

FRIAR LUIS' FOLLY

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OW OFTEN is the Catholic an enigma, an incomprehensible mystery to the world! Especially puzzling is the Catholic thirst for self-immolation and martyrdom. Worldlings can understand a man dying for his loved ones or for his country, but for "superstition and mummery"—never! The supernatural is beyond the ken of the world. Martyrdom is but self-slaughter, immolation but suicide. And among the martyrs, Luis Cancer de Barbastro, walking into the very jaws of death, can surely be considered the most insane of the insane.

The world, however, is not alone in its sentiments. When the contemporaries of Luis Cancer heard of the details of his death and his mad scheme of missionary conquest in Florida, they saw little in his actions but imprudence and sheer absence of common sense. Even religious criticized him for indiscretion and temerity. Enemies of the famous protector of the Indians, Bartolomeo de Las Casas, for years a close friend and associate of Luis Cancer, pointed out superciliously that the latter's conduct was an example of the lengths to which Las Casas' radical ideas about the red man could be carried.

Folly, indeed, might well be fastened on as the keynote of Luis Cancer's life. His blood stained the sands of Tampa Bay, yet, contrary to the dictum of Origen that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church, the Faith in Florida had to struggle for its very existence throughout the missionary era and even today numbers but a few thousand adherents. "Why was not this sold and given to the poor?" Why was not Father Cancer spared and given long years in the apostolate, instead of having his blood spilled in a venture doomed to failure?

Some have a different outlook on the matter. Why should the massacre of a friar on a lonely beach, witnessed by a handful of human beings, having no apparent effects on the flow of history,

NOTE—Under the auspices of the Most Rev. Thomas J. McDonough, auxiliary of the diocese of St. Augustine, in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce of the city of Tampa, the fourth centenary of Friar Luis Cancer's death, will be commemorated this year in a special public celebration.

still live in the minds of men after four hundred years? Why are Americans this year commemorating the death of a madman? Apparently they see another side of his folly; in fact, they see his entire life checkered with it. They recognize that folly for what it really is—a priestly zest for the battle against paganism, a burning love for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the Indian, an impatient zeal for the spread of the Faith. His enthusiasm to propagate the Word of God ever impelled him onwards, leaving another to reap the harvest of the mission field he had sown, while he hastened to make a beginning in some new land, the fleet messenger of the Good Tidings.

Very little is known of the early years of Luis Cancer's holy folly. History first discovers him a Friar Preacher laboring in the West Indies about 1530, already noted for holiness of life, learning and courage, and marked with that deep-feeling sympathy for the lot of the red man so preeminently characteristic of the Dominican missionaries. Having labored in Santo Domingo and having founded the first Dominican priory in Puerto Rico, he longed for a mission field where he could work among Indians not yet enslaved by the Conquistadors. With Las Casas and Pedro de Angulo as companions, he set out for the newly conquered land of the Inca but was driven back to Nicaragua by a violent storm. There, as if by plan of Divine Providence, the Friars received a request from Bishop Francisco Marroquin to come and labor in his newly created diocese of Guatemala.

APOSTLE OF GUATEMALA

Joined by another famous friar, Rodrigo de Ladrada, the little mission band began its study of the Indian tongue under the tutelage of the bishop. The Dominicans soon raised their voices against the treatment of the Indians by the Spaniards, boldly denouncing their methods and preaching charity, kindness and meekness. The savages could be converted and civilized in their natural state of life more easily than by force and reduction to slavery. Harassed by these white robed gadflies, the Spaniards retorted by challenging the Dominicans to prove their methods by converting the Quiche Indians of Tuzulutlan, the "Land of War," a tribe as yet unconquered and considered unconquerable, emboldened by successful repulsions of the inroads of the hated white man. To the great surprise of the Spaniards, the friars madly took up the challenge and exacted a promise from the governor to leave them unmolested in their mission for five years, in which time they would prove that their method was feasible and correct.

In their zealous absurdity, the friars now began preparations for their entry into the Land of War. They employed four Indian traders who moved freely among both Spaniards and Indians and, having taught them the catechism set to rhyme, sent the liturgical quartet into the hills to spread the Gospel with song. Questioned by the curious savages, the peddlers replied that the mysterious things of which they sang could only be unraveled by the men in the black and white robes and with shaven heads. Assured that the friars were kind and good men, interested in the welfare of the Indians, the chief at last sent an embassy to invite the Dominicans to come.

As Father Cancer had proved the ablest at the Quiche tongue, he was chosen to go, and in 1537 the first white man entered the Land of War. Given a royal welcome, he proceeded to explain to them the story of the creation and fall of man, the Incarnation and Redemption. His success was immediate. When he was joined later by Las Casas and the others, most of the Indians were converted and introduced peaceably to the blessings of the Faith and civilization, proving conclusively that the folly of man is the Wisdom of Christ. A few years later the name of the province was changed by royal decree to Vera Paz—the "Land of True Peace."

Except for a journey to Spain to obtain recruits for the new mission, Luis Cancer labored in Vera Paz for the next few years. During this time Bartolomeo de Las Casas was named first bishop of Chiapas, the new diocese including Vera Paz within its limits. As the need for more missionaries was again acute, the bishop and Father Cancer embarked on another journey to Europe, stopping in Mexico City for the ecclesiastical council held there on the Indian question. This council, convened in 1546, was composed of bishops, jurists and theologians. The assembly, using eight fundamental principles of the natural law as a basis, drew up twelve propositions which stated the rights of the Indians and the duties of the Spaniards towards them. Together with Las Casas Father Cancer, speaking from the wealth of his experience both in the West Indies and in Guatemala, took a leading part in the discussions. The matters that ultimately detained Las Casas in Spain probably had their inception at this meeting, and most likely it was here that Luis Cancer first felt the impulse to evangelize Florida.

THE LAND OF THE FLOWERY EASTER

Florida had earned the reputation that Tuzulutlan had enjoyed when the Dominicans first came to Guatemala. Elsewhere the Indians had quickly succumbed to Spanish power, but in Florida repeated at-

tempts to subdue them had proved futile. It now was the unconquerable, the land of the fierce, indomitable red man. The De Soto expedition had ended in disaster just a few years before and the remnant had straggled into Mexico. Besides coming into contact with these survivors, Father Cancer probably met in Mexico City two of his confrères, Fathers Juan Garcia and Gregorio de Beteta, who were likewise interested in converting the new land. They had just returned from a vain attempt to reach Florida overland, and were later to be the companions of Father Cancer on the ill-fated mission.

When Luis Cancer reached Spain, Florida again was the chief topic of conversation among American-minded Spaniards. Its acquisition was considered imperative in order to raise a buffer against any action hostile to the colonial empire of Spain. So far three great expeditions to occupy the peninsula had ended in failure—that of Ponce de Leon, of Panfilio de Narvaez in 1528, and just recently that of Hernando de Soto. The situation had arrived at a stalemate.

Father Cancer now determined to lead a missionary expedition to Florida to conquer by the Cross instead of by the sword. He knew the Indians, their ways, suspicions and caprice. His method of peace and kindness had succeeded in Guatemala to the amazement of the world. Why not in this new "Land of War," Florida? He would apply his folly once more and win the land to Christ and to Spain. He made his proposal at the Court and the Regent, Prince Phillip, conscious of Cancer's success in Vera Paz and seeing the futility of sending another army to Florida, consented to the plan. Contrary to all murmurs against the novelty of the mad scheme, the prince authorized the friar to equip his mission at the expense of the Crown. With this royal permission Luis Cancer now began preparations for the supreme farce of his life.

PREPARATIONS

Father Cancer spent most of 1548 in Spain seeking a pilot who might know the Florida coast, trying to engage some Dominicans to accompany him on the enterprise, and searching for a suitable vessel to make the hazardous journey. He had hoped to be in Florida by autumn, but was delayed time and time again by the colonial agents at Seville. He complained impatiently that the devil was doing his utmost to deter him from his holy plan so as to be able to snatch away more and more of the souls of the savages. He obtained a royal decree freeing all the Indians of Florida held as slaves in the colonies so that they might both accompany him as interpreters and prepare

the way for him, much as the peddlers of Guatemala had done.

Unable to make any satisfactory preparations in Spain, Luis Cancer sailed to Mexico in the autumn. There, fortified with an injunction of the Regent, he obtained from the Viceroy a ship, the *Santa Maria de la Encina*, Our Lady of the Oak. The Dominican Provincial of Mexico gave wholehearted support to the mission and permitted Fathers Gregorio de Beteta, Juan Garcia, Diego de Tolosa, and a laybrother named Fuentes to accompany him. A captain, Juan de Arana, was secured, but Father Cancer was not so fortunate in regard to interpreters, for the decree of emancipation and repatriation was ignored. In their place he reluctantly took on the voyage a converted Florida squaw, named Magdalena, whom he had found in Havana when stopping to take on provisions.

THE HOLY INVASION

The spring of 1549 found this extraordinary invasion party making its way toward Florida. Luis Cancer wished to land and settle upon the Atlantic coast, for the Indians of those regions had not yet been molested or antagonized by previous Spanish incursions. The Viceroy had ordered de Arana to sail for that area, but the pilot, either disobedient to Father Cancer and to the Viceroy, or not wishing to hazard a journey into sections unfamiliar to him, made his way up the Gulf coast and headed for the Bay of Espiritu Santo, a region which had been overrun only a few years before by De Soto and his men. Moreover, the Calusa Indians among whom the friars eventually landed were perhaps the least disposed of the Florida Indians to receive the Gospel and civilization. Cruel, lewd, crafty, rapacious, addicted to human sacrifice, they hardly responded to the efforts of subsequent Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries.

Land was soon sighted and on Ascension Thursday, May 30th, Father Cancer and his companions first set foot on the soil of Florida. The Indians they met, though not hostile, nevertheless showed signs of enmity and distrust. At another spot farther up the coast the savages appeared more friendly, so that Father Diego and Fuentes begged permission to stay on shore and begin the work of evangelization at once. These two and the Indian woman were detained by the Indians on shore that evening, and the next day when Father Cancer and the others returned to the shore Magdalena alone was there. She informed the Spaniards that Father Diego and the laybrother had gone to the village of the chief and would meet them at their destination, Tampa Bay. The ship, therefore, proceeded on its way, stopping

at various points where the missionaries endeavored to make contacts and to spread good will with presents and kindness. On Corpus Christi Fathers Cancer and Garcia celebrated Mass on shore. At each stop there were Indians to meet them, Magdalena sometimes being with them, a sign that the ship was being followed and closely observed in its progress northward.

On June 22nd the *Santa Maria* reached its destination. The following day Luis Cancer, Garcia and de Beteta landed and were met by Magdalena, who said that Father de Tolosa and Fuentes were still with the chief but would come later. She told Father Cancer that the Indians had gathered together in great numbers fearing a new Spanish invasion. She had endeavored, however, to dispel their suspicions and had told them that the priests had come only to do them good.

So far the prospects of success were not promising. The party had landed among a tribe already ill-disposed toward the Spaniards. Two friars were being held, and their safety was to be doubted. Furthermore, the Bay of Espiritu Santo with its shallow harbor proved unsatisfactory for a permanent settlement, while the obstinate pilot refused to go further because the provisions had to a great extent become contaminated. Matters approached a crisis when Father Cancer returned to the *Santa Maria* that day. A Spaniard, Juan Munos, held as a slave by the Indians, had escaped to the ship. He reported that the two Dominicans held captive by the savages had already been killed.

Shocked by this news, Father de Beteta and Garcia felt that it would be both dangerous and futile to establish themselves here, and that it would be better to persuade de Arana to sail elsewhere. Knowing that the pilot would be obdurate, Father Cancer decided to stay and make another attempt to win the trust of the Indians. To return to Havana would be failure. Perhaps he had confidence in the good will he had shown to the savages and the friendly spirit shown by them on several occasions. He may have hoped that Magdalena would succeed as an intermediary, or that some of the escaped slaves among them—for several of the Indians knew some Spanish and one had shown signs of reverence to a small crucifix given him by the friars—might join him, or at least convince the others that the mission of the priest was peace and love, not oppression and degradation. If he could be spared just a little while, he might succeed. If the Indians were not won over now by kindness, he foresaw only a worse fate—conquest, slaughter, slavery. He must change Florida into a land of peace before the Spaniards should transform it into a land of war.

PROTOMARTYR OF FLORIDA

As the seas were too rough the following day to permit a landing, Father Cancer spent his time aboard ship making final preparations and completing his chronicle of the voyage and mission, the *Relacion de la Florida*. On the 26th of June the impatient apostle could wait no longer, even though the waves were still somewhat high. As the small boat made its way through the water, Fathers de Beteta and Garcia, who accompanied him, continued to argue and remonstrate, hoping to dissuade him from the venture, as they repeatedly emphasized the great danger and the small chance of success. Drawing closer to shore they could see groups of Indians, some of them armed, moving about among the trees, but Father Cancer remained adamant. The intrepid missionary who had entered the Land of War alone was now ready to convert Florida single-handed. When the boat neared the beach, he leaped into the shallow waters and slowly made his way ashore, his black mantle trailing in the waters, his crucifix held high above his head.

Once upon the beach the courageous friar knelt upon the sands and bowed his head in prayer, imploring the blessings of God upon his undertaking. The Indians began to stir. One approached him and raised him to his feet, then others crowded around and dragged him to a small mound a few paces away. Another of the savages now raised a heavy club above his head and with a powerful stroke smote the priest to the ground. In a frenzy the rest of the red men rained death blows upon the prostrate victim in quick succession. After a pause of a few moments the tonsured scalp of the Dominican was held aloft amid the shouts and cries of the cruel heathens.

From their boat Fathers Garcia and de Beteta and the other Spaniards looked on helplessly at the horrible scene. Their worst fears had been realized. With grief they made their way back to the ship, their leader martyred, the conversion of Florida frustrated. The *Santa Maria* mournfully made its way back to Mexico, there to tell of the sad fate of the saintly fanatic, Luis Cancer.

Was his death not the act of a madman? But if he were insane, surely his companions would have prevented his leaving the ship that fateful day. There is no record of Father Cancer's motives; we can only suppose them. He had three days to weigh and consider the matter. His decision to make a final attempt in spite of the great odds against him was not the act of a dreamer or romanticist, Luis Cancer was a practical man, as his whole history proves. His decision was the result of his zeal for the Faith, his love for the Indian,

his great desire to wrest Florida from the domain of Satan. Responding to a sense of duty, justly confident that the miracle of Tuzulutlan might well be repeated, perhaps specially urged on by Divine Providence, he laid aside all worldly wisdom and became a fool for Christ. Where Ponce de Leon supposedly sought the fountain of youth, Luis Cancer found Eternal Youth.

Luis Cancer made no converts, established no mission, nay, not even a beachhead. Indeed, his stay in Florida can be counted in hours rather than in days or years. As far as man can perceive, his venture was a disaster. But this year, the fourth centenary of his death, men are thinking of Luis Cancer. His brother Dominicans justly hail him as the Protomartyr of Florida, the leader of the first band of Friars Preachers enrolled in the American Martyrology. Catholics of the United States are proud to include him as one of those from our beloved land eligible for the honors of canonization. Citizens of Tampa for years cherished his memory and honored him in the dedication of one of their parish churches to Saint Louis. The people of Florida recognize in his mission the first sincere attempt to civilize their native State. O let the Gentiles rage, let the world scoff and deride, but there are some who have penetrated beyond the seeming of things and understand in their hearts the truth which Wisdom speaks to us: "In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die; and their departure was taken for misery, and their going away from us, for utter destruction: but they are in peace."