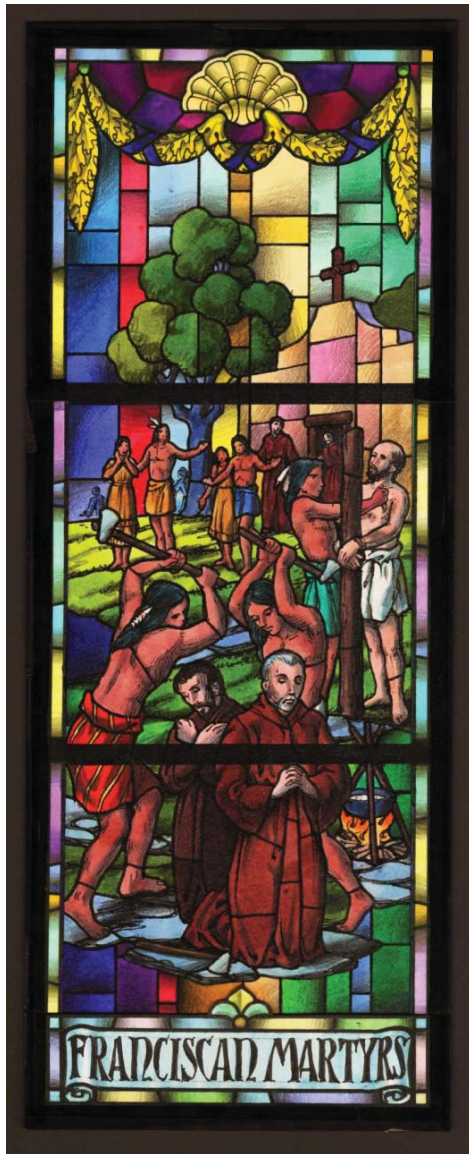


The Georgia Martyrs

Heroic Witnesses to the Sanctity of Marriage

By Paul Thigpen (July 2007 Catholic Answers Magazine)



Ask about old Spanish missions in America, and most people will think of the adobe churches from the late eighteenth century that span the coast of California. Yet these missions, however historic and celebrated, were by no means the first of their kind in what is now the United States. A full two centuries before Bl. Junipero Serra preached to the Native Americans along the West Coast, his brother Franciscan friars

from Spain were spreading the Gospel in what are now the southeastern states.

Their mission base was a Spanish settlement on the Florida peninsula, St. Augustine—the oldest still-inhabited city in our nation, founded in 1565. It was here in *La Florida*, as the Spanish called the colony, that the Christian faith first took root in the lands that today form the United States. Here were the first Mass, the first construction of a church, the first baptisms, and the first Christian conversions in what is now our nation.

Long before the founding of the first permanent English colony in America — Jamestown, Virginia,

celebrating this year its four-hundredth anniversary—and longer still before the Pilgrims came to Plymouth Rock (1620), Jesuit and then Franciscan missionaries established missions in what are now Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. They labored with remarkable courage and devotion to evangelize native peoples of the region, and tens of thousands were baptized, catechized, and provided the sacraments. In the late sixteenth century, six of the Spanish Franciscans ministered to the people called *Guale* who lived along what is now the Georgia coast. Their names were **Pedro de Corpa, Blas Rodríguez, Miguel de Añon, Antonio de Badajóz, Francisco de Veráscola, and Francisco de Avila.** All but de Avila were murdered on September 14, 16, and 17 in 1597.

Only One Wife Life in the American mission field was harsh. These men left behind the comforts of home in Spain to live as the natives did, in huts made of tree trunks, branches, and mud, thatched with palmetto fronds. Agriculture was primitive, yielding at best a few humble garden items to supplement a diet of gathered acorns, local shellfish and wild game from the forest.

Basic items of clothing and even liturgical vestments were sometimes lacking. The men were tormented throughout much of the year by excessive heat, a blazing sun, and the mosquitoes, ticks, and tiny biting sand gnats that are the scourge of the Georgia coast. Worse yet, the closest Spanish soldiers were far away in St. Augustine, so the friars had no protection from natives who might turn hostile.

Add to all these the great challenges of bringing the Gospel to a people of a different tongue and culture who had no knowledge of much that the Spaniards had been raised to take for granted. All in all, it was perhaps near-miraculous that they did in fact meet with success and began bringing new converts into the fold.

Among the difficulties faced by the missionaries, perhaps the greatest was that of sharing Christ's teaching on marriage—that marriage is a lifetime union of one man and one woman—with a people whose culture allowed polygamy. This teaching comes to us from Christ himself, so the missionaries neither could nor would change it. The practice of the missionaries was not to admit an adult male *Guale* to baptism unless he first promised to live in a

permanent marriage with no more than one wife.

A Broken Promise Death came to the five martyrs after a baptized Guale named Juanillo, living in one of the missions, broke his promise and took a second wife. It fell to Fray Pedro in the mission at Tolomato to admonish Juanillo to live the Christian faith in which he was baptized. In this he was seconded by Fray Blas in the nearby mission at Tupiquí (near modern Eulonia, Georgia).

Juanillo left the mission in anger to recruit natives from the interior to rid the Guale territory of the "troublesome" friars. Under cover of darkness on a Saturday night, the war party crept into the mission compound and waited for dawn. When **Fray Pedro** was about to leave his cabin to celebrate morning Mass, the war party broke in and slew the missionary with a blow of the *macana*, the Guale version of the tomahawk. It was Sunday, September 14: the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

With Christian morality thrown aside, a licentious celebration ensued, during which Fray Pedro's severed head was displayed on a pike at the mission landing. The body was left to decay in the sun for several days and then buried in an unmarked grave so that it would never be recovered.

One Final Sermon The war party now proceeded to Tupiquí and seized **Fray Blas**. During the two days he was held prisoner, he was permitted to celebrate Mass and to preach his last sermon. He said: *"My sons, for me it is not difficult to die. Even if you do not cause it, the death of this body is inevitable. We must be ready at all times, for we, all of us, have to die someday. But what does pain me is that the Evil One has persuaded you to do this offensive thing against your God and Creator. It is a further source of deep grief to me that you are unmindful of what we missionaries have done for you in teaching you the way to eternal life and happiness."* (qtd. in Luis Gerónimo de Oré, *The Martyrs of Florida [1513-1516]*)

Fray Blas distributed his personal things among his flock and then, bound by ropes, watched the profaning of the sacred images, vestments, and vessels by the war party. On September 16, he was clubbed to death. After his body was left exposed for several days, a faithful Christian buried it in the woods, where it was found later by a detachment of Spanish infantry sent from St. Augustine to investigate the deaths.

A Brave Local Chief Meanwhile, the war band sent word to the local chief (or *mico*) on St. Catherines Island to kill the two friars stationed there, **Fray Miguel**, the priest, and **Fray Antonio**, the lay brother who was his co-worker and interpreter. The chief refused and instead informed Fray Antonio, offering a canoe and rowers to take the friars to safety at the heavily Christian San Pedro (now Cumberland) Island. Antonio did not believe the warning, or perhaps he simply would not flee the crown of martyrdom.

On September 17, the war band arrived on St. Catherines, and the friars knew their fate. The *mico* boldly told them he would do the missionaries no harm, and he even offered the assassins all he owned if they would let the friars go free. But the offer was refused.

Fray Miguel offered Mass. It was the feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis, and the Gospel reading of the day contained the words of the Lord Jesus: "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:25). For four hours the friars gave themselves to prayer, awaiting the crown of martyrdom. Antonio was the first to receive the blow of the *macana*, and then Miguel. Their mutilated bodies were left to rot in the sun until crudely buried by faithful Christians at the foot of the great mission cross that Fray Miguel had erected. Later the relics were gathered and taken to the central friary at St. Augustine, now the National Guard Armory, known as "St. Francis Barracks."

The Last to Die While the other murders were occurring, **Fray Francisco** was returning by canoe from St. Augustine to his mission, probably on what is now St. Simon's Island (though perhaps at another location). On some unknown date before the end of September, he arrived home with the supplies needed for Mass and for the ongoing construction of the mission, and with gifts for his Guale flock.

The details of his reception are told succinctly by a chronicler: *They waited for him, and when he disembarked, two natives took him in their arms, while the others came and killed him with blows from the macana. Then they buried him"* (Captivity narrative of Fr. Francisco de Avila, qtd. in Oré, *The Martyrs*, 94). His Franciscan capuche, or hood, and his sombrero were later recovered from the Guales who were wearing them, but his body was never found.

News of the terrible events soon spread throughout the Spanish missions of *La Florida*. A few weeks later Friar Pedro Fernandez de Chozas wrote to the Spanish governor at St. Augustine: "*How lonely they must have been, Señor General, these little lambs, at the moment of martyrdom*" (Letter of Fr. Pedro Fernandez de Chozas to Gozalo Mendez de Canzo, Oct. 4, 1597).

The Cause of Canonization The heroic death of these five Servants of God was recognized from the beginning. An official Franciscan report to his Majesty Philip III on October 16, 1612, bears witness:

"Though [the natives] did not kill them because of doctrine, it is certain that they slew them because of the Law of God they were teaching them and because of our moral precepts—so contrary to their way of life and their customs. Specifically they slew them because we would not consent that any married Christian should have more than one wife. . . . This is the reason which the Indians gave and, recognizing their sin, this day cite for their slaying of the friars. It is a recognized fact in this land that since the death of these blessed religious the native people have been turning more docile and peaceful, attaining their present state. It is the pious belief that these blessed ones are in God's presence, interceding for the conversion of this land." (Archivo General de Indias, qtd. in Oré, 94)

Martyrologies, chronicles, and histories continued to recall the heroic deaths of the Georgia martyrs. But only in the 1950s did the Franciscans begin in earnest the movement for canonization. On February 22, 1984, the Bishop of Savannah, Raymond W. Lessard, officially opened the Cause of Beatification. Work on the cause continues with the endorsement and encouragement of the present bishop, J. Kevin Boland.

After 23 years, the Diocesan Inquiry—which is the first stage of the canonization process—has at last come to a close. The inquiry was the informative phase of the cause, whose main purpose was to gather information related to the life, deeds, martyrdom, and enduring reputation of sanctity of the missionaries. The official Acts of the Process run nearly 500 pages, each one carefully notarized to ensure their authenticity. This official document was hand-carried to the Congregation of the Causes of Saints in Rome in late March 2007 by Fr. Conrad Harkins, OFM, the vice-postulator of the cause. There the

Congregation, and ultimately Pope Benedict XVI, will make the final judgment concerning the genuineness of their martyrdom.

If that ruling is favorable, they will need no miracle to be beatified—that is, declared "Blessed." But full canonization—which would result in their designation as "saints"—is a still further process, during which the Church would look for a single miracle in confirmation of their holiness.

We Need their Example Today Why is it so important that the heroism of these missionaries be recognized now? Today many American Catholics remain timid about sharing their faith with others, even when talking with people who are not hostile to the Church. At the same time, certain cultural, legal, and political developments exert increasing pressure on Catholics to remain silent about urgent moral issues. In these circumstances, the Georgia martyrs have much to teach us about the necessity of living the Gospel, sharing it generously, and defending it vigorously, without compromise, even when such faithfulness is costly.

In particular, marriage and the family are suffering a sustained attack in our society. We hear increasingly strident demands to redefine matrimony by legalizing, not just same-sex unions, but polygamy as well. The Georgia martyrs inspire us to reaffirm the moral truths about marriage they died to defend. The heroic missions and courageous deaths of these five daring witnesses to the faith are not yet widely known. But the time has come for their story to be told, their faith imitated, their help sought. The martyrs' sacrifice teaches us that some truths are worth dying for. We need their example and their intercession now more than ever.

Profiles of the Martyrs

Pedro de Corpa was born in a tiny village in central Spain in the diocese of Madrid-Alcalá, probably around 1560. A Franciscan priest of the province of Castile, he was known as a skilled preacher and confessor when he came to Spanish Florida in 1587. After serving for a short time near St. Augustine, he was sent north to the mission at the important Guale village of Tolomato, near modern Darien, Georgia. A contemporary described Fray Pedro this way: "*Since he was a wise and holy man,*

the love of God burned in his heart, and by means of prayer, abstinence, and self-discipline he gave good example to the Indians of the West whom he strove to convert."

- **Blas de Rodríguez** was born in the Spanish town of Cuacos, probably in the 1550s. He had joined the Franciscan Province of St. Gabriel in the strict Alcantaran branch of the order. Ordained to the priesthood in the 1580s, Fray Blas labored in Spain for several years and received the title of confessor. In 1590, he volunteered for Florida.
- **Antonio de Badajóz** was a Franciscan lay brother born in La Albuera near Badajóz. Like Fray Blas, he was a member of the strict Alcantaran reform. He came with Fray Pedro de Corpa to Florida in 1587, learned the language of the Guale well, and served as interpreter for Fray Miguel de Añon. He was also instructed by the priests how to evangelize the native people.
- **Fray Miguel de Añon** was in charge of the mission on St. Catherines Island. He had arrived in *La Florida* only two years before. His birthplace is uncertain, but some evidence suggests that he was of noble origin. Like Pedro, he was a member of the Franciscan province of Castile and ordained to the priesthood in Spain. When Miguel came to America, the Spanish colonists in Havana sought his services. But he ultimately declined their invitation, convinced that God was calling him to Florida.
- **Francisco de Veráscola** was born on February 13, 1564, at Gordejuela into a relatively prosperous Basque family. He joined the Cantabrian Franciscan province, and after his ordination he served for a few years in the region of Vizcaya before volunteering to be sent to Florida. Soon after his arrival in 1595, Francisco was made a kind of bodyguard for a Spanish official on a reconnaissance expedition into the interior. He was chosen for this role because of his great physical stature and strength, which earned him the nickname "the Cantabrian Giant." His size and athletic prowess also made him popular with the Guale youth, who invited him to join them in sports such as spear-throwing, wrestling, and a game similar to soccer.

Support the Cause

To support the cause of the martyrs' canonization, join the Friends of the Georgia Martyrs, an association whose mission is to spread the story of the martyrs, pray for their canonization, share testimonies of answered prayer, and otherwise promote the advancement of the cause. Members receive literature about the martyrs, including pamphlets, prayer cards, and occasional issues of the association newsletter, *The Palmetto*, which provides historical information about these Servants of God and updates about the progress of their cause. Members commit themselves to pray for the cause, to share the heroic story of the martyrs with others, and to report any extraordinary favors they believe they have received through the martyrs' intercession.

To join, e-mail name, address, and phone number to georgiamartyrs@comcast.net, or mail a stamped, self-addressed business envelope to The Stella Maris Center for Faith and Culture, P.O. Box 30157, Savannah, GA 31410-0157.

For More Information

www.georgiamartyrs.org

www.PaulThigpen.com

- David Arias, *Spanish Cross in Georgia* (University Press of America, 1994)
- Michael V. Gannon, *The Cross in the Sand: The Early Catholic Church in Florida, 1513-1870* (University Press of Florida, 1992 ed.)
- Paul E. Hoffmann, *A New Andalusia and a Way to the Orient: The American Southeast During the Sixteenth Century* (Louisiana State University Press, rev. ed., 2004)
- Jerald T. Milanich, *Laboring in the Fields of the Lord: Spanish Missions and Southeastern Indians* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999)
- Luis Gerónimo de Oré, *The Martyrs of Florida (1513-1516)*, Maynard J. Geiger, trans. (J. F. Wagner, 1937)



Dr. Thigpen earned a B.A. in Religious Studies from Yale University (1977) and an M.A. (1993) and Ph.D. (1995) in Historical Theology from Emory University, where he was awarded the George W. Woodruff Fellowship.