet he was able to write again from this abode of torment: "I am very happy here"; and yet again: "To suffer for the cause of God is an honor for the Christian."

The prison soon became his monastery. Deprived of the privilege of saying Mass, his breviary and his Rosary were priceless consolations amid so much human misery. To Fr. Garcia he managed to send word: "If the Lord wishes me to stay here all my life, I shall be most content; and if He wishes to call me to Him, I shall be so much the more content. Pray for me that God may give me the grace to glorify Him in the midst of my torments."

The Christians had managed to give Francis food, drink, and covering for the cold, wintry nights, for it was coming near the time of Christmas. Nearly all the food and drink he gave to the others, and under the blanket he slept with two of the dirtiest thieves in the dungeon. Such patience and kindness, such trust in God's goodness could not but have a happy effect on his guards and fellow prisoners. At the end of two months most of these poor wretches had been converted to Catholicism, and many, among them the two thieves who had shared his blanket, were executed in the sanctifying grace of their Baptism. Francis was to have a glorious welcome waiting for him in heaven from these souls whom he had plucked from the very brink of hell.

When the civil mandarin heard that Francis was receiving kind treatment at the hands of the guards he was furious. The warden was severely punished for his leniency. Then Francis, like Jesus, was taken out and so cruelly scourged with bamboo rods that for three whole days he could scarcely move. The mandarin had hoped eventually for ransom, but Francis had forbidden the Christians to supply any. He told them rather to give their money to his beloved poor. Shortly afterwards this cruel tyrant received his just reward. While observing from the wall of the city the besiegers under the lawful viceroy, Lien-Chung-Zao, he was struck by a stray missile and killed instantly.

THE PROTOMARTYR

The violent death of the mandarin, however, did not help Francis's situation in the least. The Christians were accused to the Tartar chief of trying to betray the city to the viceroy and his forces. Francis, since he was one of their leaders, was condemned to death as a warning against any further attempts on their part. When the executioners came for him, he was saying the sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary with his fervent little band of Christian fellow prisoners. When he heard the joyful news that at last he was going to die for Christ, he turned and gave his last farewell and blessing to his friends, who were very much saddened, and yet happy, to realize that their spiritual father was being taken from them only till they should meet again in heaven.

"Dwell together in peace, my friends," said Francis with triumph in his voice. "I go now to my death."

The saint was led out to a nearby hill. Here he was like Jesus stripped of his garments save only his stockings which could not be removed because of the horrible condition of his crushed and blood-caked feet. His hands were bound behind his back, and he knelt peacefully to receive the blow of the executioner's sword. It descended swiftly and unerringly on the 15th of January, 1648—three hundred years ago.

THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYR, THE SEED OF SAINTS

From the first the Christians gained possession of the martyr's head which is still venerated in the Convent of St. Paul in Valladolid where Francis made his novitiate. The rest of his body was shamefully abused and thrown into a shallow grave near the walls of the city where many corrupt bodies already lay. Here it remained neglected and exposed to the elements for nearly two months. When recovered it was recognizable only by the blood-stained stockings. In the events that followed it was again lost and never recovered.

Thus lived and thus died the first martyr of the Church in the vast Empire of China. That he was a true imitator of Christ and of his holy father, St. Dominic, is evident. For some unknown reason, however, his cause for beatification was neglected until 1909 when Pope Pius X declared him blessed. In the decree of beatification this "insuperable athlete of Christ and citizen of Spain" is proclaimed in glowing terms as a true example of the lengths to which Christian heroism can go. For three days Francis's brethren in Rome celebrated his beatification in the Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, that famous shrine of the Order where so many other glorious events in

the history of the Friars Preachers have taken place. When Francis, however, will be raised to the altars of the universal Church by solemn canonization is in the hands of Almighty God Who will no doubt see to it in due time. The Church in China only prays that it will be soon.

From Francis's blood has sprung up a numerous progeny of martyrs not only in the Order of Preachers, but also in all the other Catholic religious Orders and Societies that labor side by side in the mud of the mission fields of China. All are dedicated to the immense task of preaching the Gospel by word and work to millions of pagans, which he so nobly and lovingly fostered three centuries before. Even today this task is still in its initial stages. At present almost the entire Province of Fukien, where Francis was a witness to the faith, has been entrusted by the Holy See to his fellow Dominicans. Here labor together in peace Francis's brothers from the United States, Spain and Germany. It is for them and for all missionaries the world over that the Order of Preachers prays each January 15th: "O God, who didst strengthen with wonderful constancy the faith of Thy Blessed Martyr, Francis; graciously grant to Thy Church, aided by his prayers, that it may merit to celebrate in all places fresh triumphs of faith."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acta Apostolicae Sedis*—1909.
Acta Capituli Generalis Ordinis Praedicatorum, Romae—1910.
Analecta Sacri Ordinis Praedicatorum—1907-1910.
Année Dominicaine—Janvier 15—"Le Bienheureux Père Fernandez De Capillas, Premier Martyr de la Chine." Lyons, 1883.
Breviarium Sacri Ordinis Praedicatorum.
Licht den Heiden, Missionsbilder Nr. 2, "Das erste Priesterblut auf Chinas Boden" von Hieronymus Wilms, O.P. Düsseldorf, 1919.