



Assumptionists Bulgarian Martyrs - Models of Faith



Kamen Vitchev; Josaphat Chichkov; Pavel Djidjov

Cause for beatification. “The courageous faithfulness in the lives of Blessed Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov in the face of suffering and imprisonment has been acknowledged by their former pupils—Catholics, Orthodox, Jews, Moslems--, by their parishioners, by their religious colleagues and by those imprisoned with them. Because of their *dynamism of their faith, their fidelity to the Gospel, their disinterested service of the nation*, they present themselves as model Christians today especially for the young people of Bulgaria who try to made sense of their lives and who want to follow Christ in the lay state, in religious life and in the priesthood” (homily of Pope John Paul II on the day of beatification, May 26, 2002).

Brief biography of the martyrs. Blessed Kamen Vitchev was born May 23, 1893 to an Orthodox family in Srem, Bulgaria. On September 8, 1910, he received the habit of the Augustinians of the Assumption and was ordained priest in the Oriental rite on December 22, 1921. He taught philosophy, theology and Bulgarian literature and was prefect of studies and rector of Saint Augustine College. Blessed Kamen earned the esteem of his students and colleagues as an educator. Pastorally, he attended to those with the least material and spiritual resources. He passionately promoted unity between Catholic and Orthodox Churches under the authority of the Roman Pontiff. Shortly before his arrest by the ruling communist government in Bulgaria, he was nominated Provincial of the Oriental Mission of the Assumptionists. He was arrested on July 4 1952.

Blessed Pavel Djidjov was born July 19, 1919 to a Latin rite family in Philippopoli. He received the Assumptionist habit on October 2, 1938 and was ordained priests in the Latin rite on January 26, 1945. He was appointed bursar of St Augustine College and of the Vicariate of the Orient. With all his heart he sought to protect the goods both of his congregation and the Church in a time of turmoil. So strong was his confidence in God that when the persecution against Christians began, he displayed an admirable calmness of the soul. H was arrested the same night together with Blessed Kamen.

Blessed Josaphat Chichkov was born in Plovdiv in 1884 to a Catholic Latin rite family. He received the habit on August 24, 1900 and was ordained July 11, 1909. He devoted himself to teaching and publishing for Catholic edification in an environment that was hostile to Christians. When many religious were forced to leave Bulgaria, he was nominated Pastor of the Varna community. He was noted for strong and authentic faith, sustained by an ardent devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. He was arrested six months earlier in July 4, 1952.

Together the three Bulgarian martyrs were sentenced to death after a mocked up trial and were executed by firing squad in the courtyard of Sofia central prison. During their imprisonment they were subjected to inhuman conditions and torture. Blessed Kamen wrote to his provincial in France before the arrest: “The iron curtain is closing around us... Pray and ask those around you to pray for their brothers in Bulgaria who may be *called to testify to Christ and his Church*. May we be worthy



witnesses to Christ and the Assumption!” He added, “All the religious endeavor to carry themselves with dignity in the present situation and to be found worthy, by a more fervent daily life, of grace of martyrdom.”

On the day they were executed, a fellow Assumptionists priest pretending to clean the hall just outside the prison cells of the martyrs, singing aloud in Latin “Confess, confess.” To which the brothers responded by confessing their sins, after which their fellow brother responded, “I absolve you.” This was done so that guards would not suspect that the martyrs were being given the sacrament of reconciliation.

Models of faith. Dei Verbum states that, “the obedience of faith must be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which *a persons entrust their whole self freely to God...*” despite of the cost to personal wellbeing and life, then martyrdom is most certainly the highest affirmation of that faith. The Assumptionists martyr, as well as other martyr of the faith, have been graced with the singular opportunity to emulate Christ’s ultimate sacrifice of himself. One could only imagine the pain, fear, and utter helplessness one experiences before an oppressor. Only the grace of faith, understood as the fullness of security in the One who made the promise of eternal life and his power to fulfill this promise (Ps 27), could sustain one’s resolve.

The Bulgarian martyrs exhibited the faith that placed fidelity to Christ and to the work of the kingdom above any allegiance or duty to nationalistic and dictatorial powers. They echo with their lives the cry of the apostle, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim 4:7). It was clear for them that it is not enough to profess one’s faith in Christ in moments when believing was easy and even praiseworthy. The three martyr strove to live faithfully on a daily basis their vows as religious and to take on themselves the cause of Christ and the kingdom. As if heeding the exhortation to, “examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith” (2 Cor 13:5) Kamen prayed, “to be found worthy, by a more fervent daily life, of grace of martyrdom”

During their beatification the Pope extolled the martyrs’ extraordinary dedication to the education of the youth, to vocation promotion, and their work for the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. This task they exercised with great love and devotion that on the day of their beatification surviving students of Saint Augustine College remembered them fondly.

But what ultimately compelled them to risk their lives for a ministry that, at that time, was taken for granted? At the heart of their sacrifice is a firm belief that, “this slight momentary affliction is preparing (for us) an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen...” (2 Cor 4:17-18). The prize of fidelity to Christ far outweighs any earthly honor or comfort and it cost far less to lose one’s life than to lose forever the friendship of Christ (Gal 2:20). Indeed, like many Christian faithful, they strove to “walked by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7).

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