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# MARTYRS OF LAOS: FROM “ODIUM FIDEI” TO THE VENERATION OF ANCESTORS

## 老挝的殉道者： “因为信仰而被憎恨”到对先人的敬奉

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### ABSTRACT

This paper concentrates on the endeavour of the Bishops' Conference of Laos to expand the Thomist definition of “martyrdom” to make it relevant for their social, religious and political context. In that way, they hoped, the beatification of those whose deaths (1954-70) are attributed to the predecessors of the present-day regime could be understood and accepted by Laotian people of all faiths and affiliations and their political leaders, and could facilitate rather than inhibit social and interreligious dialogue.

They asked: While the traditional crucial underpinning of martyrdom is “*Odium Fidei*”, is there a deeper understanding of this same mystery, which can be usefully applied in our context? Their reasoning, leading to the beatification in 2016, rests on four major points:

- Acknowledge the local objections to a one-sided Western notion of martyrdom;
- Focus on the notion of “ancestors” (of the faith), as a basis for mutual understanding;
- Define “beatification” as elevating the most meritorious members to the rank of ancestors for the community to remember, venerate and imitate;
- Acknowledge Buddhist teachings on the contemplation of death to overcome the deep-seated Laotian aversion toward those who have died a violent death.

### MARTYRS OF LAOS: FROM “*ODIUM FIDEI*”<sup>1</sup> TO VENERATION OF ANCESTORS

After unsuccessful attempts by Jesuits in previous centuries, Christianity, especially in its Catholic form, gained a foothold in Laos at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the midst of the incessant wars and conflicts of the last century, Laos' local history has been without much brilliance (Costet, 1999). It suffered a violent backlash in 1975, when the faction supported by international communism took power. Until today, the country has no dioceses, only “missionary circumscriptions” from where the last European missionary left in 1977 (Jacques, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> The term, “*Odium Fidei*,” literally means “hatred of the Faith.” It is used traditionally to define a “martyr” or “martyrdom,” that is, a person whose persecution or execution is motivated by hatred of his or her (Catholic) faith, or an act so motivated. The criterion was used to distinguish martyrs from others who may have been murdered for other reasons, for example, for political reasons. The broadening of Catholic understandings of martyrdom, as in this case study on the martyrs of Laos, is part of a larger trend, and has surfaced again in the recent Canonisation to sainthood of Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador (San Martin, 2015).

On the occasion of the Great Jubilee of 2000, however, Pope John Paul II asked this “young Church” to wake up to the hidden values it carries. “*Te martyrur candidatus laudat exercitus*”—“The noble army of martyrs praise Thee”—sings the liturgical hymn proclaimed every Sunday (John Paul II, 1994).

Between 1954 and 1970, seventeen men—lay persons and priests—were killed in Laos. Sixteen died at the hands of those who established the government of the Democratic Popular Republic of Laos. For the leaders of the Laotian Church, proclaiming this loud and clear was a tough challenge, even as their Church was living in semi-liberty, closely watched by that regime (Chevroulet, 2004; Jacques, 2007, 2019; USCIRF, 2009).

After a protracted time of reflection, their unanimous decision was to proclaim these Christian Martyrs before the entire Laotian people, even as the Government deemed it a hostile act; not to confront them, but in a desire to join forces for a more harmonious future. This meant contextualising the event in the social and religious framework of the nation, in which the Catholic Church is but a tiny minority. They were confident that, in this way, the beatification of the martyrs could take place in Laos itself, and be understood and accepted by their political leaders as well as by the Laotian people of all faiths and affiliations (CELAC, 2013).

Though the absence of any Western priest was viewed as a positive asset—“we are not a religion of foreigners”—the makeup of the Catholic community in Laos posed a particular problem. The core nucleus are descendants of slaves, redeemed from Burmese raids and resettled on virgin lands by the Missionaries of Paris in the 1880s (Bayet, 1981). These Catholic communities, whose mother tongue is Laotian, have lived largely in isolation, severed from their cultures of origin, and especially cut off from the core of the Laotian nation, which is deeply rooted in Theravada Buddhism. Beyond this nucleus, increasing numbers of converts came from ethnic minorities who practice animism and shamanism, and speak their own unrelated languages (Sion, 1969).

The Bishops’ conference mirrors this composition, remaining marginal to the dominant culture and its values received from Buddhism, not to mention the set of values promoted by the Revolution. Just as their flock, they tend to be regarded as second-class citizens. Thus, they empowered a small committee of lay Catholics to dialogue with the Ministry of Home Affairs (Interior) and the Lao Front for National Construction, jointly in charge of religious affairs.

## NAMING THE MARTYRS

Contextualising meant reinterpreting the classical, Thomist definition of “martyrdom”—a key element of the report demanded by Rome for the beatification of martyrs—in such a way that it would be relevant for their own social, religious and political context. Meanwhile, in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI restated forcefully the traditional understanding of martyrdom: “It is... necessary, directly or indirectly... to ascertain the “*Odium Fidei*” of the persecutor. If this element is lacking there would be no true martyrdom according to the perennial theological and juridical doctrine of the Church” (Benedict XVI, 2006).

Therefore, the Catholic bishops of Laos tackled the following question: With the understanding that we maintain the “perennial doctrine” integrally to enlighten the faithful, isn’t there a complementary point of view, a reverse side of the same mystery, that can be understood here and now in our context? Otherwise, proclaiming the martyrdom of our men would jeopardise all interreligious dialogue, and result in additional restrictions for our Church (CELAC, 2013).

Since the Christian wording, “*Odium Fidei*,” betokens its foreign origin, a new terminology was sought, to resonate more harmoniously with the local cultures. A striking example is the term “martyr,” common to most Western languages. In Laos, because of the strong influence of Vietnam on both the regime and the Catholic Church, it is ambiguous. “Martyr” is widely used in the English language media in both countries to render “*liệt sĩ*” (烈士), designating the Vietnam troops that were killed in Laos in the endeavour to conquer the

land for socialism. Laos has a Monument to the Martyrs of Laos, and a Remembrance Day for the Martyrs, with patriotic celebrations promoted by the Vietnamese People's Army. The same English word "martyr" renders the Christian phrase "*tử đạo*" or "*tử vì đạo*" (死(爲)導). Thus, the Catholic Church in Laos, resorting to Pāli rather than Greek, proposed မံဇးပးဒံာ် (*molasasakkī*, Pāli "*maranasakkhī*"), which translates "bearing witness through death" (Jacques, 2014).

Removing the ambiguity made it possible to negotiate with the Laotian authorities: The Catholic community wished to honour their own "martyrs of Laos," but under this new name, which underlined a different side of those men who died in the same years of the war. Though they were undeniably on opposite sides, all victims had died courageously to bear witness to a peaceful and harmonious coexistence of all members of the nation.

#### HONOURING THE CHRISTIAN MARTYRS

Government authorities raised objections about the very notion of beatification: The Catholic community in Laos had never needed any such thing; to what purpose should it now introduce a new festival unknown in its (local) tradition? The short answer was: we need to recognise and honour those who are our ancestors, our forebears in faith. This statement resonates deeply with the mentality of Laotians. The notion of "ancestors," *tổ tiên / tổ tông*, 祖先 / 祖宗, "ပံးပးပုဂ္ဂိုလ်" (*banphabulud*, Pāli "*pubbapuris*") is widely understood in Southeast Asia, transcending all religious denominations.

Indian and Chinese practices reverencing ancestors are prevalent here as they are throughout Asia. The adoption of Buddhism in the ethnic Lao population did not erase them, and a lot can be learned from their reinterpretation through the Laotian Buddhist rites and customs (Zago, 1972). The social aspect of the funeral ceremony (involving cremation or other means) ritualises the separation from the community of the living, and the entry into the community of ancestors. The rites reflect the need to believe in a life beyond, the desire to erase death as a mere manifestation

of the non-permanence of all things. In Laos, to this day, marriage rituals include great offerings to parents and ancestors: the intention is to ask for their blessing and to show the will to be faithful to the good tradition they have left us. The same is true for the other main rites of life.

In this context, in spite of Roman concerns and doubts, the Bishops' conference did not hesitate to showcase the martyrs through this designation. The Veneration of Ancestors, as promoted by Catholic teaching and practice in Southeast Asia in the late 20th century, has roots in the Confucian tradition of filial piety; this helps to shed light on the martyrdom of the newly beatified in Laos, which is blossoming for today through the cult rendered to them, as a living link to the True Origin of All Things (万有真源) (Jacques, 2001). "Beatification" means elevating the most meritorious members of the community to the rank of venerated ancestors. Similarly, the regime recently asked everyone in Laos to remember the ancestors of the Revolution: လောကုဘေဒီ ပံးပးပုဂ္ဂိုလ် (*leāmunseū banphabulud*) (literally, to "recount the ancestors"), telling the new generations of their deeds and sacrifices for the Cause, that they are invited to ponder—to contemplate.

The Buddhist theology of merit provided a further argument. Even before Buddhism, "merit" was used with regard to ancestor worship, but in Buddhism it gained a general ethical meaning. Zago writes: "As part of the cult of the ancestors ... this is a sign of the universal mercy and the cosmic communion between all beings... The formulas of transmission open in this respect endless horizons about the human beings who can benefit from this communion" (Zago, 1972, p. 128). These realities are expressed in the formulas of transmission (Pāli *pattidānagāthā*, 迴向功德) chanted by the bonzes. Other rites and beliefs show the role played by ancestors as protectors of the living.

Doesn't this evoke the communion of saints, and their humble invocation (δουλεία *douleia*) as patron-saints? In the history of the Catholic doctrine around the intercession of the saints, were not the martyrs the first to be so honoured—so contemplated? From the

viewpoint of Asian civilisations, rites connecting to the ancestors are not anecdotal, but essential: Their veneration is constitutive of the human person and of the whole social fabric.

The martyrs officially recognised by the Church as “Blessed” have taken the first place among the “Founding Fathers of the Christian faith in Laos.” The honours they receive from the faithful will testify to everyone that the Laotian Christians are true Laotians, proud of their roots, and firm in their faith as were the martyrs.

great blessing; it has deathlessness as its goal and object” (Nyanatiloka, 1956). In other words, the contemplation of death—the profound thought that this will happen to us one day—softens the hardest hearts and connects people with bonds of love and compassion; it abolishes social barriers, beliefs and races among people who are subject to the common destiny of death; it helps to destroy vanity and longing for bodily pleasures; it gives balance and a sense of proportion to our minds, conditioned with false values.

After a protracted time of reflection, their unanimous decision was to proclaim these Christian Martyrs before the entire Laotian people, even as the Government deemed it a hostile act; not to confront them, but in a desire to join forces for a more harmonious future.

#### CONTEMPLATING THE DEATH OF THE CHRISTIAN MARTYRS

A last difficulty remained. How do non-Christians in Laos understand and assess the death of the martyrs? Zago writes: “For the Lao people there are two quite distinct types of death, with very different rituals. Natural death by illness is considered normal, the fruit of a good life. Then there is bad death—unforeseen and violent... considered dangerous for the community, being a punishment for some past behaviour... The body of the unlucky is buried the same day amidst fear, almost with shame, to get rid of something dangerous” (Zago, 1972, p. 242).

The violent death inflicted on the martyrs should logically be seen as a nefarious episode in the social life of the community. Buddhism, however, enshrines a fundamental practice, called “contemplation of death” (*maranānussati*, ມຣະນານຸສະຕິ, 死随念), one of the “Ten Recollections” that punctuate the *Visuddhi Magga*, the Way to Purification. This Buddhist teaching helps span the above-mentioned contradiction. In chapter VIII, this 5th century CE “Great Treatise” of Theravada Buddhism specifies: “Recollection of death... yields great reward,

In other words, “Death is the key that opens the apparent mystery of life. It is through the understanding of death that one understands life, because death is, to a large extent, part of the process of life. So, by understanding death, we also understand life” (Jacques, 2014). By contemplating death, one reflects on the brevity and fragility of life and the many possible causes of one’s death—including accidents, sudden injuries, attacks by enemies. A traditional Buddhist recital says: “Seeing with wisdom the end of life in others, and comparing this to a lamp kept in a windy place, one should meditate on death... If death could come in an instant to the Buddhas endowed with great glory, prowess, merits, supernormal powers and wisdom, what could be said of me?” (Anonymous, 2012).

Almost three years after the beatification of the Martyrs of Laos, the time came for the pastors of the Catholic Church in Laos to propose to all faithful the veneration of their relics. This had never been done in any way in past years, but, in spite of the deep-seated aversion for the bodies of those who died a violent death, it met with no opposition. The Buddhist teaching definitely helped to achieve acceptance of this ritual.

## SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Bishops' Conference of Laos and Cambodia chose an active and innovative approach to the beatification of those who had given up their lives for their Christian faith in Laos during the dark years of war. They entrusted the dialogue with the Government to members of the faithful more familiar with the dominant culture, or cultures. This approach came to its successful conclusion on December 11, 2016.

bring about peace with patience" (Pope Francis, Sep. 25, 2019).

The above-mentioned intervention of the Apostolic Delegate also opens up new perspectives for a careful reinterpretation of the criteria for martyrdom, that we inherited from Thomas Aquinas and Benedict XIV and were restated by Pope Benedict XVI. The Bishops' Conference of Laos never considered advancing on their own on this doctrinal issue, restricting themselves to the local cultural and political

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The Ministry of Home Affairs had given its approval in June 2016, in the following terms: "This should be an opportunity to create solidarity, mutual understanding and mutual help, which are the precious legacy and image received from our ancestors; and to maintain good relations (of Catholics) with governmental organisations, as well as with the non-Catholic people, for the sake of progress for all." The Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis, dated December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, addressed the government's concerns: The Martyrs will be called Blessed, as "heroic witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Gospel of peace, justice and reconciliation" (see Jacques, 2019).

At the end of the solemn beatification rite, in an astonishing dialogue, the same concepts were developed in their respective allocutions by the Deputy Director of the Lao Front for National Construction and the Apostolic Delegate to Laos, nuncio Tschang In-nam. Though the "*Odium Fidei*" was certainly present in the memories of those who had known and loved the martyrs, it now faded in the background, to allow the present generation to write a new chapter of Christianity in Laos. "The martyrs teach us that, by the force of love, by gentleness, one can fight against arrogance, violence, war, and one can

context; but a Nuncio, through his training and international experience, has a wider outlook. In any case, the beatification of the Martyrs of Laos is a landmark for the definition of "*Odium Fidei*," and may be considered an important precedent. As such, it could be invoked in different cultural contexts, for the causes of heroic Christians, who gave up their lives rather than following new ideologies that they rightly judged incompatible with the core message of the Gospel. Only time will tell.



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