

“Reading the ‘Letter of the Martyrs’ of Lyonto the Churches of Asia fills us with great admiration for their courage, their mutual support and the solidarity between them.

Today, the accounts of similar events in different circumstances can be found throughout the international press which will, perhaps, affect us in the same way. We forget that they are our brothers who have been persecuted and killed.

The reading of the martyrology in which we are familiar with such names as Nero, Decius, Diocletian, Nicomedia, Antioch, Carthage. The old forms of death, the gridiron, heavy weights, the sword have other names in the newer martyrology. Yet one sees the same strength of faith.

The martyrology is not complete because it is part of the mystery of the Church that is yet to be fulfilled. Fr. Pavel Djidjov who was like a brother to me, will be mentioned one day in words similar to these: “On the Ides of November, in the year of our Lord 1952 at Sofia, capital of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Bulgaria, a Bishop and three priests were shot out of hatred for the faith and for their fidelity to the Catholic Church after a mock trial. In the same country, in other places, innumerable brothers whose names are unknown shed their blood for their faith.”

(‘Condemned to be Shot’; an editorial by Fr. Emile Gabel in ‘La Croix’, 8th October 1952)

“This persecution arose out of hatred for the faith. A particularly sad situation the halos which the martyrs of today earn through a public and brutal condemnation are often hidden from our eyes. Their persecutors, pretending to follow the letter of the law, condemned them as traitors to the cause of the people. (...) Whether the execution of our Fathers has already taken place, or is immanent, or that a long Calvary is being reserved for them, they will be the first Assumptionist martyrs. Yet the sadness and Indignation that we experience at their fate must be accompanied by a rightful sense of pride. His excellency Bishop Beck considers this to be a special sign of God's affection for us that, at the dawn of 2nd century of our existence, he wishes to choose this kind of Witness from among us.”

(Fr. Wilfrid Dufault, 4th Circular to Religious, 9th November 1952, 2 days before the execution of our bothers.)

Why begin this new canonisation process at Assumption?

Several reasons have given rise to this action. In 1984 the Passionist Fathers asked the Assumptionists to join them in the canonisation process of four Bulgarian martyrs condemned to be shot by the communists following the trial, in September 1952, against Catholics in Bulgaria. The Passionist Bishop of Russia, Mgr Eugene Bossilkov was shot at the same time as our three fathers, Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov on the night of 11th and 12th of November 1952, which we learned a long time later. At that time, at the express wish of the Bulgarian bishops, the Congregation decided not to take up this request so as not to cause greater hardship to our brothers who remained faithful to their post in Bulgaria but under close scrutiny of the secret police. " When we began to have more regular contact with our brothers, learning their history and that of their people, it seemed important to us to give witness to the Bulgarian martyrs particularly that of our own brothers. It is a 'Duty of remembrance' that their story of resistance and faith is not forgotten. The video 'Le Balkan crucifie' gives a good account of this era of our faith. But it would have been impossible without the research carried out for the canonisation. In our Assumptionist history, the 'Myth of the East' which was a mobilising factor for several generations had now become concrete. It is called bravery.

Assumptionist life in Bulgaria is identified with that of the College 'A jewel in the crown of Bulgarian intelligentsia and the pride of the young students who were accepted without discrimination: orthodox, Catholics, Armenians, Jews, and Muslims'. 'The Catholic College of St. Augustine at Plovdiv,' wrote Professor Alain Fleury 'leaves us with a living memory of a courageous gamble that was successful. Practicing what has been given an appropriate title 'Ecumenism before its time', it has shown that young people can live in harmony without renouncing their faith but, very simply working in a spirit of openness and tolerance.'

This is an excellent example of our ecumenical orientation.

Who were these Martyrs?

KAMEN VITCHEV

'Pierre VITCHEV was born at Srem, in the diocese of Thrace (District of Bourgas) in Bulgaria, on 23rd May 1893, of orthodox parents.'

His older brother, Ivan, entered the Assumptionists before him, and his younger brother, Dimitar, became a lay teacher at St. Augustine's College at Plovdiv. Their nephew Georges

Vitchev later made his religious vows with the Assumptionists after taking a more circuitous route. He took the name Velik.

Pierre went to school at Srem. In 1903 he was admitted to the alumniate of Kara-Agatch (Andrinople) where he pursued his secondary studies until 1907. He went on to the alumniate at Phanaraki, in the suburbs of Istanbul to study humanities, until 1909.

On 8th September 1910, he received the Assumptionist habit at Gempe near Louvain in Belgium, and began his noviciate. He took the name Kamen, the name by which he would be known in future.

After two years of noviciate, Kamen made his perpetual vows at Limperzberg in Luxembourg, where the noviciate had been transferred.

In 1912, he began his ecclesiastical studies at Louvain, which he continued until 1918. Then he was appointed as a teacher at St Augustine's College in Plovdiv and then at the minor seminary of Koum-Kapou in Constantinople.

In 1920 he returned to Louvain to complete his ecclesiastical studies. After about a year, he was appointed as a teacher of theology at Kadikoy, where he stayed until 1925. He was ordained sub-deacon and deacon three weeks later on 21st December 1921. The following day 22nd December 1921 he was ordained priest in the oriental Rite.

Fr. Kamen stayed in Constantinople until 1925 teaching theology at the Assumptionist's Major Seminary at Kadikoy.

His superiors asked him to continue his studies in theology at the University of Strasbourg, France, for two years. He was awarded the highest grade of diploma with "commendation" for his studies in Canon Law and was admitted to the doctorate.

In 1927 he completed his ecclesiastical studies at Rome at the Pontifical oriental Institute and went on to Strasbourg to study for a Doctor of Theology, The following year, he pursued specialist studies at the Institute of oriental Studies at Kadikoy while being attached to the "Echos d'Orient".

In 1930 he was appointed to the College of St Augustine at Plovdiv where he was successively and sometimes simultaneously professor of philosophy, dean of students and rector of the seminary.

Fr. Kamen gave the impression of being a severe man. He carried an air of authority. Although he had a rather abrupt manner, young people showed him great respect.

He was often asked to give talks especially on young people and society. He was actively involved in the catholic newspaper "Istina" and the Review of Byzantine Studies. He published a number of articles for newspapers and scientific reviews under different pseudonyms. He also wrote lighter articles for the "Calendar of St. Cyril and St. Methodius".

In 1948, at the tune of the final closure of the College by the communist authorities, Fr. Kamen became superior of the Seminary at Plovdiv, with Pavel Djidjov, his young confrere, as bursar, one year later after the expulsion of the foreign religious from Bulgaria, he was appointed Vicar Provincial of the Mission in the orient.

On 4th July 1952 he was arrested by the communist militia accused of being the leader of a catholic plot against the State security.

There was no news of him until 20th September when the newspapers published, on the front page, the Act of "Accusation against 40 people involved in espionage and conspiracy against the People's Republic of Bulgaria for the benefit of the French secret service and the Vatican". Fr. Kamen was at the top of the list of those accused as leader of the plot.

PAVEL DJIDJOV

Joseph DJIDJOV was born at Plovdiv, in the diocese of Bulgaria, on 19th July 1919, to a catholic family of the Latin rite.

From 1926 to 1930, he frequented the primary school of "St Andrew" run by the Assumptionists at Plovdiv.

From 1931 to 1938 he followed courses at the College of St. Augustine at Plovdiv,

He was a member of the Catholic Charity of "Saint Benedict". He liked sport and belonged to a leading sports club "Petar Partchevitch".

On 2nd October 1938, he received the Assumptionist habit at the noviciate at Nozeroy, in the Jura, France. Taking the name Pavel (Paul) by which he would be known in future, he began his noviciate.

At the end of the noviciate year, he made his first vows on 3rd October 1939, which he renewed a year later at Lormoy near Paris, and began his ecclesiastical studies of philosophy and theology. He devoted himself to these studies until 1942. He made his final profession that same year on 8th September.

At the scholasticate of Lormoy, life was rudimentary because the War imposed restrictions on everyone. Pavel took care of a small flock of sheep which provided a little extra nourishment.

Suffering from stomach trouble, Pavel returned to Bulgaria to continue his ecclesiastical studies at Plovdiv until 1944.

On 26 January 1945 he was ordained priest in the Latin rite at Plovdiv. That same year he was appointed to Varna on the Black Sea. He was now studying economics and social sciences at the Business College with the Intention of becoming the Bursar for the whole Mission. He also taught.

Fr. Pavel was very active among his students at Varna. He never hid his anti-Communist feelings. As he had a great deal of Influence, he was already under close surveillance by undercover agents.

That same year, in face of a very difficult economy, his superiors made him Bursar of the College of Saint Augustine at Plovdiv.

In 1949 he was appointed Bursar and Procurator of the Vicariate of the orient.

In this responsibility, he showed great courage especially in defence of the property of the Congregation and the Church. The Ambassador of France at Sofia wrote in a telegram to his Foreign Minister: "I would be grateful to your excellency to commend to his Congregation the courage of my visitor."

He was under constant surveillance by the militia especially because he went regularly to the French Embassy to hand in letters destined for his superiors in France and to collect money sent to him by his superiors.

During the night of 4th July 1952 he was arrested by the communist militia at the Assumptionist Seminary of Plovdiv at the same time as Fr. Kamen Vitchev. Like him, he was listed among the 40 accused of "espionage and conspiracy against the People's Government of Bulgaria." Fr. Pavel Djidjov was second on the list of those accused.

JOSAPHAT CHICHKOV

Robert Mathieu CHICHKOV was born on 9th February 1884 at Philippopoli (Plovdiv), Bulgaria, to a very fervent Latin catholic family. It was a family of modest means. His father was a tailor at the French college of Saint Augustine in Plovdiv.

In September 1893, Robert Mathieu, aged nine, joined the alumniate at Kara-Agatch (Adrianople). He did his primary and secondary studies there until 1899. He received the Assumptionist habit at the noviciate in Phanaraki, in Turkey, on 29th April 1900. He was just 16 years old. He took the religious name of Josaphat and began his noviciate.

In 1901, for the six months of his noviciate in apostolic work, he was appointed as a 'special' teacher at Yambol. While continuing this work, he made his perpetual profession with the Augustinians of the Assumption on 29th May 1902 at Phanaraki.

He was appointed as 'special' teacher at Kara-Agatch, then a little later at Varna. He conducted a small orchestra at the College, edited a few articles for some Bulgarian revues and did some translation work.

In 1904, his superiors sent him to Louvain, in Belgium, to pursue studies in philosophy and theology. He stayed there until 1909. It was at Malines on 4th June 1909, Pentecost Sunday, that he was ordained Deacon by Cardinal Mecier. One month later at Louvain, on 11th June, he was ordained priest in the Latin rite.

He returned to Bulgaria, and in September he was appointed as a 'special' teacher at Plovdiv. A year later at the beginning of the new academic year he was appointed as 'special' teacher at Varna, then in 1911, on to Kara-Agatch where he stayed until 1914.

Between 1914 and 1919, during the first world war, he was a teacher at St Augustine's College at Plovdiv. Then from 1920 to 1929 he was appointed to teach at Varna and put in charge of the first and second years classes. He worked hard for the catholic press and during the holidays he preached retreats.

In July 1929 he was appointed superior of the minor Franco-Bulgarian bi-rival seminary of 'St. Cyril and St. Methodius' at Yambol. He replaced his uncle in this position. As Superior he edited the 'Ephemerides'. He was an inquisitive man open to modern ideas. In Yambol he managed to get hold of one of the first typewriters with the Cyrillic alphabet. He introduced the cinema and loved to organise musical evenings for young people, listening to the gramophone.

In 1933 he was also appointed parish priest of the Latin rite parish at Yambol. With the other fathers he introduced the Sacred heart into family homes. Fr. Josaphat was also bursar for the Oblates of the Assumption and gave numerous conferences to the Sisters, to the novices and to the alumnists.

He was often and regularly visited by the Papal Nuncio for Bulgaria, Mgr Roncalli who loved to visit the minor seminary where he held the work done there in great admiration. Fr. Josaphat loved to spend his leisure time with his brothers at Varna where he went by express train.

In July 1937 he was appointed superior of Varna, where he stayed until the '39-'45 war in charge of the Franco-Bulgarian foyer of Saint Michael. It was during his stay at Varna, that Fr. Josaphat wrote most of his articles that appeared in the 'Poklonnik' (the 'Pilgrim' in Bulgarian). The erudition of this quiet man was striking. He would quote from Catholic and Protestant exegetes famous at that time. In 1949 when foreign religious were forced to leave Bulgaria, Fr. Josaphat was appointed Parish priest of Varna.'

He was arrested there by the communist militia in December 1951. The other Assumptionist religious were told nothing about their brother. After nearly twelve months silence, the newspapers published on the front page the accusations against 40 people accused

of espionage and conspiracy against the peoples government of Bulgaria." The postulator Spassov claimed he was one of the oldest spies in Bulgaria. It was said that from 1903 to 1950, 47 years, he had been in continual contact passing information to the French."!

His arrest marked the beginning of the catholic persecution in Bulgaria.

The Next Dossier will give information about the canonisation process of our Martyred Brothers.

Father Bernard Holzer, A.A.

Postulator of the Cause