

Burgeoning Discourse on Martyrdom*

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For the Letran community, the beatification of the two holy martyrs of the 1936 Spanish Civil War, Fr. Jesus Villaverde Andres, O.P. and Fr. Antonio Varona Ortega O.P., will now be an additional part of the rich and continuing history of the Colegio. More so, this would be an emerging call for this institution to be more motivated in shaping contemporary mass consciousness to become genuine disciples of truth and humble apostles of Jesus Christ. The life and martyrdom of these venerable servants of God will be an open epistle reminding every member of the community that life is always beautiful especially if it is spent according to the will of God.

Martyrdom is indeed a gift to some. Everyone has the chance but only few will experience this opportunity where faith in God is valiantly expressed in exchange of a suffering of death. Hence, the immeasurable courage of these two martyrs is more than enough to be a source of inspiration, hope, love and courage as well. And as pure as their hearts, it would be a strong testimony that we, too, even if we may not become martyrs of our time, should always have the same faith in God.

The Epigrammatic Chronicles of the Martyrdom of the Two Servants of God

Fr. Jesus Villaverde Andres, O.P.

Fr. Jesus Villaverde Andres, O.P. was born in San Miguel de Dueñas, province of Leon, diocese of Astorga on December 4, 1877. He was the son of Jose Antonio Andres and Maria Teresa Francisca Andres. In 1844, he entered the novitiate of the Convent of Santo Domingo in Ocaña, where he made his simple profession on July 4, 1895. When he finished his

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philosophical studies, he moved to the Convent of Santo Domingo in Avila where he took his theological formation. He was ordained priest on July 26, 1903.

As a young priest, he was sent to the missions of the Philippines (1877-1936). He received his first assignment at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran as a professor (1905-1910). Later in his life, he was appointed Rector of Letran and served for three years (1924-1927). In 1934, he was elected Prior of the Convent of Santo Tomas in Avila, whose office he did not finish by the order of the Master General. When he was assigned to the Convent of the Our Lady of the Holy Rosary in Madrid, he was caught by the revolution. In October 15, 1939, the “milicianos” (*Communist militiamen*) arrested Fr. Villaverde while taking refuge in the house of his brother Carlos. And with courage, he presented himself as a religious, ready to die for Christ. He was brought to “checa” of Formento, and on the next day, his brother Carlos, after making some investigations learned that Fr. Villaverde had suffered death.

Fr. Antonio Varona Ortega, O.P.

Fr. Antonio Varona Ortega, O.P. was born in Zume, the province of Burgos on January 16, 1901. He finished his studies in humanities at the College of La Mejorada in Olmedo, Valladolid (1913-1917). He received the Dominican habit in the Convent of Santo Tomas in Avila on September 8, 1917. At the same Convent, he made both his simple and solemn professions. After studying three years of philosophy and the Preparatory Theology, he was sent to the House of the Province of Rosaryville, Louisiana, USA where he completed two years of Theology. He was ordained priest in New Orleans, USA on June 13, 1926.

In that same year, he arrived in Manila and was assigned to the Colegio de San Juan de Letran, where he was renowned as a “formator and educator.” He taught Biology and took care of the intern students of the Colegio. In 1933, he returned to Spain due to his lingering sickness of tuberculosis. He was in a farm in Nambroca totally paralyzed when the revolution broke out and the persecution of the religious started. On the midday of the 24th of July, a group of “milicianos” stormed the farm and arrested Fr. Varona and the three other religious who were there. They

were brought near the Tajo river to a place known as “Malecon de Cañete.” As they were crying aloud “Viva, Cristo Rey!” (*Hail, Christ the King!*), they were shot to death.

Synopsis of Reflections and Insights

The exquisite journey of understanding begins with the meaning of martyrdom through the reflections delivered by Fr. Winston Fernandez-Cabading, O.P. of the University of Santo Tomas and Sem. Noel Vincent B. Abalajon of the Archdiocese of Capiz.

In the reflections of Fr. Cabading, *Martyrdom in the Catholic Church: the Heritage of Blood*, he pointed out the essence and necessity of simply looking into the way Christians understand the concept of martyrdom.

He mentioned that the basis of Christian martyrdom is no less than the Christ, the righteous one of God. In the Roman Rite the general intercession for the Common of Martyrs addresses Jesus Christ as the “King of Martyrs.” The martyr therefore “imitates the suffering and death of the Lord.” However, all types of martyrdom pale in relation to his passion and death. For two reasons (1) Christ action is the action of the God-Man. Although it is his humanity that underwent the passion and death, the hypostatic union sealed it to be rightly the action of a divine person and because of this (2) his passion and death itself are efficacious in eternity.

Moreover, the prayers in the Common of Martyrs of the Roman Rite testify to the belief that martyrdom is a gift and therefore is not given to everyone. The dimension of heroic in suffering and in death is paramount. Because it is something heroic and the motivation is primarily supernatural. Enduring suffering for love of God is beyond normal human capacity to face the double whammy of suffering and death. Hence, the martyr must be a person fully filled with the Holy Spirit. According to Tertullian, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the martyrs assured them of their closeness to Jesus. In Christian iconography, martyrs are often portrayed with serene countenance in the midst of an impending death. The belief is founded in the promise of Jesus “I am with you always until the end.” This is understood to mean that their courage is given because of their vision of Christ. It is in this vision, they do not fear suffering and death.

The prevailing Catholic attitude is not to seek martyrdom, to flee from it as much as possible but not to refuse when it comes. However, the Montanists were all for it to the point of inviting martyrdom by provoking the magistrates. Tertullian, as a Montanist, voiced his enthusiasm for martyrdom in *De fuga in persecutione* and *Ad martyras*. But a similar attitude is found among the Catholics as evidenced by Tertullian in *Ad Scapulam*. Nonetheless, facing martyrdom is no mean feat no matter how theologically appealing. Therefore, every member of the Church would have to face the difficult reality of martyrdom that to give witness to Christ is always a kind of martyrdom that may lead if it is for the glory of God to one similar to what the Servants of God underwent.

The research of Sem. Abalajon, on the other hand, talks about the beauty and challenges of martyrdom. In his reflection, he raised his thoughts specifically to invite enough contemplation about the foundations of how to become a martyr in our present time.

As a preliminary, Sem. Abalajon noted that in the Thomistic tradition, martyrdom is the highest or the perfect manifestation of charity of love. Jesus is our model par excellence. Christianity is indeed a religion that was sown, has grown and continues to be nourished by the salvific death of Christ. Christ's ultimate sacrifice became the visible sign of God's love for us. As the Gospel of John testifies: "For God so loved the world he gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but will have eternal life (John 3:14).

The martyrs from the early Church up to the modern times had given up their earthly lives and had shed their precious blood to follow the example of Jesus. It was their love of God, for the Church and for the faith that enflamed their desire to accept martyrdom with rejoicing spirits in their anticipation of their Heavenly home and with resigned hearts in their submission to the will of God. This explains why in the early persecutions, many people who witnessed their martyrdom were drawn to the faith and were finally called to conversion. This phenomenon of love through the blood of our martyrs explains the growth and endurance of our Catholic faith.

Our recognition of the contribution left by Spain to the Philippines should be alongside our appreciation of the Catholic heritage. We should

remember the many Spanish missionaries who tirelessly and selflessly worked for the evangelization of our country. These friars were often much-maligned in our Philippine history as cruel and vicious. We, therefore, need to rewrite our Philippine history and be proud of our Catholic heritage.

In the age when silence is preferred over martyrdom, tolerance over heroism, and mediocrity over holiness, we need to have a new breed of holy men and women who will come and would answer a big yes when the question, "*Uso pa ba ang maging martir?*" (Is being a martyr still relevant today?) is being asked. We are called to follow the examples of the martyrs, if not through a martyr's death, a saintly life will do best. Pope John Paul II issued the same challenge: "to die for the faith is a gift granted to few; but to live the faith is a call addressed to all."

Pragmatism and Realizations

Discerning the concept of martyrdom could be endless since every attempt to grasp the improbable phenomenon could lead to new understanding. True enough, it is not the complete reflection and interpretation about martyrdom that would give us the essence of it. When Jesus told His parables, He did not have to explain them. It is for his disciples to discover the beauty of these parables based on their lived experiences and extent of their appreciation. Fr. Cabading and Sem. Abalajon shared their thoughts to enlighten the readers but they left a considerable responsibility for the readers to value the meaning of martyrdom. Because when they start to live like martyrs and remain resolute in their faith in God, then and only then, that every single paragraph of this said reflections would start to breathe and speak for its purpose.

As it was mentioned, holiness is a call to everyone. And holy life can be achieved in many ways. Following simple traffic rules and respecting traffic officers could be one. Paying taxes properly and doing the solemn duty during election can also be in the path towards holiness. And as what the disciples of Jesus did after His death, they evangelized through examples and let the generations after them witness and carry the same passion and devotion in doing good for themselves and for the others. The desire to have a holy life should not end on the personal domain, rather it should extend to influencing others in surrendering everything to God's will.

In conclusion, martyrdom is a pilgrimage. It is a living space whose boundaries were created by those martyrs, including Fr. Villaverde and Fr. Varona, who died long before the Church beatified them. And as we all move towards those boundaries, some of us might be in for only a portion of the journey. But we must help them. We will not let them fall behind so that in the end, even if we may not be able to achieve such boundaries, all of us will be proud of our collective achievement. And our cooperation will create new space and the quest of others will continue even after our death.