

BEATIFICATION OF FR. JOSEF CEBULA

April 10th, 1999 - Letter - Rome

Fr. Jozef Cebula, a martyr for the faith, will be the third Oblate to be raised to the honor of the altars. This is another moment of celebration for the Congregation! After the Founder, and then the father of the Church in Lesotho, we will now celebrate a son of Poland. It is true that Fr Jozef Cebula is less known to us than Saint Eugene de Mazenod or Blessed Joseph Gérard and his beatification comes as a surprise to most Oblates, but what a pleasant surprise. May we live fully this time of celebration and grace. May we both personally and as a Congregation draw from its riches.

It is now a fact: the Church officially recognizes an Oblate as a martyr. Is it surprising that the third Oblate to be beatified is a martyr? During this 20th Century now drawing to a close, persecutions have been and still are very frequent. Those who have borne witness with their blood are still many. Statistics show that today Christians are persecuted in no less than 40 countries, and the Christians living in these countries number close to 200 million (Paul Marshall). The last 70 years have seen no less than 1300 missionary martyrs. As for Oblates, the names of 63 "martyrs" have been presented for a list that the Vatican intends to publish: 22 from Spain, 15 from Poland, 7 from Laos.... One who is well known is probably Bishop Benjamin de Jesus, assassinated at Jolo in the Philippines on February 4 1997. We probably remember a few other names, but many of our martyrs have remained in the shadows of our memory. Is this because tales of martyrs are not very pleasant? Or is it because martyrs are generally given little publicity? Fr Jozef Cebula is one of these many witnesses who is now very slowly coming out of the shadows. He will be beatified June 13 along with 106 other men and women, all victims of Nazism.

What was the future Blessed's life like, and what does the Lord want to tell us through his witness? Let's have the simple facts of his life speak to our hearts.

1. An ordinary life

Jozef Cebula was born into this world on March 23, 1902 and was born into heaven on May 9, 1941. There is nothing exceptional about these brief 39 years except his martyrdom. Bearing witness with his blood crowns an existence like any one of us could have had. His humble, peasant origins make him close to us. His poor health makes him a brother to all those who do not enjoy an iron constitution. Because of circumstances beyond his control it was with much hardship that he finished his studies, like many of today's poor. It was in such ordinary circumstances that his discreet, and even slightly timid personality was formed, but one not lacking in some outstanding qualities. It was not long before his maturity, sound judgment and good heart drew people's attention.

He nurtured deep within himself the hidden treasure of faith and amidst the difficulties of his life young Jozef asked where God was calling him. After a pilgrimage to the Marian shrine at Piekary, served by the Oblate, she turned to the missionary life: juniorate and novitiate in Poland, philosophy in Belgium. Because of his human qualities and supernatural spirit it was not long before he was entrusted with positions of responsibility. Still a scholastic, he had to teach at the juniorate in Lubliniec, while continuing his own studies. He was ordained a priest at the end of this period. Considered to be "the best Oblate" available, he was appointed Superior of this house, although only 29 years old. Six years later, he was sought as a candidate for Provincial but refused for reasons of health. He did accept, however, to become novice master and superior of the novitiate at Markowice. Then came martyrdom. What his brother Oblates noticed above all in Jozef Cebula was the man of faith. He lived God with little external display. An Oblate who knew him says, "His

particular charism was his love of prayer."

2. The Missionary Oblate

Jozef Cebula is a member of our religious family and practically a contemporary. Oblates who knew him are still alive, some like Fr J. Pielorz, who wrote his biography, had even been his novices. How did Fr Cebula carry out his Oblate mission in his day, a day that is so close to ours? It is worth taking a brief look at the two main ministries that he has in common with many of us: that of formator and that of pastor of souls as a priest.

Already during his formation he was seen as a future educator. He would in fact spend eleven years as teacher or Superior at the juniorate and four years as novice master. His contemporaries describe his style as an educator this way: "kind but demanding"; "a model for the candidates, a model of the ideal Oblate, a man of God"; "he respected the young men's personalities and did not impose anything by force"; "he looked after them well, for example, seeing that they had good food"; "he was easy to speak to." Here is certainly something to think about. What might such a formator not have done if he had lived longer? But his ministry was cruelly interrupted by Hitler's racism. He saw the fathers, brothers and novices of his house led off to the concentration camps, then came his own turn.

There is another point concerning Fr Jozef's priestly life that merits our attention: it was his pastoral ministry as a priest that brought him to martyrdom. The year of his death he continued to say Mass at night in secret, despite the prohibitions, he blessed marriages, baptized, assisted the sick. He knew the risks. He could have gone away, but he stayed because there was no other priest. Finally, he was denounced for the "crime" of administering sacraments to the sick, arrested and brought to a concentration camp. That is where he bore his crown of thorns with Christ; he was mocked because he was a priest. But he kept his dignity, even to the point of shedding his blood. To Jozef Cebula, priestly ministry was worth his life.

3. Martyr

We are shocked by the cruelty that he had to suffer during three whole weeks, and yet we are struck by the calm and steadfastness with which Fr Jozef endured it all. Beating him with clubs his SS tormentors made fun of him by having him recite prayers or sing hymns. But they could not make him lose his inner peace. He did not complain, but he did confide to his fellow captives that he had never imagined that men could be so evil. He shared with the others the little food he received. Once while working in the camp's quarry, he suddenly raised his voice like a prophet and said to the henchmen of the Gestapo: "It is not you who are in charge. God will judge you, too." At the end, he was ordered to run towards the barbed wire fencing and shot down for "attempted escape." While his body was burning in the crematorium, some witnesses say his arm was raised as if in a gesture of blessing.

In Fr Jozef we see that the strength of martyrs cannot be humanly explained. It is a sign of God whose "power is at its best in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Fr Jozef Cebula's life was quite ordinary, just like that of other Oblates who like him finally shed their blood. But the miracle of martyrdom helps us understand that it is God who was at work in them, and who glorified them by this supreme witness.

Martyr means "witness": in that sense, we Christians are all martyrs, even though we have not yet "resisted to the point of shedding (our) blood in the struggle against sin" (Heb 12:4). Each of us will find in Fr Jozef Cebula an inspiration to renew the holiness of our Oblate life and our ministry. I also believe that God is giving a message to the Congregation through this our third saint. I propose two

points for your consideration.

a) Blessed Jozef Cebula tells us something about the meaning of our name, "Oblates". For Saint Eugene it was more than just a name. In the context of the beatification of our first Oblate martyr the Founder's words to Tempier on July 22, 1817 can be seen in a different light. "Our Lord Jesus Christ has left us the task of continuing the great work of the redemption of mankind. It is towards this unique end that all our efforts must tend; as long as we will not have spent our whole life and given all our blood to achieve this, we can say nothing; especially when as yet we have given but a few drops of sweat and a bit of fatigue. This spirit of being wholly devoted to the glory of God, the service of the Church and the salvation of souls, is the spirit that is proper to our Congregation, a small one, to be sure, but which will always be powerful as long as she is holy. Our novices must steep themselves in these thoughts, ponder them and meditate on them often." (Selected Texts, N ° 7). St Eugene himself desired martyrdom, "at least the martyrdom of charity" as he used to say. For him the word "oblate" meant "consecrated with Christ" and was almost a synonym of "sacrificed victim". The martyrs show us concretely the meaning of our oblation, as St Eugene understood it, and the heights to which it can lead us.

b) The new Blessed can also become a patron saint for some of our ministries. He will clearly be one for our novice masters, local superiors and formators. He can also inspire us in a ministry which was again stressed by the last General Chapter: "In the face of a virtual explosion of poverty, we commit ourselves to a more radical way of working for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation" (Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the Third Millennium, N ° 41). Fr Cebula was a man of peace in the very middle of a death camp. He shared with others the little food he had as he shared in their sufferings. He let his prophetic voice be heard, and overcame the evil of men the same way that Christ did in his Passion. "May the next millennium be one of peace and fraternity" exclaimed the Holy Father during his trip to Mexico. Our Blessed will intercede for this and will be for the Oblates a patron saint of justice and peace.

Martyrdom is disturbing, it questions us. It puts us face to face with the radicality of our oblation. Would I - formator, superior, priest, or in whatever ministry - be able to crown my "career" by giving my blood as Fr Jozef Cebula did? One thing sure is that the fruitfulness of our mission is rooted in the radicality of our oblation. In my last letter I wished "the Great Jubilee Year to be a new missionary Pentecost for our Congregation." May Blessed Jozef Cebula and all the Oblates whom we may call martyrs help us by their witness and intercession to make this happen.