

## Blessed Agathange de Vendôme and Cassian de Nantes - the Martyrs of Gondar



Had not Guglielmo Massaja collected the stories handed down among the local Catholic Christians, these two Capuchin missionaries would probably have remained in the shadows of oblivion. Agathange de Vendôme and Cassian de Nantes were martyred in Gondar on 7 August 1638. Cardinal Massaja worked in the high-plains of Ethiopia for thirty five years and after the proper checks was able to identify the location of their tomb. In the process on the 10 January 1887 he stated that Catholics spread throughout the different provinces of the vast Ethiopia still told their children and grand children the story of the martyrdom and virtues of these servants of God. Their relics were kept near the city of Gondar towards the south, at the entrance to a Muslim suburb. Their cause had already been attempted in the seventeenth century at the time of Urban VIII, Innocent X and Alexander VIII, Then with the recommendation of King Louis XIV of France the process was introduced on 13 June 1887. And so with particular solemnity on 1 January 1905 Saint Pius X proclaimed them blessed.

In the liturgy and in memory the two martyrs cannot be separated. Their biographical account – brief and intense the forty years for one and thirty one years for the other – cannot be told separately. Even if their initial formation had different cultural and geographic tinges, their missionary ardour and apostolic fervour united them on the one path of light which in the subsequent nights of their martyrdom shone out in the cloud of stones showered on them, to form the one pillar of fire, like red swirling plumes from a great censer.

Born in Vendôme on 31 July 1598 to François Noury and Marguerite Béon was the third of seven children. He first met the Capuchins when he was very young. His father was highly regarded in their town. In fact he was the president of the Election court and the committee organiser to collect funds when in 1606 the Capuchins planted the cross for a new friary in the suburbs of Vendôme. The enthusiastic welcome given by the people to the Capuchins, and the readiness of every group of people to help build the friary struck the seven year old, François, as he was called. In the following years he accompanied his father to visit with the friars since he was their “apostolic *sindaco*”<sup>1</sup>. In this way the young François learned to savour the Franciscan virtues. In the César-Vendôme college he did his classical studies and with the maturation of his vocation he entered the novitiate in Mans when he was around twenty years of age. Mans was part of the Capuchin province of Touraine-Bretagne. His novice master was Br. Gilles de Monnay.

After religious profession he was sent in 1620 to Poitier where he could continue his studies for three years under the guidance of such extraordinary masters as Br. Ignace de Nevers, and especially Fr. Joseph du Tremblay of Paris who, at that time, was provincial definitor and prefect for the missions of Poitou. In 1624 Agathange went on to study theology at Rennes, taught by Br.

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<sup>1</sup> At that time the *sindaco* was the secular who handled the financial dealings of the friars and friary, sometimes known by the quaint English title of “spiritual friend.”

François de Tréguier. Ordained priest the following year he could experience, if only briefly, the front-line apostolate of the “flying” Capuchin missions to restore the Catholic faith in Poitou. In 1626 he preached the Lent in his home town. He continued his counter-protestant apostolate until 1628. When he was in Rennes a providential circumstance – though not without the good offices of Br. Joseph of Paris - involved him the missions of the Levant by his replacing a missionary who was all ready to go but who fell gravely ill.

However before seeing him in action it is necessary to know his companion martyr, his *in passione socius*, Cassian de Nantes. He and his twin sister were born in the beautiful cosmopolitan city of Nantes on the banks of the Loire on 14 January 1607. Their parents were Juan Lopez-Neto and Guida d’Almeras, a Portuguese family of merchants. The following day they were baptised in the church of Saint-Similien. He received the name Consalo and everyone later called him Vasener. He did his first studies in the College of Saint Clement, in a suburb outside the city. He stood out for his lively intelligence combined with an innocence which made him liked by all his cleric teachers and fellow students. He nurtured the practice of mental prayer and loved to recollect himself in the silence of the Capuchin chapel not far from home. When the Calvinists evicted the Capuchins from Angers in 1589 the friars found refuge in Nantes under the protection of the Duke of Mercoeur, one of the leaders of the League. He donated the friars their friary in 1593 and the friars were welcomed sympathetically by the people. Vasener was only nine years old when he asked to become a Capuchin. He already dreamed for the distant missions in order to die a martyr.

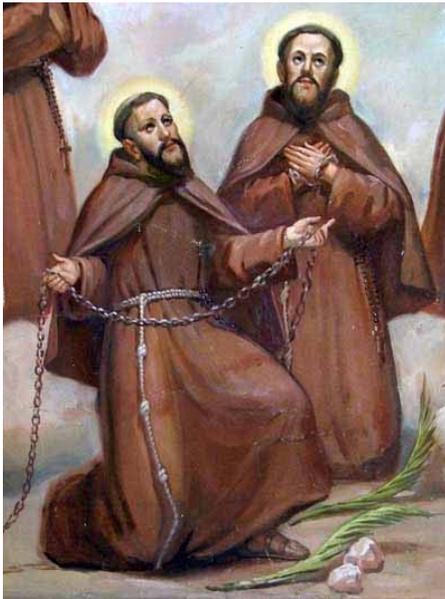
There was a surge of missionary spirituality in France at that time. Even if tied up with a nationalistic *grandeur*, this missionary enthusiasm was inspired somewhat by the gifted Fr. Joseph Leclerc du Tremblay of Paris, who looked forward to a universal conversion and a return to unity by the separated brethren of the various Churches. Naturally the young Vasener had to wait, but as soon as he reached the age determined by the Council of Trent, close to fifteen or sixteen years, he entered the novitiate in Angers. On 6 February he was clothed in the Capuchin habit and received the name Cassian. After he completed the year of probation in a praiseworthy manner, the superiors sent him to continue studies in philosophy and theology at Rennes under the direction of Br. François de Tréguier who had been the professor of Br. Agathange. This professor had formed many heroic missionaries who worked and died as martyrs of charity in the missions of Palestine, Syria and Egypt.

He continued to cultivate his missionary vocation. When he was ordained as priest he believed the moment had arrived to fulfil his wish when the plague broke out suddenly in Rennes and reaped havoc for over a year between 1631 and 1632. Was this a sign? In the hospital outside the city he dedicated himself totally to serve those infected. He remained unharmed and later returned to his studies. Fr. Joseph de Paris, who chose his missionaries well, was then Provincial Minister of Paris. He recognised a suitable man in Br. Cassian who received the obedience and after a short stay in the capital went to Marseilles to embark for Egypt where Br. Agathange was waiting for him.

The latter had arrived in Aleppo on 29 April 1629 and applied himself keenly to study Arabic and sought to encourage a return to the Church by the

schismatics, especially by actively trying to win over bishops and archbishops. Apart from many Armenians and Syrians he managed to win over even a Greek bishop who would have been a great help to the Catholic mission in Syria, but this aroused the jealousy of the Maronite authorities. Agathange then redirected his energies from Aleppo to the numerous villages of Lebanon, enough to earn the title of "apostle of Lebanon." Another aspect of his work was the liberation of Christian slaves.

Meanwhile the organisation of a new mission in Egypt had reached maturity. Joseph de Paris entrusted it to Agathange in 1633. Cassian was among the first missionaries to arrive from Europe. The two met at Alexandria and will share the rest of their apostolate together in an attempt to effect the union between the Coptic and Roman churches. Both dedicated themselves to learn the language Gheez. Agathange sought to strengthen his relations with the Coptic Patriarch Matiewos III who appointed a new archbishop for Ethiopia, the monk Armanios. He appeared open to the missions but this was ruined by an adventurer, a self-styled monk called Pier Leone, a Lutheran from Lubeca who worked against the two martyrs.



Before leaving for inland Ethiopia, Agathange and Cassian, the experienced missionary and the enthusiastic youth, strengthened their spirit by visiting the holy places of the Lord in the Holy Land. Then in 1638, helped by a Venetian merchant, they joined a caravan heading to the coast of the Red Sea through the Nubian desert. With the availability of other caravans they passed Massawa and reached Deborech in the Serawa on the Ethiopian high plains. They did not find a welcome there, but imprisonment. This was the result of the malicious intervention by Pier Leone with the archbishop. Stripped of everything they were ignominiously taken away, tied to the tails of the animals ridden by their jailers and arrived in Gondar on 5 August. Agathange appealed to the archbishop, unaware of the plot woven by Pier

Leone. He was not able to meet with abuna Marcos, the new archbishop from whom the two missionaries only received threats and slander.

On the 7 August 1638 the negus Fasilides questioned them again. They defended their Catholic faith and Cassian, who had a good grasp of Amharic, renewed his profession of faith. The death sentence was immediate. The two confessors of the faith were dragged by the mob to the place of execution. All was ready, nearly. They had no rope to hang them. The friars offered their cords which were then used to hang them on the gallows. It was midday, the time of day in which Jesus was raised on the Cross. One personage who was present at that moment confessed the Catholic faith. Abuna Marcos was hidden in the crowd and ordered that the two be finished off by stoning. That night the citizens of Gondar saw a great column of light rise from the mound of stones.

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