



Saint Pedro Calungsod

The Life and Glorification of Pedro Calungsod

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PEDRO CALUNGSOD was a teenage native of the Visayas region of the Philippines. Very little is known about him. We do not even know where exactly in the Visayas he came from or who his parents were. He was just one of the boy catechists who went with some Spanish Jesuit missionaries from the Philippines to the Ladrones Islands in the western North Pacific Ocean in 1668 to evangelize the Chamorros. In that century, the Jesuits in the Philippines used to train and employ young boys as competent catechists and versatile assistants in their missions. The Ladrones at that time was part of the old Diocese of Cebu.

Life in the Ladrones was hard. The provisions for the Mission did not arrive regularly; the jungles were too thick to cross; the cliffs were very steep to climb, and the islands were frequently visited by devastating typhoons. Despite the hardships, the missionaries persevered, and the Mission was blessed with many conversions. The first mission residence and church were built in the town of Hagåtña [Agadña; Agaña; Agana] in the island of Guam. Subsequently, the islands were renamed “Marianas” by the missionaries in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the then queen regent of Spain, Maria Ana, who was the benefactress of that Mission.

But very soon, a Chinese quack, named Choco, envious of the prestige that the missionaries were gaining among the Chamorros, started to spread the talk that the baptismal water of the missionaries was poisonous. And since some sickly Chamorro infants who were baptized died, many believed the calumniator and eventually apostatized. The evil campaign of Choco was readily supported by the Macanjas who were superstitious local herbal medicine men, and by the Urritaos, the young native men who were given into some immoral practices. These, along with the apostates, began to persecute the missionaries, many of whom were killed.

The most unforgettable assault happened on 2 April 1672, the Saturday just before the Passion Sunday of that year. At around seven o'clock in the morning, Pedro – by then already about seventeen years old, as can be gleaned from the written testimonies of his companion missionaries – and the superior of the Mission, named Padre Diego Luís de San Vitores, came to the village of Tomhom [Tumhon; Tumon], in Guam. There, they were told that a baby girl was recently born in the village; so they went to ask the child's father, named Matapang, to bring out the infant for baptism. Matapang was a Christian and a friend of the missionaries, but having apostatized, he angrily refused to have his baby christened.

To give Matapang some time to cool down, Padre Diego and Pedro gathered the children and some adults of the village at the nearby shore and started chanting with them the truths of the Catholic Faith. They invited Matapang to join them, but the apostate shouted back that he was angry with God and was already fed up with the Christian teachings.

Determined to kill the missionaries, Matapang went away and tried to enlist in his cause another villager, named Hirao, who was not a Christian. At first, Hirao refused, mindful of the kindness of the missionaries towards the natives; but, when Matapang branded him a coward, he got piqued and so he consented.

Meanwhile, during that brief absence of Matapang from his hut, Padre Diego and Pedro took the chance of baptizing the infant with the consent of the Christian mother.

When Matapang learned of the baptism, he became even more furious. He violently hurled spears first at Pedro. The lad skirted the darting spears with remarkable dexterity. Witnesses said that Pedro had all the chances to escape because he was very agile, but he did not want to leave Padre Diego alone. Those who personally knew Pedro believed that he would have defeated his fierce aggressors and would have freed both himself and Padre Diego if only he had some weapon because he was a valiant boy; but Padre Diego never allowed his companions to carry arms. Finally, Pedro got hit by a spear at the chest and he fell to the ground. Hiraó immediately charged towards him and finished him off with a blow of a cutlass on the head. Padre Diego could not do anything except to raise a crucifix and give Pedro the final sacramental absolution. After that, the assassins also killed Padre Diego.

Matapang took the crucifix of Padre Diego and pounded it with a stone while blaspheming God. Then, both assassins denuded the bodies of Pedro and Padre Diego, dragged them to the edge of the shore, tied large stones to their feet, brought them on a proa to sea and threw them into the deep. Those remains of the martyrs were never to be found again.

When the companion missionaries of Pedro learned of his death, they exclaimed, “Fortunate youth! How well rewarded his four years of persevering service to God in the difficult Mission are; he has become the precursor of our superior, Padre Diego, in Heaven!” They remembered Pedro to be a boy with a very good disposition, a virtuous catechist, a faithful assistant, a good Catholic whose perseverance in the Faith even to the point of martyrdom proved him to be a good soldier of Christ. “Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. He endures death through an act of fortitude.” – *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 2473

The Mariana Mission continued amid turmoil. Meanwhile, the surviving Jesuit missionaries managed to start the process for the beatification of their Mission superior Padre Diego on 9 January 1673. Beatification is the act by which the Church, through papal decree, permits a specified diocese, region, nation, or religious institute to honor with public cult under the title “Blessed” a Christian person who has died with a reputation for holiness. Written testimonies of the missionaries and of the Mariana natives were gathered to document the martyrdom of Padre Diego. Naturally, the documentation could not but mention also his lone companion in martyrdom, the boy from the Visayas, Pedro Calungsod. However, due to the difficult situation at that time and the eventual suppression of the Jesuits in the 18th century, the cause for the beatification of Padre Diego fell into oblivion and, together with it, the memory of Pedro which went hidden for centuries in the long-forgotten manuscripts of his companion missionaries.

But the Faith that was planted in the Marianas in 1668 did not die with Padre Diego, Pedro and the first missionaries. It remained. It survived. It grew, thanks to the blood of the martyrs and the perseverance of the succeeding missionaries. On 17 September 1902, the Marianas became an Apostolic Prefecture and was separated from the old Diocese of Cebu. On 14 October 1965, Guam became a diocese by the name of “Diocese of Agaña”. On 8 March 1984, Agaña became an archdiocese.

In 1981, when Agaña was preparing for its 20th anniversary as a diocese, the 1673 beatification cause of Padre Diego Luís de San Vitores was rediscovered in the old manuscripts and taken up anew until Padre Diego was finally beatified on 6 October 1985. It was his beatification that brought the memory of Pedro to our day.

The Archdiocese of Cebu, where Pedro belonged by ecclesiastical jurisdiction, also started to process his beatification cause in 1994. The endeavor was rewarded when, on 5 March 2000, Pedro Calungsod was beatified by Pope John Paul II at Saint Peter’s Square in Rome. In his homily during the beatification, the Pope said, “From his childhood, Pedro Calungsod declared himself unwaveringly for Christ and responded generously to his call. Young people today can draw encouragement and strength from the example of Pedro, whose love of Jesus inspired him to devote his teenage years to teaching the faith as a lay catechist. Leaving family and friends behind, Pedro willingly accepted the challenge put to him by Fr. Diego Luís de San Vitores

to join him on the Mission to the Chamorros. In a spirit of faith, marked by strong Eucharistic and Marian devotion, Pedro undertook the demanding work asked of him and bravely faced the many obstacles and difficulties he met. In the face of imminent danger, Pedro would not forsake Fr. Diego but, as a ‘good soldier of Christ’, preferred to die at the missionary’s side. Today, Blessed Pedro Calungsod intercedes for the young, in particular those of his native Philippines, and he challenges them. Young friends, do not hesitate to follow the example of Pedro, who ‘pleased God and was loved by him’ and who, having come to perfection in so short a time, lived a full life.” The feast of Blessed Pedro is celebrated every 2 April, the anniversary of his martyrdom. If the date falls within Holy Week or Easter Week, the feast is observed on the Saturday before Passion Sunday as was 2 April in 1672.

On 21 October 2012, Pope Benedict XVI, in a solemn ceremony at Saint Peter’s Basilica, will inscribe the name of Blessed Pedro Calungsod in the Canon or list of Saints and from then on, the teenage Visayan martyr will be invoked as *Saint Pedro Calungsod* or *San Pedro Calungsod*. “By canonizing some of the faithful, i.e., by solemnly proclaiming that they practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God’s grace, the Church recognizes the power of the Spirit of holiness within her and sustains the hope of believers by proposing the saints to them as models and intercessors. The saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church’s history. Indeed, holiness is the hidden source and infallible measure of her apostolic activity and missionary zeal.” – *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 828. A more detailed account on Blessed Pedro Calungsod is provided in the manual I. LEYSON, *Pedro Calonsor Bissaya: Prospects of a Teenage Filipino*, The Archdiocese of Cebu, 2000.

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