



GENERAL BULLETIN

SPECIAL EDITION - MARTYRS of EL QUICHÉ
JUNE/2021



WORDS OF GRATITUDE FROM FR. GENERAL SUPERIOR ON BEHALF OF THE MISSIONARIES OF THE SACRED HEART

Words are not enough, but they are the means that I have, and I would like to express our gratitude on behalf of all the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, who, in the 50 countries where we are present, on five continents, have been united with us during these last days and especially today.

We thank the God of Life who in Jesus Christ has shown us the ultimate display of Love in giving his life for those He loves. *To the heart of heaven and to the heart of the earth*, to the ancestors Quichés, Ixiles, Queqchíes and Mestizos of this "sacred land" - missionary territory of El Quiché fertilized by the blood of martyrs.

We thank you all and especially those who have added their grain of sand to make this Beatification a reality. There are so many that by mentioning them I may leave others out. But I cannot fail to mention people like our dear Pope Francis who has believed in the authenticity of the martyrdom of our brothers and sisters. Msgr. Rossolino -Bishop of the Diocese of El Quiché, Joaquín Herrera msc - Postulator of the cause of the martyrs of Quiché, Teresa Malagarriga op and Hector del Castillo pbro, members of the court for this Case. Jean Jules Chassem - MSC General Postulator. To the religious of El Quiché, to CONFREGUA the Conference of Religious of Guatemala - -. To the members of the MSC Provinces of C.A. and Mexico and Spain. And Archbishop Julio Cabrera, who for me, has always had an MSC Heart. To the clergy and laity of the Diocese of Quiché who have prepared and organized with such dedication today's Celebration. And to the many who have worked so hard for this Cause. Thank you one and all.

We thank the families of José María, Faustino, Juan Alonso, Rosalío, Miguel, Reyes, Tomás, Nicolás, Domingo and Juanito. Some here present and others who could not come, but who join us today from Spain.

The three religious Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and the seven Laity, today Blessed Martyrs, are a prophetic voice that continues to resonate, calling us to recognize the situation that was lived in El Quiché and Guatemala in the 80's. Thousands of brothers and sisters who were killed because of justice and their faith while committed to building the Kingdom of God. It was a system of death - of genocide - that destroyed the life of these ten new Blessed. They are the sign that Guatemala must "Never again" repeat this unjust barbarity that bled out an entire nation. Unfortunately, situations like this continue to happen in different parts of the world.



Through the ministry of Superior General and General Council, of which two members have come today - Chris Chaplin of Australia and Humberto Henriques of Brazil - we are encouraging our MSC brothers to appreciate that the best way to honor the memory of those who gave their lives is to remain committed to eradicating the causes that led these three Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and seven Laity and so many others to shed their blood. Sadly, the causes of these deaths remain open, wounds continue to bleed in Guatemala and around the world, because of violence, exploitation, poverty, injustice and corruption. Our *Mother Earth* continues to be violated and destroyed. Our *Common Home* needs us, that inspired by the new Blessed Martyrs of Quiché, we raise our voices and bear prophetic, living and coherent witness, as the three Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and the seven Laity, now Blessed Martyrs, did.

May their Blood make us people who transform this dehumanized system that continues to destroy life in Guatemala and around the world. May new lay, religious, missionary and priestly vocations germinate, if not in quantity then Quality of Vocations, that, even if we are few, we can really create an ecosystem of Life, Justice and Fraternity - from *Fratelli Tutti*-.

The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart around the whole world join in the cry for life in this Diocese of El Quiché and in all the places where life cries out.

I conclude by expressing our joy that a Cardinal friend like you, Archbishop Ramazzini, who has suffered persecution and slander on the part of this genocidal and corrupt system, has been chosen by Pope Francis to preside over the Beatification of those who also suffered persecution and slander. In view of Cardinal Ramazzini's inability to be present, I thank Mgr. Nuncio of His Holiness in Guatemala for presiding over this celebration.

Greetings from the heart to those who follow us on social media from different parts of the world, different MSC Provinces on five continents, especially in a parish in Manado, Indonesia where Blessed Juan Alonso worked for three years and who are holding a great celebration. A special greeting to so many Quichelenses who are in other parts of the world and who have followed this transmission.

Thank you all for the wonderful prophetic light that is this celebration.

| *Mario Abzalón A. Tovar, MSC*
General Superior



GROUP OF MSC PRESENT

PILGRIMAGE IN QUICHÉ

Wednesday 14 April: Frs. Jean Jules Chassem, Humberto Henriques, and I, left Rome for a pilgrimage to places of significance in El Quiché, Guatemala, of Fr. Juan Alonso MSC and his companions killed in Guatemala in 1980-1981.

Our Guatemalan confrère Fr. Willy Mendez was host and guide for 10 days. Our group included, Frs. Paco Blanco (Provincial), Manuel Barahona, Secundino Varela, and Mr. Jarvier Trapero (Communications Office), all members of the Spanish Province. These men personally knew our martyrs, while Fr. Varela now in his 80's had ministered in some of these places.

Friday April 16: Leaving Guatemala City we drove three hours to the township of Joyabaj. We passed markets among building colonnades full of stunning flowers and fruits of many colours magnified by the colour and texture of Mayan traditional clothing. At Joyabah we stopped at the Church of Santa Maria di Assuncion where Fr. Faustino Villanueva Villanueva MSC had lived and ministered

among the indigenous Mayan population called Quiché (said Ki-ché).

A paramilitary group had decided to put an end to him. They were frightened by his raising awareness of human dignity and of the catechetical education he was developing based on the Gospel and what this meant for their economic interests. He was warned to leave as soon as possible, but had written to his mother: "We cannot leave the people abandoned... the events we are living through do not stop worrying and frightening us." Only a month before, Faustino had carried the coffin of his confrère, Fr. José María Gran MSC on his shoulders. On his way to the cemetery in Chichicastenango he asked, "Who will be next?".

I stood in a small room used by him for hearing confessions. "That's where he was killed", our guide pointed to a chair. A feeling of horror and sadness overwhelmed me. Some men had come to see Faustino. A few minutes later a shot rang out, and the men fled on motorbike. The shot shattered his face. It was July 10, 1980. The motorbike was later seen in the army barracks in Santa Cruz del Quiché. He was aged 49, killed after a life given to the Quiché.

We celebrated Mass together at the main altar, next to a new side altar displaying the remains of Fr. Faustino. The remains of our three confrères were recovered during forensic exhumations which assisted the Church led Human Rights Office and the Recovery of Historical Memory project.

We travelled 20 mins down the winding Mountain Highway to the township of Zacualpa. We went to the Espiritu Santo Church and Monastery on the town square just as the market-stalls were closing. Spanish members of our group commented on how one MSC rebuilt this church after the 1976 earthquake.



We were met at a side gate by a Guatemalteco Quiché woman. Inside the compound Franciscan sisters and priests who live there welcomed us. In the church the Quiché woman led us in prayer in native language then in Spanish. She told about the atrocities inflicted on the people of El Quiché by the military regime during the war in the 1980's. She talked to us as she led us through the church and monastery buildings for 2 hours, explaining how the buildings were confiscated by the military and used for imprisonment, torture, and execution. One small room, I found particularly upsetting, is now dedicated as a chapel, but was used as a torture chamber and still bore the stains of blood and violent memories in its walls. The regime was accused of genocide to the United Nations after the release of extensive evidence provided by the Human Rights Report. I won't relate the stories here as they turn the stomach and are incomprehensible acts of cruelty.

Saturday 17 April: In the morning we celebrated Mass in the Chapel of the 12-year-old, Juanito Barrera Mendez, the youngest of the ten martyrs of Quiché. His remains were laid out in the Chapel and his clothing kept as relics of a courageous child catechist who suffered hideously at the hands of soldiers before they killed him. The Franciscan men and women who live at this sanctuary of the tortured victims, hold the story with an amazing equanimity and peace.

We drove on to the provincial capital, Santa Cruz del Quiché, and visited the inspiring bishop, Mons. Rosolino Bianchetti. In the Cathedral we watched local craftsmen preparing beautiful carved timbers for a memorial Chapel of some of the Quiché martyrs.

We continued on our journey to Sacapulas and went to the church in the middle of the town, again surrounded by colourful markets. In this church

was a memorial for Miguel a lay catechist, and another of the 10 martyrs. On the other side of the market was the priests house where Miguel's remains were reverently laid out and a small chapel for us to pray on his life and find some understanding of his death. I was offered some wise advice, that the only way to understand all this was to live with it. Somehow God holds all this, and the people trust that.

We drove on, up through the mountains of Quiché - up, up, up, and up. The corners were very tight with the steepest gradients I have ever seen. Late in the evening we called in for the night to a township called Nebaj. In 1982, in these remote mountains, where the military classified those most isolated as being more accessible to the guerrillas, it identified many communities as "red" (Communist) and targeted them for annihilation. This included the villages around Nebaj.

Sunday 18 April: A drive of 40 minutes on from Nebaj brought us to Chajul and San Gaspar Church. Once an MSC parish and the home of Fr. Jose Maria Gran msc, it was near here he and two sacristans, Tomás Ramírez and his junior Domingo del Barrio Batz, we're shot by military. Jose Maria Gran and Domingo were killed in an ambush by soldiers as they were on horseback returning from celebrating Mass in the nearby village of Chel. Domingo said to Gran, "don't go with me, the military is going to kill me". Gran responded, "then we will die together". After Mass with the parish, we drove 9kms out on the road where they were gunned down. A chapel was built on the roadside where the soldiers were waiting to kill them. It's just a gravel road like any other. When we returned the parish priest Fr. Santiago showed us where, just outside the church, the older Sacristan Tomás was shot down in open daylight. At both places I felt stunned by emotion and confronted by such brazen violence.



Place of the martyrdom of Juan Alonso



Place of the martyrdom of Faustino Villanueva



Place of the martyrdom of José Maria Gran Cirera

We left Chajul for Uspantan, a long drive back through Nebaj and out in an easterly direction through winding and steep mountainous roads. About 12 km before Uspantan township, after inquiry with local people, we found the place where Fr. Juan Alonso msc was murdered. We left the road and descended a narrow pathway through plantations of green beans, corn and coffee to a simple memorial cross. Beneath, is a rock ledge on which he was forced to crouch. He had already been shot in the hand back on the road some hundreds of metres away near a football field, and there he called out to a woman and asked her for a drink of water. They pushed him on through the steep bush until they got to the rock ledge, and there shot him in the side of the head. Several people witnessed it and called the Bishop. They came and removed Juan Alonso's body

I was profoundly shaken to be in the place where this man had lost his life and we stood silently at his memorial in prayer for a long time.

Monday April 19. We left Uspantan early in a 4x4 wheel van and with an experienced local driver. The mountain road had frightening sheer drops, and majestic valleys all at once. The road was under construction, and it had been raining all night. Juan Alonso travelled this way by horse.

We arrived at Lancetillo La Parroquia, where Juan Alonso built the parish. This was before the diocese removed all priests and religious because it was so dangerous. Our confrères, Gran, Villanueva, and Alonso, said they could not leave the people in their time of trial and returned knowing that it may mean their lives. I paused motionless in prayer, shaking my head at the senselessness of violence, as I gazed with admiration and regret, at the remains of Juan Alonso's body, and clothing, brought to Lancetillo to be with the people he loved and who loved him. We celebrated a very joyful Mass with a full church of his people.

Back in Uspantan we went to the church where the relics of another martyr were carefully kept in a relique. The catechist Reyes Us Hernandez is also counted among those taken and killed.

Tuesday April 20: From Uspantan, we drove to meet the woman who was present when Juan Alonso was taken. She told us that he was on his motorcycle riding back towards Uspantan from ministry when they shot at him to make him dismount his bike and wounded him in the hand. When he saw her, he asked her for a drink of water, but the soldiers ordered her not to give him any. Her husband also witnessed the shooting as he was at the nearby football field. To listen to a living witness, tell the story made it so present. She held Alonso in great respect.

Others also spoke highly of our three MSC

confrères. In Chichicastenango, we met Dominican sisters who knew the three personally. One said of Juan Alonso, "he lived a simple life, was down to earth, and was very prayerful, often praying his rosary or reading his breviary as he rode along on his horse. She spoke of him as a very loving man, and said José Maria Gran and Faustino Villanueva were peaceful men.

Wednesday, April 21. We continued our pilgrimage from Chichicastenango to Sololá, and Panajachel and back to Santa Cruz del Quiché. It gave time to get ready for the ceremony.

Friday April 23. The Beatification Ceremony of P. Juan Alonso MSC and his 9 Companions at Santa Cruz del Quiché, took place at the playing fields of the College of the Dominican Sisters. Those preparing the ceremony had put out over 8000 chairs all socially distanced from one another. At every entrance and every room there was someone to squirt sanitising gel onto your hands. I was jolted back to the present pandemic! I have never been so sanitised! We vested in special red stoles. It was wonderful to be with so many MSC from across the Latin world and elsewhere, here to celebrate such a significant moment in our history.

I will not spend time describing the ceremony. You can watch it on online. I will just say there were moments I was deeply moved, and I choked up. It brought the week of pilgrimage to a proper conclusion. Our three confrères, and their companions, and the many people across Guatemala whose suffering is absolutely reprehensible, remain in my thoughts and the lives that have been given in love offer powerful testimony to a force greater than death itself.

| *Chris Chaplin, MSC*
General Councilor

QUICHÉ, LAND OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

I have had the good fortune, the immense good fortune, to travel to El Quiché. This region is called the 'Land of Martyrs'. I must confess that, to a large extent, this was the vision I had before I was there. After reading several books about our Blessed Martyrs, watching some videos about the persecution and torture, soaking up the circumstances that led to the persecution of the Catholic Church, listening to how a lack of reason made official the attempted extermination of the indigenous people, it is only logical, given the distance of 9,000 kilometres, that I had an image of suffering and pain, of martyrdom, that permeated everything I could imagine.

I stayed with the facts. I was not able to see beyond that. It was difficult for me to understand why they acted as our MSC and lay people did. Why didn't they leave? Why did they stay in their community? I realised that this question contains in itself the answer. Because they were Community.

The MSC because of the 'shared mission' and the lay people because everything they did was a service. When you talk to the Quichelenses, they all refer to the Community. How else can you understand that one of them was killed because he didn't want to hand over the keys of the church to the army? Because it was the church of his community. How is it possible that he risked carrying the Blessed Sacrament camouflaged among tortillas when he would surely have been killed if he was discovered? Because he could not leave his community without

communion.

But they are not a civil community, they are a Christian Community. The strength, the union that holds the group together comes from a complete trust in Christ. They are convinced that He is the way to follow. Rural Catholic Action is now also a philosophy of life. Christ, at the centre, is the driving force of a Christian community united in faith and in helping each other. For me, El Quiché is now 'Land of Christian Community'.

*| Javier Trapero, MSC
Communication officer of the Spanish Province*





“May their Blood make us people who transform this dehumanized system that continues to destroy life in Guatemala and around the world.”

(Fr. Abzalón)

MY IMPRESSIONS OF THE PILGRIMAGE TO GUATEMALA

I thought I knew Blessed Josè Maria Gran Cirera and his nine companions better through my readings, which helped me to draft the Decree on Martyrdom or to propose a text for the Apostolic Brief of Beatification, that is, the text on parchment that attests that an important event took place in the life of the Church, through the rite of beatification of these Venerable Servants of God. At the end of our stay in Guatemala, I can say that

the Congregation for the Causes of Saints (CCS), the Postulator addressed to the Prefect of this Dicastery the request for the Opening of the Acts, which took place on 29 May 2013 in the presence of five MSC confreres. On the same day, the Postulator submitted the request to study the validity of the Acts of the Diocesan Inquiry. After the requirement of a complementary investigation carried out in Guatemala by Father Joaquín Herrera, the CCS then

We met people who were still moved by the persecution. Witnesses hardly talk about it in person.

there is a gap between book knowledge from reading about the people and the practical knowledge that comes from visiting the places where these men of God lived and hearing from the people who knew them and worked with them.

Let us first pause to speak about the Roman phase of this cause of beatification. One often hears complaints about the length of time it takes to send a cause to Rome and about the fees to be paid. The evolution of the present cause contradicts this viewpoint a little and reveals that sometimes, on this subject, our thoughts are only hasty and preconceived opinions that are far from the truth.

Informed on 8 May 2013 of the arrival of the Acts of the Diocesan Investigation at the offices of

issued the Decree of Recognition of the Acts on 17 November 2014. Joaquín Herrera then composed the Positio and present it on February 2018. On 11 June 2019, the Special Congress of nine Consultors of the CCS held a meeting to discuss the case and render its judgment. At the end of their debate, all the Theological Consultors gave a positive vote (9/9). The cause was then forwarded to the Ordinary Congress of Cardinals and Bishops of the CCS, which in turn gave a positive opinion. Finally, the Holy Father Francis recognised the martyrdom of these Venerable Servants of God on 23 January 2020 and ordered the Prefect of the CCS to affix his signature to the Decree of recognition of the martyrdom.



With regard to the taxes to be paid, it must be said that, apart from the costs related to printing, which are not the responsibility of the CCS, for a cause, the total amount of taxes to be paid, from the opening of the Roman phase to the celebration of the rite of beatification, amounts to 17,000 €. Because of the requests for exemption made by Mons. Rossolino Bianchetti, bishop of Quiché in Guatemala, we were exempted from paying at least 15,000€. It is true that there is no poster at the CCS that talks about the possibility of requesting exemptions, but it is up to the Postulator to inform the Actor of the cause about this possibility. This was also done in the case of the beatification of Venerable Samuel Benedict Daswa.

We met people who were still moved by the persecution. Witnesses hardly talk about it in person. And when they talk about it, one feels that they are still marked by the violence to which the martyrs were subjected. I had the impression that the people of Quichè pass on this story of persecution from generation to generation, so that even the

youngest are aware of it. Because of the horror, everyone prefers to keep quiet, to remain silent, but behind this apparent calm, there is a hatred against the oppressor of yesterday who has not yet come clean about everything that happened, and has not yet acknowledged his share of responsibility for this disastrous and horrible past. Yes, in my opinion, the truth will have to be told one day; it is the only way to help these people, the oppressed of yesterday, to mourn, to come out of their silence.

I asked a nun who knew our three confreres well to say something about each of these three Blessed, and here is her answer:

"Josè Maria Gran was the youngest; he was full of strength and loved manual work. Juan Alonso was the man of the people, always close to the parishioners. Faustino Villanueva Villanueva was the man of peace. He sought it at all costs."

Our world needs men and women with these qualities. May the Lord help us to imitate these blessed people.

| Jean Jules Chassem, MSC
(General Procurator and Postulator)

MARTYRS OF EL QUICHÉ, SEEDS OF NEW CHRISTIANS!

The spiritual value of martyrdom is eternal. The martyr is someone who has imitated the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord in a perfect way. Clement of Alexandria already called martyrdom perfection not because it is the end of life but because in it perfect charity is manifested.

Pilgrimaging along the paths of our Martyrs of El Quiché, I was able to witness the holiness and charity with which our martyrs lived in those lands. Simple men, dedicated missionaries and, above all, capable of resisting social accommodation and contamination by the power that always corrupts.

It is above all from the heart of God and in a context of profound injustice that a martyr is born. Someone who voluntarily stands up against a society seen as corrupting and far from the Gospel ideal. Men and women who consecrate themselves to the service of God, to the "only necessary" and confront the system that kills especially the poorest. They make the Church fruitful with their witness and fight for their people in a way that risks suffering even more the weight of the hand of the "powerful" of this world.

The military dictatorship, which spread through almost all the countries of Latin America between the 1950s and the 1990s, gave birth to a persecuted and prophetic Church in various parts of that blood soaked continent. The courage not to align oneself with the powerful, whose obsession was to take away the rights of the poorest and favour the richest, gave strength to a sector of the Church to stand up against all this injustice that was practised by State terrorism. Jose Maria Gran, Juan Alonso, Faustino Villanueva arrived in Guatemala in this context and had to take a stand on one side and chose the side of the defenceless people of God.

One of the consequences of taking a radical position in this kind of scenario is persecution and death. A martyr is someone who dies to defend the faith. In that context of El Quiché and in many others, defending the faith means defending human rights. Faith cannot only be made up of writings, doctrines and tradition. It must be translated into deeds, because otherwise it is dead (James 2:26).



Walking through the communities through which our missionaries passed, their testimonies are still very much alive there. It is easy to meet people who can testify that our confreres, during the time they were there, struggled for peace, justice, life and good in all the works they did. They were able to build communities which reproduced the thoughts, feelings and words of Jesus. But beyond all that, our martyrs were able to believe in the poor, the peasants and their cause. They could have continued celebrating their Masses without becoming involved

performed by the indigenous people, wearing colours on their dresses and on their souls, a few tears came to my eyes. I understood at that moment that their struggle was not in vain and will not be in vain. I understood that we are not allowed, by virtue of our Christian vocation, to stop being indignant at any kind of unjust death. I understood that it is not possible to remain "on the fence" when it is a question of choosing between the oppressed and the oppressor.

The sounds, the dance and the colours of

"Like the grain that falls to the earth and dies to produce fruit, our blessed martyrs fell murdered to the earth and became the "seed of new Christians".

in the cause of those people. But that is not possible when you give your life to a mission.

Along the way we heard difficult stories about the thousands of victims murdered by the army. Innocent people, killed with the utmost cruelty. Real stories that cause us indignation to this day and make us ask: what is the need for this? How far does human evil go?

But as we are men and women of hope, we cannot remain imprisoned in the terror of the wicked but raise our eyes to the courage of the good. That is why the memory of our martyrs is so important for that people and for each of us who also never tire of fighting for the rights of people in this time and in the times to come. We know that those who commit themselves to an incarnate faith do not close their eyes to any kind of injustice. And so many injustices are happening today.

The celebration of 23rd. April will remain in my memory. At the moment when the relics of the martyrs were introduced, flanked by a typical dance

that mass helped a little to ease the pain and to soften the darkness of the injustice committed against them. The colours those indigenous people wear is their flag of resistance to the poverty that kills and to the system of oppression and denial of any human dignity. A people with a colourful identity who live a grey reality.

On the altar, the ornaments were made of corn that carry in their ears seeds of hope. The blessing of the seeds for planting is a typical ritual for the indigenous peoples of El Quiché. With the blessed seeds, the planting is done with the hope of a fruitful harvest so that they have something to eat, something to sell, something to exchange and something to survive on. These same seeds have also become a symbol of our martyrs. Like the grain that falls to the earth and dies to produce fruit, our blessed martyrs fell murdered to the earth and became the "seed of new Christians".

| Humberto Henriques, MSC
(General Councilor)



We thank the God of Life who in Jesus Christ has shown us the ultimate display of Love in giving his life for those He loves. To the heart of heaven and to the heart of the earth, to the ancestors Quichés, Ixiles, Queqchíes and Mestizos of this "sacred land" - missionary territory of El Quiché fertilized by the blood of martyrs.

(Fr. Abzalón)



Missionaries of the Sacred Heart
General House: Via Asmara, 11 - 00199 - Roma - Italy
E-mail: communications@msc-chevalier.org



English Corrections: Tony Arthur, MSC
Photos: Javier Trapero

