

## The "martyrdom" of Tito Banchong in Laos

# Giving one's life for one's people

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*After studying in Italy, Tito returned to his homeland of Laos, from which so many had fled because of war. He returned to be close to his people and bring the Gospel proclamation, despite the risks that this meant for his life.*

"I am already ready for Jesus: to be his martyr if I am worthy and if he wants me. And I think that time is already very near." This was the end of one of Fr. Tito's first letters from Laos in 1976. Tito was the name given to Banchong Topagnong at age 8 or 9, when he was baptized, together with his family, in the Hmong village of Kiukiatan, in Northern Laos.

When Tito was 12 or 13 years old, Fr. Mario Borzaga arrived in the village. He would be the first of six Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate who would soon be martyred and later proclaimed *blessed* in 2016. Tito was drawn to the example of that young missionary and entered the seminary, where he remained for a short time. Accustomed to the freedom of the forest, he did not adapt to the somewhat austere life of the seminary.

One evening, while the village youth gathered around the campfire; they pondered what they can do to improve the condition of their people. Some thought of becoming doctors and other engineers... as they spoke of their futures. "I will become a priest.", Tito declared, "I want my help to reach the roots of life". And in 1969, he entered the major seminary in Phong-Pen, Cambodia. The war in that country was relentless, and the seminary was soon forced to close. Tito was then sent to study theology in Rome, but arrived too late to enroll at the Pontifical Urbanian College, and so Laos missionaries directed him to the Oblate seminary, where his years of study passed quickly...

### **"I chose the Church of Laos and I feel God wants me there"**

The situation in Laos became increasingly dire and the Vietnam war spread to surrounding regions. Rebel forces overthrew the government, seized power, and all missionaries were subsequently expelled. In the midst of this, Tito made his decision: "I chose the Church of Laos and I feel God wants me there, not elsewhere. Even if I can be a priest for only one day, I will return to Laos."

On September 13, 1975, he left Rome's Fiumicino airport. In the refugee camps in Thailand, he met refugees from his land, and his own family. Should he remain there or go on to Laos? "When I look at Laos, beyond the Mekong, I see a flock without a shepherd. None of my family and friends want me to return to Laos, but I know that a naked cross awaits me there... I return so that we may all be stronger. I return to help believers. I choose God alone. He is the one who makes me come back and that's why I came back."

It was difficult to leave family and friends in the refugee camp. He seemed to betray them, because they had placed all their hope in him.: "They come at me crying." They did not want Tito to return to Laos. "I have no words. It seems everything is collapsing around me. And I hear very strongly the words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". My strength is reduced to nothing. After a sleepless night I repeat my "yes" to Jesus Forsaken and regained the strength to leave my parents, in tears. Our people will be saved if we do as Christ himself does, consecrating ourselves to God's will."

### **"In the world's eyes, whoever follows Him is always a madman"**

Three days later, from Laos, he wrote again: "I am happy to be able to carry my cross behind Him... My return is a strength for local clergy, because they believed I would never return. Instead, I came back, even though I knew I have to suffer... They say I'm crazy because people try to get out, and I try to get in. Of course, in the world's eyes, whoever follows Him is always crazy."

A few days after arriving in Vientiane, he was ordained a priest. The following day he wrote: "I am no longer afraid because I am of the Lord... I'm ready for anything. I am very happy. No one can separate me from him... Every day I discover more that he is with me. I have God. How cool that is, isn't it? He asks me everything, I give him everything."

After his ordination Tito was sent to the country's historic capital of Luang Prabang, but he could not carry out any ministry nor visit Christian families: "It is a thousand times more difficult than I had imagined." Finally, after receiving permission, he was allowed to celebrate Mass with Christians, "but it was a very painful Mass for everyone. Near the altar there were a dozen soldiers with weapons. We couldn't say a word. After the readings I wanted to give the homily, but I couldn't. Inside I wanted to express many things to encourage them, but I couldn't say them. I sat down in silence for a moment and started crying like a baby. The others saw me and began to cry too. I tried to take courage, got up, and resumed the celebration. During Mass, looking one another in the eyes, we said to each other: 'Courage, Jesus will bear our sorrows.'"

### **"The slaves of Jesus are useless for this country"**

Soon, public accusations began to be made against Tito: "Jesus' slaves are useless for the country. The imitators of Jesus are not worthy to live in a free society. Those who are slaves of Jesus must convert to freedom as soon as possible..." "How happy I am, when I hear the words "slave of Jesus" resounding against me. I believe it is the only beautiful word that a Christian can await, to be a little like our Lord on the cross."

The bishop sent him to the rural town of Paksane to protect him: "I became the parish priest for five villages...and I am trying to get to know the Christians. My cross is getting heavier and heavier. I am happy because the Lord always gives me his strength and joy. So many times, one can only cry. I try to be the 'Light', as the Gospel says, and I have to renew my Yes daily and start over." He visited villages and was "a vagabond", as he often repeated. "I resume my wandering now... Lent requires my presence here and there. I am able to love and I must love until my life's last breath. I try to make myself weak with the weak, even if it costs me a lot. It cost him (Jesus) his life, why can't I do it, too?"

### **Arrested and imprisoned in a pit dug in the ground**

To the challenges of his work, is added eye pain, for which Tito had been operated twice in Italy. The trials are becoming heavier: "The Lord's Passover did not last long according to the liturgy, but mine is always present. For them I returned to Laos, now I remain for them until the very end... I feel ever more abandoned, like Jesus in his cry. But at the same time, I feel him with me."

The military was following his movements, and finally Tito was arrested in an ambush. The villagers courageously ask the authorities about his disappearance. The "reasons" for his disappearance are the usual false truths: spying for foreign countries, organized subversion... The villagers were forbidden to speak about Tito or look into his disappearance under penalty of imprisonment and reprisals...

Tito was imprisoned for months in a pit dug in the ground. Then, he spent four years in prison, followed by forced enlistment in the army. In Italy he was believed to be dead until only later, when the first news of his survival began to arrive.

### **A meeting with Chiara Lubich before leaving**

During his years of study, he encountered the Focolare Movement. Before returning to his country, he met with foundress Chiara Lubich, who asked him: "Why are you going back to Laos? You will be able to do little with the communists there!" And Tito responded: "I have to return for my people, because no missionaries are left. If I must die, I will die for them, for my people." To which Chiara Lubich replied: "Go ahead. I will always be with you. Wherever you are, I will always be with you! God will put you where there are pain and suffering... Trust the Lord".

When Chiara later learned of his death, wanting to motivate the Gen, the new generations of the Movement in their social commitments, she spoke of Tito:

*"I remember a phrase said by a focolarino [she considered Tito to be one] in leaving the Movement's Center where he had been trained, to return to his distant, dangerous homeland: 'Goodbye, until perhaps in Paradise; but always let me know everything about the Movement.' And then Tito, knowing that he might never return, added: 'I go, ready to die for my people.' Here, each of us must feel this: that we must give our lives, of course, for humanity [...]; but we must also give our life for our own people. And for the poorest of one's own people."*

Instead, Tito was later freed, although not before converting jailers and prisoners. He resumed his ministry in the villages, until he was appointed Apostolic Prefect. Tito departed for heaven on January 25, 2025, at age 78, consumed by a long illness and the 50 years of his demanding mission, to "lay down one's life for one's own people".