



FEAST OF ST. ANDREW DUNG-LAC & COMPANIONS
Martyrs of Vietnam

Today we commemorate the Catholic martyrs of Vietnam who set before our eyes the cost of true Christian discipleship. Few people realize that the persecution of Christians in Vietnam lasted intermittently from 1625 to 1886 and that approximately 130,000 Catholic men, women, and children died in the persecution. Of the 117 who were canonized in 1988 as representatives of this vast multitude, ninety-six were Vietnamese and twenty-one were missionaries from Spain and France. I wish to say a little about two of them: one of them, St. Andrew Dung-Lac, was a Vietnamese convert; and the other, St. Théophane Vénard, was a young Frenchman who left his native land to be a missionary.

Andrew Dung-Lac was born in 1795 to a poor pagan family in northern Vietnam. When he was twelve years old, his parents had moved to Hanoi to find work. There he met a Christian catechist who gave him food and shelter and eventually led him to conversion and baptism. The young man took Andrew as his baptismal name; and filled with zeal for Christ, he began to study Chinese and Latin, and himself became a catechist in order to lead his own people to Christ. He went on to study theology and was ordained to the priesthood at the age of twenty-eight, becoming a zealous missionary among the Vietnamese. Beginning in 1835, he was arrested and imprisoned several times under the persecution ordered by the Vietnamese emperor Minh-Mang, who was called the Nero of Vietnam. The emperor excluded all foreign missionaries and ordered Vietnamese Christians to renounce their faith by trampling on the crucifix. Andrew Dung-Lac continued to work among the Vietnamese Catholics and was imprisoned several times. At last, he was arrested and tortured and finally beheaded on the 21 December 1839.

The other martyr is St. Théophane Venard. He was born in France in 1829, when the Church in France was experiencing a revival after the devastation of the French Revolution. When he was nine years old, he read an account of a missionary martyred in Vietnam, and this stirred his desire to follow in his footsteps. He studied in the diocesan seminary at Poitiers and then joined the Foreign Mission Society in Paris. Théophane eventually got his wish: he was sent to Vietnam at a time of heightened persecution. At first he worked as a missionary in Hanoi, then he was forced to hide in caves and swamps.

Théophane was arrested on November 30, 1860. His vestments were taken away, and he was led away, tied up, while he continued to pray and prepare himself for martyrdom. His final judgment took place in Hanoi. He entered the courtroom, and the officials placed a crucifix in his hands. "Trample the Cross underfoot," the viceroy told him, "and you will not be put to death!" At that, the Théophane raised the crucifix in his hands with respect, kissed it, and then exclaimed in a loud voice, "I have preached the faith of the Cross till this day, and now you want me to renounce it? I do not value life in this world so much that I wish to preserve it at the cost of an apostasy!" The viceroy uttered the following



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



sentence: “The European priest Vin, whose real name is ‘Vénard’, is condemned, on account of his blindness of heart and obstinacy of spirit... to having his head cut off, then displayed for three days, and then thrown into the river.”

The emperor Tu-Duc then signed the execution order. The morning of February 2, 1861, Father Théophane learned that he was going to die that very day. He thanked God, asked the Blessed Virgin to help him until the end, then, dressed in a feast day habit, walked joyfully to his death, singing the Magnificat, Our Lady’s song of praise from St. Luke’s gospel.

How was such faith and courage possible, in the face of such suffering? Théophane himself expressed it in a letter that he wrote near the end: “I do not rely on my own strength, but on the strength of Him who defeated the power of Hell and of the world through the Cross.”

The example of the martyrs serves as a corrective to the mistaken notion that the Christian gospel is as primarily a program of do-gooding and social work. Christ himself said otherwise: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword” (Mt 10.34). To those who wished to be his disciples he told them what to expect: ‘You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; you will be hated by all for my name’s sake’ (Lk 21.16-17). For both the ancient and the modern world, the absolute and exclusive claims of Christ were—and are—divisive. It was with good reason that St. Paul spoke of Christ crucified as “a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1.23).

For Andrew Dung-Lac, to become a Christian meant turning away from the religion of his ancestors and in a sense becoming a stranger among his own people: it meant learning Latin in order to enter into Catholic civilization, as well as learning Chinese in order to be a highly cultured Vietnamese. For Théophane Vénard, to follow Christ meant leaving his beloved family and his native France to proclaim the gospel to people who saw him as a dangerous foreign imperialist. At his trial, Théophane refuted the absurd claim that he was an agent of the French state or that he had ulterior motives for preaching the gospel. And yet, Théophane made no secret of his French Catholic origins and made no apologies for being a son of Catholic France. Not, I hasten to add, of *revolutionary* France, which had cast down the altars of Christ, but of *Catholic* France, the country of St. Martin of Tours and of St. Louis and St. Joan of Arc.

Still, as different as their origins were, Andrew Dung-Lac and Théophane Vénard were in one way very similar: their destiny was to experience a kind of exile from their own people, and finally from this life, for the love of Christ. Both were following in the steps of Abraham, to whom the Lord had said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gn 12.1).

