

Martyr For The Scapular **by Fr. Pius Sammut OCD**

"You were a man of heroic faith, Isidore Bakanja, young layman of Zaire. As a baptized person, called to spread the Good News, you shared your faith and witness to Christ with such conviction that to your companions you seemed one of those valiant lay faithful, the catechists. Yes, Blessed Isidore, absolutely faithful to your baptismal promises, you were a true catechist, tolling generously for "the Church in Africa and for her evangelizing mission".

These are the words that Pope John Paul II pronounced in front of numerous people who had gathered in Saint Peter's Square on the morning of Sunday, 24 April 1994 for the beatification of three Servants of God: Isidore Bakanja, a young Zairian martyr, and two Italian mothers, Gianna Beretta Molla, a woman who preferred death rather than terminating her pregnancy and Elizabeth Canon Mora, an abused wife, an exemplary mother and a mystic. It was the Sunday of Good Shepherd.

Isidore was born in northeast Zaire, then Belgian Congo, in the 1880's. His father and mother were lyonzwa and Inyuka. At the time, Zaire was a colony of Belgium and various foreign companies had moved into the area, especially interested in rubber and ivory. Their only interest was maximum profit. As always, the poor and the defenseless were the ones who suffered most.

Missionaries arrived from Belgium. They were Trappists, a contemplative order, dedicated to a life of prayer and penance. They worked very hard among the people but they were very unpopular among the foreign companies, because the missionaries did not hesitate to denounce the abusive conduct of these companies. The Church always sides with the most vulnerable.

Isidore left his village to find work as an assistant mason in the city of Mbandaka. This is where he met the missionaries. God was waiting for him there. When he was eighteen, he was baptized. That same year, 1906, he received first communion and confirmation,

Bakanja lived his new faith very simply, cherishing the two external signs of the rosary and the scapular which he never failed to wear. He was eager to spread the good news among his fellow workers. He had discovered a 'precious pearl'

When his work contract ran out, Isidore went to work as a servant to a Belgian colonizer, following his employer into the bush to work on a large rubber plantation in Ikili. Isidore was warned by a fellow servant not to go to this place. He was told that the whites there hated Christians. They were right.

By character, Isidore was rather gentle, honest and courteous. However his zeal to speak about Jesus Christ made him many enemies. He was ordered to stop speaking about Church and to remove the Scapular (Mary's habit, as it is rendered in Isidore's native tongue) from his neck. "You'll have the whole village praying and no one will work!"

The confrontation was on! One evening while Isidore and his friend lyongo were serving supper, the agent of the plantation demanded that Isidore remove the scapular from his neck. Isidore was not intimidated. A few days later, on noticing that Bakanja was still wearing his scapular, the man flew into a rage and had Isidore beaten with 25 strokes.

The climax of this vicious hatred came on February 2nd. It was the year 1909. This agent was having an afternoon coffee on the verandah with two of his friends when he spied Isidore who was walking towards a nearby marshland. He noticed that he was still wearing the scapular!

The man confronted Bakanja and ripped the scapular from his neck and tossed it to a dog. Then he grabbed him by the neck and threw him to the ground, ordering his henchmen to beat the African. Isidore asked for mercy. "My God, I'm dying", he muttered. Futile. That afternoon, Bakanja was given more than 250 strokes with a hippopotamus hide whip that had nails in it. He was then locked up and chained.

The pain was intense. Isidore's back was one open wound; some of his bones were exposed. Since an inspector was due, Isidore was banished to another village. But because he could not walk, he fell by the wayside and hid in the forest.

Somehow the inspector did meet him. "I saw a man come from the forest with his back torn apart by deep, festering, foul-smelling wounds, covered with filth, assaulted by flies. He leaned on two sticks in order to get near me - he wasn't walking; he was dragging himself". He felt pity for him and took him to his own settlement, hoping to help him heal.

But Isidore knew his end was near. "If you see my mother, or if you go to the judge, or if you meet the priest, tell them that I am dying because I am a Christian."

Two missionaries were called and spent days with him. "The white man did not like Christians.... He did not want me to wear the scapular.... He yelled at me when I said my prayers". The missionaries urged Isidore to forgive the agent. "Certainly I shall pray for him. When I am in heaven, I shall pray for him very much".

His agony lasted six months. He died on August 15th, rosary in hand and the scapular of Our Lady of Mt Carmel around his neck. Amen.