

## Blessed José Tous y Soler, Capuchin Priest, (1811-1871)



On April 25<sup>th</sup> our Capuchin brothers of Catalonia and the Capuchin Sisters of the Mother of the Divine Shepherd will celebrate the beatification of our brother José Tous y Soler in Barcelona. The whole Order is rejoicing with them and joins in the chorus of praise to God for this special moment of grace: we are delighted to add one more to the already considerable number of our canonised and beatified brothers. If you read the biographical notes you will realise what a shining example this Capuchin friar is, compelled as he was, owing to the political and social hardships of the time, to live much of his life away from the fraternity and without any form of fraternity life. Br. José had managed to make the values of our life so much a part of his existence that he was able to remain faithful to what he had professed, even in extremely difficult conditions, obliged to move from one house to another. He had the ability, wherever he went, to fit in and start serving the people who were put in his charge. He let himself be moved by the needs of the people, and responded with practical efficacy.



Blessed José Tous y Soler was born and lived for most of his life in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spain. One feature of this century was its high level of political, social and economic instability, which saw the suppression of the religious Orders and at times outright persecution of the Church, with killings, excommunications and imprisonment of religious and, for many, the experience of enforced exile. In the most dramatic years, riots and violent conflict were the order of the day, sometimes leading to the destruction of churches. For Spain the century opened with invasion by France and closed with overseas wars and the loss of the last imperial colonies.

In this complex social and political situation, with its strongly anti-clerical environment, the Spanish Church saw strong personalities flourish throughout the century who rose to the challenge of political and cultural change with the boldness of faith and with untiring commitment in the fields of education and charitable service. This was especially the case in Catalonia, where our beatified brother lived.

José Tous y Soler was born in Igualada, in the province of Barcelona in the diocese of Vic, on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1811 to a well-to-do family with profound Christian roots. He was the ninth of the twelve children born to Nicolás Tous Carrera and Francisca Soler Ferrer. On the following day he was baptised in the parish church of Santa Maria de Igualada, and was given the names José-Nicolás-Jaime. In 1817, according to the custom of the time, he was confirmed and in 1818 received First Communion.

The role of the family in the life and formation of the young José turns out to have been fundamental. It was the place where he received the first seeds of faith, of the love and fear of God, which in time would produce fruits of genuine holiness in him.

In 1820, José's family moved to Barcelona to look for better employment. It was here that the future Blessed met the Capuchins and asked to join them. And so, on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1827, at the age of 16, he donned the Capuchin habit in the novitiate at Sarriá, a friary known as "the desert". From the beginning of his years of formation he proved to be a religious of great virtue. The testimonies of his fellow-friars tell of his exemplary recollection, his solid piety, his ready obedience, his humility and purity, and of his complete fidelity to the Capuchin Franciscan charism.

On 19<sup>th</sup> February 1828 Br. José pronounced his religious vows and in subsequent years studied philosophy and theology in the friaries of Calella de la Costa, Gerona and Valls. On 1<sup>st</sup> June 1833 he was ordained deacon in Tarragona and on 24<sup>th</sup> May was ordained priest by Mgr. Pedro Martínez de San Martín. Shortly afterwards he was sent to the friary of Santa Madrona in Barcelona, where he was distinguished for his fidelity to the priestly ministry and for a profound interior life, nourished by an intimate relationship with Jesus Crucified, with Jesus in the Eucharist and with Mary, Mother of the Good Shepherd, devotions which marked his life deeply.

In the friary of Santa Madrona he was caught up in the social unrest of 1835. In June of that same year, on account of the suppression of religious houses decreed by the government, he and his fellow friars were imprisoned in Monjuic fortress in Barcelona. He was freed after 18 days, and began the harsh journey of exile, which brought him first to France and subsequently to northern Italy. In 1836 he returned to France, residing in Grenoble, Marseilles and in the diocese of Toulouse. There he completed his studies in moral theology, gaining the title of preacher, as was the established norm in the Capuchin Order at the time. During this period he exercised the priestly ministry as chaplain to the Benedictine nuns of Perpetual Adoration.

Br. José, though compelled to reside outside the friary and involved in intense pastoral activity, always remained a genuine Capuchin friar, living poorly and cultivating humility, love for silence, a life of prayer and devoting himself to the relief of the material and spiritual needs of all whom he met.



Two exceptional witnesses tell us something about his apostolate and devotional life in those years of exile in France. The Bishop of Toulouse, Mgr. Paul D'Artrós, testifying on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1842, wrote these words: *"We attest and certify that our dear brother in Christ, José Tous, a Spanish priest who has been living in our metropolitan city for about six years, has earned the esteem of everyone on account of the purity of his faith, his moral rectitude and the excellence of his ecclesiastical virtues. For this reason we affirm that the said priest is to be kindly received everywhere and admitted to the celebration of Holy Mass, saving the permission of the competent superior. (Positio, vol. II, p. 180).* Similarly the Benedictine nuns, whose chaplain he was, give vigorous testimony in their book of Chronicles as to his life of devotion, piety and love of poverty. *"He leaves us taking our affection with*

*him"*, they wrote.

In 1843 he returned to Spain in the hope of being able to rejoin Capuchin conventual life, but the 'liberal' laws of the time prevented this. So he went to live with his family, always remaining faithful to the austere, penitential style of Capuchin life. He exercised the priestly ministry as a curate in the parish of Esparragure (Barcelona) and, from 1848, in the parish of San Francisco de Paola in Barcelona. He was always happy to live his consecration to God, even when he had to face tribulation, anxieties and at times even injury to his person as a priest and religious.

It was in the parish of San Francesco de Paola that Blessed José understood how much the children and young people of his day were living in a state of spiritual and material abandonment, exactly *"like sheep without a Shepherd"*(Mt 9,36). He therefore took on the job of spiritual director of the *"Pious Association of the glorious little Saint Romana"*, promoting veneration of the Mother of the Good Shepherd.

Spurred on by the desire of some young members of the Association, who asked to devote themselves to the service of the Christian education of girls and young

women, in March 1850 he founded the *Institute of the Capuchin Sisters of the Mother of the Good Shepherd*. On 27<sup>th</sup> May 1850 the first house of the new Institute was opened at Ripoll (Gerona) and in 1858 at Capellades (Barcelona), which was to become the mother house of the new Institute. Subsequently houses were opened at San Quirico de Besora (Barcelona, 1860), Barcelona (1862) and Ciempozuelos (Madrid, 1865).

Br. José personally drafted the Constitutions of the Institute he had founded, and presented them to the Bishop of Vic, Mgr. Luciano Casadevall. These show very clearly the two hinges on which the life of the sisters was to rest; devotion to Mary, Mother of the Good Shepherd, and education of children and young people.

The Institute grew and developed rapidly under the constant pastoral concern of Br. José, who devoted himself in particular to the spiritual formation of the religious. In 1888 it received the *Decretum laudis* and was approved in 1897. In 1905 it was affiliated to the Capuchin Order.

Br. José met sister death on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1871, while celebrating Mass in the school of the Mother of the Good Shepherd, Barcelona. It can truly be said that his life was one continuous celebration of the Holy Mass. With his death, the light of a "saintly religious", a genuine son of Francis of Assisi, was extinguished.

Pope Benedict XVI, in declaring Br. José Tous y Soler blessed, presents him as an integrated religious, wholly dedicated to the fulfilment of his mission for the glory of God and the good of the Church. He was a religious with a zeal for silence and prayer, a lover of contemplation. He was a Capuchin, penitential, faithful to the Franciscan charism even though living outside the friary against his will. An austere man, at the same time he was generous with others, a priest who was preoccupied for the salvation of souls and particularly sensitive to the needs of young women, of the sick and the poor, and submissive and obedient to his superiors.

His unconditional love for Christ and the Church enriched the ancient trunk of the Capuchin Family with a new branch, the Capuchin Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

Circular Letter n.6 of Br. Mauro Jöhri Capuchin Minister General (Prot. N. 00359/10; Rome, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2010)