

Blessed Leopold of Alpandei (1864-1956)



For the past few months, the Order has been preparing for a second beatification, once again, in Spain! This time it is the turn of Br. Leopold of Alpandei, a friar who is close to our own times. His life was not distinguished for any spectacular works but rather for the simplicity and fidelity he put into everything he did. Of him it can be said that he was before all else a “man of God”, steeped in His Spirit. He was a questing friar, and so would go out every day among the people. His was not a position of power: he simply asked, and left the other person free. He would beg alms to support the friars, and leave the giver, in return, with the gifts of the Spirit, serenity and peace.

Questing in this form, as Br. Leopold exercised it, has all but disappeared in the Order. However, we do need to discover new ways of being present among the people as “lesser brothers”. “Subject to everyone in this world”, says St Francis in the Praises of the Virtues, to give them an opportunity of sharing and to offer them “His peace”, the peace of the Lord Jesus. How? By involving them in the charitable apostolates started by many of our brothers, and asking them to spend some of their time doing good and receiving it in return. The gift of oneself, freely given, can only bring gratitude for all that we have received.

Blessed Leopold belongs to that great army of questing friars who personified in terms of minority both the quest and the question - the seeker’s quest and God’s question to man, seeking him out because He loves him. Today the humble questor achieves glory on the Church’s altars; we rejoice, and at the same time ask him to walk alongside all those who seek God, and to accompany us, too, so that as Capuchin lesser brothers we may be open to the voice of the Spirit, calling us to live among people with simplicity, with only the joy and gladness that comes from knowing that we are loved by Him.

Hidden in the midst of the Serranía de Ronda lies Alpandei, a tiny village, nestling in the heart of the mountain, a place of great natural beauty. This is the native land of our holy Capuchin questor, that mystic of humility and seclusion, the gift of God to the human race in search of its destiny.

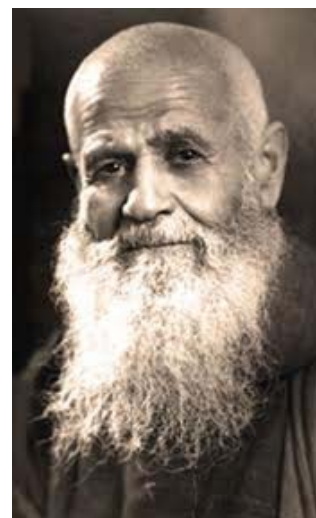
His parents, Diego Márquez Ayala and Jerónima Sánchez Jiménez, were simple, industrious peasants and, like most people, they worked hard to turn the rocky soil into fertile ground so that they could feed their family. On June 24th, 1864 their first son was born, and at the baptismal font, on the 29th of that same month, our brother Leopold was given the name of Francisco Tomás of St John the Baptist. Diego and Jerónima were overjoyed at the birth of three more children, Diego, Juan Miguel and Maria Teresa.

Warmed by the love of his family and nourished by the practice of Christian virtue, the good seed of faith took root and grew strong in the heart of the young Francisco Tomás. From his father he learned good manners, Christian principles and the practice of goodness. From his mother’s lips he learned how to pray. Cheerful and prudent, a tireless worker who kept good company, Francisco Tomás would start his day with Holy Mass and a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. What little he had, he shared, and this, allied to a natural kindness that was never contrived, expressed the depth of his spiritual life and the strength of his experience of faith. He was “all heart”, and would assist the poor, as we know from the testimony of those who knew him. It is said that he used to give away his tools to those who needed them, or gave the money he had earned from the grape harvest to any poor person he met on his way home.

This was how he spent the first 35 years of his “hidden” life, working in the fields and living with his family. Meanwhile, God was slowly moulding him, waiting for the opportunity to call him to His service. So it was that in 1894, while listening to the Capuchins preaching in Ronda, during the celebrations in preparation for the beatification of the Capuchin Diego of Cadiz, the young Francisco Tomás decided

to embrace the religious life and become a Capuchin. "I want to be a Capuchin like them". He was attracted by their "life of seclusion".

Only in 1899 was he accepted by the Capuchins in their friary in Seville. One month later he moved to the novitiate, where he enjoyed the more than favourable opinion of the members of the community, who praised his silence, his hard work, his prayer and his goodness. From the hands of Br. Diego of Valencina, Superior and novice-master, on November 16th of that same year, he received the Capuchin habit and was given the name Br. Leopold of Alpandere.



The decision to become a Capuchin did not call for any radical change in his life – he was already living the gospel life intensely at a deep level. Br. Leopold, working in the fields and in the friary kitchen garden, transformed his humble work into constant prayer and generous service. The change of name, as he commented years later, shocked him "like a cold shower". For one thing, the name was unusual even among the friars. His joining the friary was not a consequence of poverty, or a refuge for a broken heart, but a manifestation of what he was already living and experiencing keenly. The example of Blessed Diego of Cadiz had led him to serve God to the point of sacrificing his whole self.

Knowing that he was a peasant, in Seville they gave him the job of assistant to the friar who looked after the vegetable garden. It was not only vegetables that Br. Leopold cultivated in that garden, but also his spiritual gifts. Those who knew him said that his holy joy matched the profound interiority which his eyes and his face could not help but reveal. In fact his every gesture, even the most ordinary, frequently repeated ones, flowed from profound communion with God. As a novice Br. Leopold experienced the joy of having responded to God's call. True, he was 36 years old, but his youthful spirit was not just something internal, it exploded in a joy that could be seen and enjoyed. The novitiate experience laid the foundations for his spiritual journey, since his love for God was being enriched by the knowledge of Capuchin tradition and spirituality.

At the end of his novitiate he made first profession, spending short periods in the friaries of Seville, Granada and Antequera. His faithful hoe was his constant companion as he continued to tend the friars' vegetable garden. He learned to transform manual work and the service of the brothers into prayer. He was a "contemplative who moved among the irrigation channels that watered the vegetables, the fruits and the flowers for the altar".

He was assigned to the friary in Granada for the first time in 1903, and always had the job of gardener. These were the last years he lived in absolute seclusion behind the ancient friary walls and in the garden, years of profound spiritual experience and silence. In the garden, his conversations with God grew deeper, his virtues stronger. From the garden he would go to the Blessed Sacrament chapel, where he would spend long nights in profound adoration. In the old friary of Granada on November 23rd in the year 1903, Br. Leopold made his perpetual vows at the hands of the Guardian, Br. Francisco de Mendieta. This was his definitive consecration to God, which he had lived and was to live for the rest of his life.

After staying briefly in Seville and in Antequera, on February 21st 1914, he returned to Granada, and was to remain there for ever. The city in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada was to be the setting of his life for the next half-century, as gardener, sacristan and questor, constantly united to God and at the same time close to the people. It was the office of questor that was to define him and mark him out for ever. He had become a friar to escape "the noise of the world", yet he was launched by obedience into the decisive battle of his life amid the streets of the city and the voices of the people. From now onwards, the mountains and

valleys would be his cloister and his church, and he would walk the dusty pathways and the streets with a ready will. Br. Leopold, like other Capuchin saints who had a marked inclination for the contemplative life, lived in constant contact with people, who instead of distracting him helped him to come out of himself, to take on the burdens of others, to understand, to be helpful, to serve and to love. In the words of one of his fervent devotees, he was "detached, but not distant".

He was so popular in the city that everyone recognised him, especially children, who on seeing him called out "Look, here comes 'Br. Nipordo'" as they ran towards him. He stopped with them a while to explain some page of the catechism; or with adults to listen to their problems and worries. Br. Leopold had discovered a way to dispense God's goodness to everyone: by reciting the Three Hail Marys. It was his formula for weaving the divine into the human.

For half a century, day after day, Br. Leopold went from one length of Granada to the other, distributing the alms of love, lending colour to the sad days of many, creating unity and harmony, leading all to meet God and lending dignity to everyday tasks. Every action of his, every approach to the people, was always something new.

But not everything was easy or trouble-free. In fact, Br. Leopold exercised the questor's task at a time of anticlericalism in Spain, when anything religious was frowned upon, if not openly persecuted. It was the time of the "Two Spains", first of the Second Republic and then of the civil war. The number of priests and religious killed amounted to seven thousand, simply for being what they were. Going out questing every day, Br. Leopold had much to suffer and was often grossly insulted: "You idle good-for-nothing, we'll soon tie that cord of yours around your neck!" . "You old tramp" they shouted, "do some work instead of going around begging all the time!". "Just wait, we're going to slit your throat!". He experienced this hostile climate and, paraphrasing the Gospel, he would say: "Poor wretches, we must feel sorry for them, because they don't know what they're doing!".



Was there, I wonder, some secret to account for the life of our questing brother? Yes, there was: the secret of his life was his prayer, his union with God, and his work. He transformed everything into a prayer, and his prayer was his most precious work. His was not a life of grand gestures or particular events, except for those things that are normally required of anyone embracing the religious life.

The holiness of Br. Leopold was underpinned by the humanity of the former Francisco Tomás. He maintained the identity of the peasant from Alpendeire, which already encompassed his road to holiness.

Br. Paschal Rywalski, a former General Minister of the Order, said of him: "There can be no doubt that to meet Br. Leopold is to be immediately fascinated by him, because he is simple, natural, without pretence, sincere and upright and evangelically poor. Here is a poor man, full of faith and without guile, simple and discreet, who always found a way of staying in the background, serving anonymously and humbly. A man with the heart of a child, noble and frank, courteous and composed ...the heart of an honest peasant. He was extremely reserved and modest about any good that the Lord worked through him, and became disturbed when people praised him: he rejoiced in humiliations and always retained a lively awareness of his limitations and sins. He would often repeat: "I am a great sinner" One spark of genuine gospel inspiration results in our seeing and valuing our fellow creatures from God's perspective. Br. Leopold knew very well the famous saying of Saint Francis: "What a person is before God, that he is and no more" (Admonition 19)".

It was not easy to see his eyes. Br. Leopold took as his model Saint Felix of Cantalice, keeping his eyes cast down and his heart raised to heaven. He had the eyes of a child, pure and penetrating, serene and clear. He exuded a calmness,

purity and gentleness that were the fruits of the interior peace that surrounded him.

He had a particular influence over anyone who met him, on account of his humility and availability. He was not one of those striking figures who attract attention. Rather than “going among the people, Br. Leopold passed through them”, he did not so much look at people, he saw into the hearts of those who sought him out.



Looking at his life we can say that he observed the Gospel of Christ *sine glossa*, following the example of St. Francis. What was extraordinary was his crystal-clear quality, his transparency, his silence. In a climate of uncertainty with no fixed reference points, the Servant of God Br. Leopold comes across as someone who carefully listened to the voice of God and allowed himself to be transformed into the image of the Only-Begotten Son.

One day while he was out collecting alms as usual, at the age of 89, he fell and broke his thigh. He was taken to hospital but fortunately recovered without surgery. He was discharged and walked back to the friary with the aid of no more than a stick, but after that he could not walk the streets any more. What he did do was devote himself totally to God, the great Love of his life. Absorbed in God, he spent the last three years of his life, gradually burning out “like a flame of love”.

The flame was extinguished on February 9th, 1956. He was 92. The humble questor of the Three Hail Marys had gone to his Lord. The news of his death spread rapidly throughout the city of Granada, moving the people deeply. A stream of people, of all ages and conditions, made its way to the Capuchin friary. The reputation for holiness, which had accompanied him during his life, grew stronger after his death. Every day, but especially on the 9th of each month, extraordinary crowds of people from all over the world flock to visit his tomb. Countless graces are granted by God through the intercession of his faithful servant.

On March 15th 2008, Benedict XVI published the decree on Br Leopold’s heroic virtues, and he will be beatified on September 12, 2010.

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