

Blessed Diego José de Cádiz (1743-1801)



ne day in 1756, after disappointing results in his philosophy studies, the young José Francisco López-Caamaño y García Pérez entered the church of the Capuchin friary in Ubrique in Spain. The friars were chanting the Liturgy of the Hours. He got a start. As he later wrote in one of his letters, "My soul was filled with such a great joy and such an usual admiration that I nearly came out of myself." He felt a great repugnance towards religious life, particularly Capuchin life, but in that moment he felt attracted and his enthusiasm was irrepressible. "I asked for a biography of any saint of the Order and they gave me one about our saints Fidelis and Giuseppe da Leonessa. Both were missionaries. Then they gave me a life of the venerable Br. José da Carabantes, the so-called apostle of Galicia. This made my heart burst into flames. Although I was only thirteen years old I longed for solitude, union with God, mortification, etc. Overcome by these desires, without consulting anyone, girded my waist and legs so tightly with rope that unable to breathe and walk I would have to take off one and loosen the other. I wore them for many days." This youthful ardour led him to be clothed in the Capuchin habit in Sevilla on 12 November 1757. At fifteen years age he began the novitiate on 31 March 1758 with a new name, Diego José. "From that moment it was my ardent desire to be a Capuchin, a missionary and a saint. I even had the ambition to give my blood in martyrdom."

He was born in the city of Cádiz on 30 March 1743 to José López Caamaño and María de Ocaña y García, both from noble families. Since his mother died when he was nine, he had a sad childhood with a pitiless step-mother. In his first years of religious life, after novitiate, he lived in quite an easy going way, if we believe what he wrote. He contented himself with the bare minimum in his studies. He felt more attracted to Castellan poetic literature. In class one day, however, during a theology lesson, he had another spiritual start. "I was aware of a notable interior devotion combined with a great desire to see those exalted things in the same Lord with the blessed. I was aware of the need to abandon everything to follow him and I felt determined to do it."



He was ordained priest at Cardona on 24 May 1766. "I was committed then to mental prayer. Apart from the two hours of community prayer, I dedicated at least an hour to mental prayer during the night." For six years he immersed himself in Biblical studies and devout books. Faced with the relentless attacks against the Church and the Pope by the French Enlightenment, he felt that he could not remain idle. He had to reply with all his strength. "Unable to read such writings," he told his spiritual director, "I had no desire to learn French because of the disgust I felt for the books that came from there on the subject. How necessary holiness is to be able to placate God with prayer and to support holy Church! What a desire to go public to openly confront the libertines! What an urge to preach to the learned and educated people! What ardour to pour out my blood in the defence of everything we have believed until now!"

He was realising his apostolic and missionary aspiration. In 1768 he began to preach in Ubrique with great fruit. After fifteen years of discord and argument among the people of Estepona he brought peace in 1773. For a decade he travelled throughout Andalucía preaching missions, Lenten courses and novenas. He was in Granada at Guadix, Baza, and Jerez, in 1779.

1780 saw him in Porto de Santa María, Jaén and elsewhere. He was unstoppable. In Lent of 1775 he preached in San Roque at Gibraltar. This year was fundamental in his life because he met Fr. Francisco Javier González, a minim of San Francesco di Paola. For nine years he would be Diego's spiritual director and prudent counsellor, who steered his apostolic undertakings. He is an indicator of Diego's mission within the spiritual history of his century. In fact he will write to Br. Diego on 26 June 1778: "Yes, God wants to use you, *ignorantissimo*, and attracted you to the Capuchin Order and to the ministry. Armed with His omnipotence, wisdom and strength, you can declare war on the bullying libertinism and blinding Enlightenment of this dark age. The world contradicts and tries with its hellish Enlightenment to destroy the wisdom of the Gospel and the Christian spirit." After the death of Francisco Javier on 29 February 1784, Diego chose Juan José Alcover y Higueras, the abbot of the collegial church of El Salvador in Granada, to be his new spiritual director.

In 1776, at thirty three years of age, he preached a mission in Sevilla. The course of sermons was interrupted by a serious illness. When he had recovered he returned to Sevilla and preached in many churches of the city. In one sermon dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene, later published various times, he resolutely attacked the incredible temerity of the libertines and the Enlightenment philosophers.

His talks against the atheism of the Enlightenment given at the University of Granada in 1779, and in Madrid and in Alcalá de Henares in 1783, and the funeral sermons in honour of his spiritual director in 1784 and of a celebrated Carmelite in 1786 are famous. His stirring speeches were also directed against elements in the press, horse racing, dances, comedies and comedians then at the height of their popularity. Often his words had little effect because of the popular frenzy that accompanied these things, considered works of art at the time. Diego was thinking of the poor as in 1778 when he was speaking to the Town Council of Écija: "I am staggered at the very costly comedy theatre, while this town has no hospital for the sick, no hospice for orphans, no adequate barracks for the soldiers." In his mission in Antequera Diego told how "as an outcome of the preaching, the principle lords decided to form a congregation to help poor prisoners who died of hunger due to the lack of assistance."



In 1782 at Toledo in the royal estate of Aranjuez he moved everyone. The following year he wanted to Madrid and to Alcalá de Henares. Following an impassioned sermon in the cathedral of Sevilla on Good Friday 1784 in favour of the poor defrauded by Church wealth, some informers managed to have him exiled from the city for many months. He travelled through Andalucía again. In the winter of 1786 he preached a mission for a month

in Cuenca. A Zaragoza he reported to the Inquisition various propositions of a poisonous book against religious vows, thus opening a tin of worms. From 1787 many Spanish cities listened to him in wonder: Abálate, Alcañiz, Caspe, Barcelona, Valencia, Alicante, Cartagena, Totana and Motril.

He also intervened with noteworthy apologetic and spiritual books. His works were published in five volumes in Madrid from 1796-1799. His adversaries though forced him into silence for a few years when he was confined to the friary of Casares until 1792 when he took up again his apostolic itinerary in Andalucía. Two years later he was in Portugal and the provinces of Pontevedra, Coruna and Lugo, then from Oviedo to León, Astorga, Zamora and Salamanca.

His health would no longer permit him to maintain the same rhythm. He had to reduce the number of his apostolic excursions. After yet another popular mission in Malaga he crossed the strait to Ceuta in 1799. He had begun his first series of preaching there twenty seven years earlier. He spent his last months outside the friary with a devout family in Ronda where he used to retire to rest after the fatigue of his preaching tours and where he had written most of his precious correspondence. It was there that he died prematurely early in the morning on Tuesday 24 March 1801. It was only in 1894 that pope Leo XIII proclaimed him blessed, arousing an intolerant reaction among non-believers and liberals both in Spain and in Italy.

Diego de Cádiz is the great apostle of popular missions developed along very effective and well tried lines. They began with a procession with the image of *La Divina Pastora* and the Crucifix, followed by a number of days of prayer meetings, penitential catechesis, sermons and exhortations to re-invigorate Christian life, the evening rosary, guided mental prayer for the people, Christian doctrine and preaching.



Particular sermons were also aimed at the different states of life such as specific spiritual exercises for the clergy, or for male or female religious, for public authorities and city functionaries. There were also sermons for the imprisoned. All was done with an eye towards spiritual and moral teaching adapted to different needs. More than oratorical method his preaching gave birth to a unique method of transmitting the Word of God assimilated first in the heart through prayer, then imparted with clarity, simplicity and conviction, able to effectively move wills through an evident gift of grace. His preaching was also attentive to the particular differences of various churches, with particular respect for the local pastoral activity. All this concluded with another penitential procession but without outward show.

He himself said that he had discovered this method in the popular preaching of Saint Bernardine of Siena in whom he recognised an ideal most suited to himself. When the difficult task of the preparation of his sermons he found he could not manage to put them down in writing, in humble abandonment to the will of God he often experienced an amazing

intervention of divine help. This is a concrete example of what Paul VI said to the Capuchins in 1974 in an unexpected comment: "I would say this to you. If you truly live what you are, make your own the words of the gospel: 'Nolite cogitare, quomodo aut quid loquamini: dabitur enim vobis in illa hora quid loquamini.'¹ You will be able speak, I would say, from an open heart if your heart is filled with Christ and filled with his holy and lasting and dangerous imitation. The word will flow from your life itself and will be the most effective and persuasive form of your eloquence."

¹ Matthew 10:19 – "Do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour."