

MARTYRS OF TONKIN¹

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"These are the saints . . . who for the love of God . . . despised the threats of men".²



MARTYRDOM is the greatest expression of love both of God for man and of man for God. "Greater love than this no man has, that he lay down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15:13). Thus God Himself did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him as an expression of His love for men. And God by a special predilection also grants to some men the unique privilege of proving their love by laying down their life for Him.

God's love for man has never remained unanswered. From the beginning of Christianity down to our own century, men and women, regardless of position, race or age, have offered their life's blood as proof of their burning love for God. Myriads of martyrs since St. Stephen's time have "washed their stoles in the blood of the Lamb" (Apoc. 7:14).

"The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians." The truth of this axiom is being proved again today, especially behind the Iron Curtain, but also in the Far East, where the seed of past martyrdom is bearing fruit in the staunch faith of the Christian people. For example, in Tonkin, where today the Church is being cruelly trampled upon, numerous martyrs bore witness to their love of God just a century ago. This is the story of two who proved their love of God by laying down their lives for Him while serving as missionaries in Tonkin.

SETTING THE STAGE

It was the year 1830. Minh-Manh, who had ascended the imperial throne of Tonkin in 1820, was for some time silently hostile toward the blossoming vitality of the Church in his land. But the year 1830

¹ We should like to express our gratitude to the editors of *ORIENTE*, magazine of the Dominican Students of the Province of the Most Holy Rosary, for use of material valuable in the writing of this article. Cf. *ORIENTE*, special issue dedicated to Bishops Diaz Sanjurjo and Garcia Sampedro and Companions Martyrs, (1951: Avila, Spain).

² Benedictus Antiphon for Many Martyrs.

had arrived without any notably open persecution. During this year, however, one of his governors brought three "culprits" before him to be punished for an "unpardonable" offense. Their crime was nothing more than that of being Christians. This was the prelude to one of the most cruel and bloody persecutions the Church has ever known. The age of martyrs had begun in Tonkin. The stage was being set.

From the year 1830 to 1835 five imperial edicts of open hostility to the Church were pronounced. Christians had to proceed with extreme caution. All homes were subject to inspection by soldiers who were constantly searching for missionaries. Fortunately, the priest was generally warned beforehand by his people and would quickly change his hiding place. But one night a troop of soldiers, who had been looking for missionaries, apprehended some catechists, and a great tumult arose. The history of Nero's persecution of Christianity was about to be repeated. Vociferous mobs carried the "culprits" to the prisons, antechambers of death for those who would not apostatize.

Enmity increased as time went on, until the Emperor signed his last edict against the Christians, setting one year for the complete eradication of Christianity from his Empire. Yet, he did not see his wish fulfilled, for in that very year, 1840, he descended with his sins into his tomb.

Now a small ray of hope was kindled in the hearts of these suffering Christians. Anxiously they awaited the moment when Trieu-Tri, the new Emperor, would ascend the throne. Hoping against hope that he might prove to be lenient, or at least indifferent to religious affairs, they poured forth their hearts in prayer. But, unfortunately, Trieu-Tri, had inherited Minh-Manh's cruelty and, at times, surpassed him. He ruled only two years, but this was sufficient time to mark him as one of the bloodiest emperors in history. He was succeeded by Tu-Duc, who by the end of his reign had sacrificed 40,000 victims, but even this, left his devilish hatred unsated.

The last act of this drama was soon to take place. The actors were borne to Tonkin's shores on ships from a land unknown to the Tonkinese. A group of humble Christians, who had been waiting for their arrival, received them with filial love and affection. Two saints had come from far off lands! Their happy faces, though emaciated by labor and sacrifice, showed the joy of those who are dead to the world. They had come to play their role in the last act of the thrilling drama then taking place on the stage in Tonkin.

Jose Maria Diaz Sanjurjo and Melchior Garcia Sampedro had arrived at last in that land from which they would never depart alive. Although they knew the situation of Christianity there, they were not

afraid. Thirsty for the salvation of souls, they showed no vacillation in their step. They had no concern but that of saving souls for Christ and of surrendering their own souls to God. They came as true friends of the Christians of Tonkin, for they came prepared to lay down their lives for them.

THE FIRST PROTAGONIST

Jose Maria Diaz Sanjuro was born in Spain on October 25, 1818. He was scarcely ten years old, when his parents, observing his capabilities for the priesthood, sent him to begin his preliminary studies at Lugo, in the Northwest of Spain. Having finished his Latin course, he remained there until 1841 studying philosophy. Then he went to Santiago de Compostela to continue his ecclesiastical studies of Theology and Law. In 1842 he manifested to some of his friends his fervent desire to enter the Novitiate of the Dominican Fathers at Ocana. On September 23 of that year he was admitted in the Order receiving the black and white habit of the Dominicans. He gave such signs of spiritual perfection during the year of his novitiate, that the following year he was permitted to make solemn profession.

He was ordained priest on March 23, 1844. Shortly afterwards he was assigned to work in the Philippine Islands. Within a year, however, he had been sent to Tonkin. His entire missionary life developed as an intricate but continuous series of persecutions and trials. Though the persecution was not directed toward the missionaries alone, they were the primary object and aim of the imperial hatred. At times it became impossible to work by day and he had to take advantage of the darkness of night in order to exercise his ministry. The difficulties and dangers increased with every hour. Father Diaz Sanjurjo was a living picture of the Apostles at the beginning of Christianity. Walking barefoot, a wooden stick serving to sustain and guide him, he had to feel his way cautiously along primitive roads that alternated with alarming suddenness between treacherously soft mud and cruelly sharp stones. Yet, he suffered all this with saintly patience, like the Apostles, "rejoicing that he was accounted worthy to suffer . . . for the name of Jesus" (Acts 5:41).

Despite the discomfort he and his companion endured in a cave where they were hiding one day, he was able to write, "With the divine protection everything is endured with patience and even with delight, asking the Lord that His divine will be done, even at the cost of our lives." Father Diaz Sanjurjo had spent scarcely four years as a missionary, when he was elevated to the dignity of Bishop as Coadjutor of Bishop Marti, O.P. His consecration took place on the anniver-

sary of his first solemn Mass. The dignity of the Episcopacy, however, only served to increase his preoccupations and anxieties and he wrote to his father, "in these lands, dignities bring more labors . . . though I have not professed to walk discalced, necessity obliges me to do it quite often, at times with mud up to my knees, to run more freely if the enemy pursues us."

Bishop Diaz Sanjurjo, who on his arrival at Tonkin was a young man of 27, was now disfigured by daily suffering, by the strain of laboring under persecutions and by self-inflicted penances and fasts. Persistent fevers actually rendered him too weak to continue his daily ministry and at times caused him to collapse from exhaustion. But nothing could stop him from moving about in the ministry of the souls entrusted to his care. Such was his zeal for the souls of Christ, that during one of the years in which he was tormented the most by chronic disease, he administered the sacrament of Confirmation to almost 30,000 persons.

When Bishop Marti died in 1852 Bishop Diaz Sanjurjo succeeded him as Apostolic Vicar of Central Tonkin. About this time Tu-Duc began to persecute all Christians with renewed rigor and cruelty. Immediately the Bishop issued a pastoral letter, exhorting his faithful "to constancy and fortitude in faith, confidence in our Heavenly Father, penance and fervent prayer." Inflamed by divine love, and desiring to identify himself more and more with the Divine Model, he sighed for martyrdom as his only reward. As Bishop Sampedro, his Coadjutor and fellow-martyr, remarked, "as the most thirsty hart pants after the waters of the fountain, thus His Excellency, wounded by divine love, wishes martyrdom, the only means to satiate his ardent thirst of suffering with his Beloved. . . ."

Among the outstanding virtues of our martyr was a fervent devotion to Our Lady. He placed before her all his difficulties and asked her every day to grant him the favor of martyrdom. She did not delay long in bestowing this grace upon her faithful servant. In the year 1857, when he had exhorted his faithful in a special manner to love and serve Our Heavenly Mother, she rewarded him with the halo of martyrdom. He had been concealed in a house and just as he was leaving for a new hiding place, the soldiers saw him. The brilliance of his pectoral cross caught their greedy eyes and they snatched it from its place. They tied his hands and brought him to the authorities, who sent him to the Mandarin, accusing him of the crime of being a missionary. Found guilty, he was imprisoned at Nam-Dinh, where he remained two months in a sickening cell.

July 20, 1857. Our Blessed was on his knees praying, when a

messenger brought him the desired good tidings of his approaching martyrdom. At last the Lord and Our Lady had heard and answered his prayer. Now he heard the noise of the multitude and saw the elephants bearing the Mandarin and the other officials. The sound of the soldiers came to his ears, but he paid no attention to it because a stronger sound penetrated and rent his heart and soul: the plaintive sighing and lamentations of his beloved children was too much for his paternal heart. Now he was in the procession to his calvary. The soldiers wanted him to make haste but he was too weak; his feet were bloody from the wounds inflicted by the sharp stones of the road. This blood, left behind on those stones, was the seed that would soon germinate with strength immeasurable.

When they had arrived at the place of slaughter, the Mandarin spoke, "The King decrees that this teacher of religion be beheaded today. If the executioners have everything prepared, let them execute the sentence." A hushed silence . . . beating of hearts . . . heart-rending sighs . . . Bishop Diaz Sanjurjo had but heard the proclamation of his death, and his blood swelled up his veins, and filled with joy he could not help but open his mouth saying, "The King and the Mandarins have decided to have me beheaded today. I ask you to strike three times: the first stroke I shall receive as an act of thanksgiving to God, Who created me and brought me to Tonkin to preach His Religion; the second stroke, in acknowledgment and gratitude to my parents, who gave me being; the third I leave to my sheep as a testament, that they may be faithful and constant in death, emulating their shepherd and thus be worthy of the joys of everlasting happiness in the company of the Saints." This he said with great emotion: happiness tinged with sadness. Happiness, because the palm of martyrdom was his passport to eternal bliss; but sadness, because he knew that he was leaving his beloved sheep among voracious wolves. Then he added with paternal affection, "I am going to heaven, but you, my dear children, will remain here, where you will undergo great sufferings. You will be afflicted by hunger, floods, pestilence, and war." Finally, with the commanding and exultant voice of a victor, he spoke to the executioners, "I am ready to be beheaded."

Like the sheep in the slaughter, he meekly offered his head to be separated from the body. Again hushed silence . . . pale faces . . . hearts beating . . . one . . . two . . . three strokes of the sword, and a martyr's soul flew to heaven. The angels sang in heaven . . . on earth humble, loving souls rejoiced and at the same time lamented, for though it was true that they had seen a saint die, it was no less true that they had also lost a valiant, generous, and faithful shepherd.

THE SECOND PROTAGONIST

While this tragic part of the drama was taking place, another actor was preparing to go on stage. The second of the two Spanish missionaries, so far known to us only as Coadjutor of the martyred Bishop, was now ready to play his role on this bloody stage.

Melchior Garcia Sampedro was born in Asturias on April 28, 1821. Eleven years later he was studying the humanities at Barzana, and in 1835, he went to the University of Oviedo to study philosophy and theology. He was yet unaware that God had chosen him as a vessel of election; that God would ask of him more than He usually asks of most men. But it seemed to him that he was being called by God to be a martyr. So, generous of heart and faithful in the fulfillment of his duty, he now sought entrance into a missionary Order to gain the precious treasure divine goodness had placed before him. For this he asked God's help, knowing that "without Him one can do nothing" (John 15:5), but that "he could do all things in Him who strengthened him" (Philipp. 4:13). God answered his prayer by bringing him into contact with the convent in Ocana. He wasted no time in asking for the habit of the Order of Preachers. Here as a novice, dying many times daily by self-abnegation, he was rehearsing for the role of martyr he was to play before long in far off Tonkin.

After seven years of preparation he was ordained to the priesthood, on May 29, 1847. Nine months later he was en route to the Philippine Islands. Temporarily it seemed as if God had changed His plans concerning Father Sampedro's goal, for as soon as he arrived at Manila, he was appointed to teach philosophy at Santo Tomas University. Nevertheless, he was convinced that if God wanted him to be a martyr, He would find the surest way of bringing it about.

Within a year he was assigned to Tonkin, where he arrived in February, 1849. Many interesting facts concerning Blessed Melchior's missionary life and ideals can be learned from the numerous letters he wrote to his family and friends while laboring amid tribulations and persecutions in his mission field. His virtues also came to light through his pen. His love of suffering for Christ's sake was made manifest in a simple but meaningful sentence, "How sweet it is to suffer for God!" Hence his faithfulness in the fulfillment of his vocation of martyr.

Describing the cruelty and terror of the persecutions during the year 1852, he wrote, "King Tu-Duc, such is the name of our monarch, as great an enemy of the light of the Gospel as his own father (who sent so many martyrs to heaven, reserving hell for himself), has maintained in all their force the wicked decrees against the Religion of the Crucified. As if these were not sufficient to check his rage, he has

promulgated a new decree, offering a considerable reward in silver and honors to anyone who apprehends a minister of religion (a European being meant), and that the minister be beheaded immediately and his head thrown into the river, as a sign of contempt."

Night ministry was a characteristic feature of the missions in Tonkin during this period and the faithful flocked to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and rejoiced in seeing the missionary, not considering the imminent danger that threatened their lives. "What a sweet happiness, to see the persecuted faithful rejoicing at seeing us glad and being able to have a religious function! . . . He who protected Daniel and Eliseus, protects the missionaries also, who pass through the midst of those who seek them so anxiously, and are not recognized, because the soldiers, having eyes, do not see the anointed of the Lord. . . ."

Illness and bad weather were a source of happiness for these men of God. When he and the Vicar Apostolic fell ill, neither wished to make his sufferings known to the other, but Sampedro writes, "What joy for us when we shared with each other our troubles and convalescence, after the recovery! . . . Drenched from head to foot, covered with mud; with neither coat or clothes for change, we deemed ourselves happy, so much so, that the Vicar Apostolic and the Vicar Provincial of the Eastern Province could sing in a poor hut, with the greatest joy, and I forgot the pains of my feet to praise the Lord. I have no fear of exaggeration in saying that rarely do we have greater joy than during the strongest tribulations."

During Lent the work was redoubled. The missionaries preached retreats of ten days, "hearing confessions every night until one surrenders . . . What grief to see the people come together in order to go to confession and to have to wait three or four days and not be able to accomplish it!"

Father Sampedro had been in Tonkin for six years, when Bishop Diaz Sanjurjo received a brief from the Pope authorizing him to name one of the missionaries as his Coadjutor and to consecrate him with the title of Bishop of Tricomia. Bishop Diaz Sanjurjo did not need much deliberation to determine his choice. Though Father Garcia Sampedro was actually the youngest missionary at Tonkin, being now thirty-four years old, everyone knew his extraordinary virtue, his admirable talent, and his apostolic zeal. The consecration took place on September 16, 1855 in the cathedral. The ceremonies were celebrated with all solemnity and despite the dangers of the time, four bishops, thirteen missionaries, thirty-six native priests, and more than two thousand of the faithful were present. Such was the manifestation of the love of the faithful for Father Garcia Sampedro, that his heart

burst forth saying, "For me, I take pleasure in saying that I felt happier than any monarch of the world, and I could not succeed in giving thanks as I wished to the ineffable mercy of Our Most Beloved Lord towards His anointed and towards all who were there present." The ceremony concluded with a solemn "Te Deum" in thanksgiving.

His consecration as Bishop decided his vocation of martyr, for during those days, to be a Bishop in Tonkin was equivalent to being a candidate for martyrdom. During the short time of his episcopacy he worked hard but efficiently. Two seminaries, a house for contemplative souls, a hospice for orphans, two magnificent churches that are worthy of the name of cathedrals: all these owe their existence to the persevering efforts of Bishop Garcia Sampedro. He graphically describes his ministry as Bishop. "We walk from one place to another in the darkness of night, often arriving at midnight and finding the church filled with Christians who wait for us. Immediately I administer Confirmation, celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, preach a sermon and make the act of thanksgiving. . . . If I have to go to another place, having finished the Mass, I set out before day break . . . always on foot and discalced as is the custom in this country. The Bishops of Tonkin have no other means of transportation than St. Francis (mules). I do not doubt that you would either cry or laugh, if you saw me in my Tonkinese robes, with no other insignia of Vicar Apostolic than mud and clay. . . ."

July 8, 1858 was the last day on which Bishop Sampedro celebrated Mass, preached and administered the Sacraments. He was then in the town of Tien-Lao, exercising his pastoral ministry. The Mandarins were informed and surrounded the town with soldiers. By eight o'clock at night the Bishop was their prisoner. The persecutors carried him in a cage to the city of Nam-Dinh, where he became the laughing stock of the populace. This horrible twenty day imprisonment was almost unbearable, aggravated by the cramped quarters of the "cage," the malicious taunts and the disrespectful treatment of his person. The cage was finally moved to a public place that he might be mocked by the scum of the city. Some spat upon him; others shook the cage violently or pricked him with sticks or knives. All laughed in mockery. He suffered all this in silence, just as his Divine Model had suffered all affronts in silence on Calvary.

July 28. A vociferous multitude waited outside the city, feverish in anticipation of the execution. Suddenly a thunderous exclamation drowned all lesser sounds as five hundred soldiers marched with unsheathed swords, followed by groups of people bearing posters that displayed pictures of dragons and gods of their worship. Then two

elephants followed, bearing the mandarin and his assistant. In the midst of this savage crowd there was a man distinguished from all by his humble, prayerful, and serene expression. He had come but ten years before to preach God's word to the very ones who that day clamored with devilish hatred for his death. Bishop Sampedro had imitated Christ in numerous ways and now, more than ever before, he was truly another Christ, for Christ's passion was to be enacted again on that very spot.

At the sound of the trumpet the executioners began to prepare the victims for the execution of the sentence. Two of his catechists, who had been captured with him, were tied to two strong stakes and looked at him with eyes bathed with their own blood. His last blessing for them was, "Be strong, my sons, and fear not." Immediately the executioners beheaded the two catechists and, extending a rough woven mattress on the grass, forced the Bishop to lie on it. They tore off his clerical robes and stretched him out on the bed that would receive his blood. First, they tied him the form of a cross, intending thereby to mock both him and the Divine Model. Then, after disjointing his bones in a desperate effort to make his feet and hands reach the stakes, the trumpet blew a second time announcing the order of the Chief-Mandarin: "Cut his legs, his arms, and his head. . . ." And the multitude screamed, "Let him die!" When the raging voices had calmed down, the executioners proceeded to obey the order. Such cruelty has rarely been witnessed: twelve strokes of the axe on each knee and seven on each arm were required to sever those members and the blows left but a scarcely living maimed body. The only thing heard from the lips of the martyr was the word, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!" . . . A little later his head was rolling on the grass from the impact of the executioner's axe. Bishop Sampedro had fulfilled his duty; his vocation to martyrdom had become a reality.

Now the curtain falls. The drama has ended. The actors have received the prize of an immortal crown of glory. The Blessed Martyrs of Tonkin, who "despised the threats of men for the love of God,"³ have now received "the crown of life that God has promised those who love Him" (James 1:12).

³ cf. Dominican Breviary, *Benedictus* Antiphon for the Feast of Many Martyrs.