

THE MARTYRS OF LAOS (1954-1970)

History and Significance – The Beatification and its Outcome

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Not having any diocese yet, the fledgling Church of Laos is a missionary Church in the strictest sense of the word. All missionary personnel from the West were driven out of the country by 1977; reorganising upon new bases the pastoral activities in its four apostolic vicariates took more than thirty years, and remains an unfinished endeavour. More recently, the violent persecutions experienced between 1953 and 1970, then revived in the 80s and beyond, gave way to an uneasy tolerance for the Catholic faith, as well as finicky regulations for its daily practice, especially in remote areas of the country. Yet many Catholic communities are vibrant, and conversions and vocations have started growing.

In this context, the Beatification of the Martyrs of Laos is a milestone of great importance. Over fifteen years, while preparing for the event, the Catholic communities in Laos were given an opportunity to come to terms with their past, taking stock of their successes and failures, however painful, of their losses, gains and hopes. Pastors and members of the faithful fought together for the right that they claimed: to wit, to celebrate the beatification their own way, on the very soil that the Martyrs had irrigated with their blood. They chose to ignore the authorised voices warning them against the dangers of such a venture, in a country governed to this day by the regime that had killed “in hatred of the faith” their very heroes. They stood their ground to keep all seventeen Servants of God together as one single group of martyrs—Lao citizens and foreigners, members of all ethnic groups of their nation, representing all its main regions.

By Laotian standards, the Beatification ceremony was a tremendous success: celebrated in the humble pro-cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Vientiane, it widely spilled over the surrounding neighbourhood. The civil authorities honoured it with the presence of an official delegation; all main religions were represented as well. The diplomatic corps was present, though inconspicuously. Many bishops, priests and members of the faithful had come from the neighbouring Churches of Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand, to share in the common joy and pride of the small, humble, fragile Church of Laos.

This is indeed a powerful portent for the future of the Catholic Church in Laos, its unbreakable link to the Church around the world, and its integration at the very heart of the nation.

Against this backdrop, the essay *The Martyrs of Laos (1954-1970). History and Significance – The Beatification and its Outcome*, covers three main topics. The first section attempts to sketch the development of the Catholic communities in Laos in their early stages—from ca. 1880—and during the era of the martyrs. The focus of the second section is on the persons of the martyrs, and addresses the question: What was the inner force that brought them to offer up their lives? The third section explores the legacy of the Martyrs for the Catholic Church of Laos today, while the conclusion suggests that their memory should constitute the foundation the future of the Catholic Church of Laos should be built upon.

Fr. Roland JACQUES was born on 4th August 1943 in Lorraine, then under Nazi tyrannical rule. By family tradition, he is perceptive to the plea of those living under oppressive regimes. Since 1963, he is a member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a Congregation that gave to the Church in Laos six of the Blessed Martyrs. From 2002 to 2010, Fr. Jacques served as diocesan postulator for the cause of 15 of the Martyrs of Laos, and from 2010 to 2016 as vice-postulator for the Roman process of all 17. He has a Ph.D. in the History of Laws, a Doctorate in Canon Law, and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Far-Eastern Studies. He is fluent in Vietnamese. Since retiring from St. Paul University in Ottawa, Canada, in 2010, he has been living in Vietnam, for the service of his Congregation.