

On this feast of the Assumptionist Bulgarian martyrs I would like to begin with a word about a heart-wrenching meeting that I will never forget, that took place last December in Rome between Bishop Christo Proykov, the apostolic exarch of Sofia (and therefore of all Catholics of the Oriental rite in Bulgaria), and the members of the Assumptionist Plenary General Council, that is to say, the superior general, his assistants, and all six of the provincials of the Congregation.

Bishop Proykov came to speak to us about the difficult decision we had taken to close our only community in Bulgaria and to withdraw the three Assumptionists living there. I can't get into the long and painful process that led up to this decision, but it was one that we took with the greatest reluctance and sorrow and after countless deliberations with the members of the local community and many others.

Before I recount some of Bishop Proykov's remarks, let me simply say a few words about the martyrs themselves. Some of you may not know much about them, all of whom were executed around midnight on the evening between November 11 and November 12, 1952 after a laughable mock trial during which they were accused by the Communist regime of being Vatican spies and agents of Western powers.

Josaphat CHICHKOV was the senior citizen of the three, born in 1884 in the city of Plovdiv itself to devoted Catholic parents. Already at the age of nine he was enrolled in a school opened by the Assumptionists in Andrinopolis, just across the border in Turkey. He would continue his

education in Assumptionist institutions until he was ordained at the age of 25. He was particularly known for his spirit of curiosity and innovation --- he was one of the first teachers in the country to use a typewriter and one of first to introduce students to the cinema and the gramophone (that means record-player for those of you who may be too young to have heard of such a device). He became close friends with Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, when the latter served as apostolic nuncio in Bulgaria from 1925 to 1935 and would spend lots of time with the Assumptionists. Just before his arrest, Fr. Josaphat wrote to friends in Paris, “We keep trying to do everything we can to make saints of ourselves. What is essential is to hold on to God, to live for him; everything else is secondary.” He was 68 at the time of his execution.

Kamen VITCHEV was born in 1893 to Orthodox parents. After attending Assumptionist schools, he not only decided to became Catholic but to join the Assumptionists. He was extraordinarily well gifted intellectually and would pursue studies in Belgium, Luxembourg, and France after which he would teach at one of the premier schools in Bulgaria, founded by the Assumptionists, St. Augustine College. Later he would obtain a doctorate from the prestigious Institute for Oriental Studies in Rome. He became a much sought after professor in Bulgaria and contributed frequently to journals and reviews. After World War II, as the Communist authorities began to tighten their iron grip on the Catholic Church and the Assumptionists in particular because of their reputation and widespread influence, especially among the young, When all foreign priests were expelled, Fr. Kamen was named the regional superior of the Assumptionists in Bulgaria. When influential Church figures were finally rounded up, he himself was accused of being the ring-leader of the so-called Vatican plot against the State. Just before this happened, he had written to his provincial in Paris, “Please pray that every day we may remain faithful to Christ and his Church so that we might be worthy to bear witness to him when the time comes.” Fr. Kamen was 59 at the time of his execution.

Finally, there was the youngest of the group, **Pavel DJIDJOV**. He was just 33 years old when he died. Charismatic and athletic (he once played on a semi-professional soccer team in Plovdiv called “The Locomotive”), he studied economics and business and served as treasurer at St. Augustine’s College and for the Assumptionists. Extremely popular among the young and the future elite of the country, he quickly came to the attention of the authorities. As more and more priests were rounded up, he wrote, “We await our turn. May God’s will be done!”

Now let me return to the meeting that took place with Bishop Proykov last December after our decision to leave Bulgaria. Here is some of what he said to us: “Dear Brothers, first of all I would like to thank the Assumptionists for being present in Bulgaria for more than 150 years. You are the ones who educated me, the ones who awakened my vocation in me. It was because of the Assumptionist martyrs that I knew, Fr. Kamen in particular that I am a priest. If I am here today with you, it is because I cannot imagine Bulgaria without you. I thank you for the presence of

your three brothers still here today who have integrated themselves completely—Petar, Daniel, and Claudio. Our diocese is small – 21 parishes and barely 10,000 faithful with 20 priests including your three brothers. On March 18, when the provincial arrived from Paris together with Fr. Marcelo, the assistant general, I thought they were coming together with Cardinal Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State, to attend the rededication of the cathedral. I had no idea that they were coming with the painful mission of announcing your departure from Bulgaria." And in tears, he continued, "After they departed, I was left alone in the presence of the relics of the three martyrs. I said to the three martyrs that this couldn't be possible. I ask you with all my heart not to leave Bulgaria. May God give you the grace to stay on this periphery of the Church in need, so dear to Pope Francis. Your motto is, 'Thy Kingdom Come." We say in the Creed, 'Your Kingdom will have no end.' And so we believe. May you not be among those who put an end to its construction in Bulgaria. Thank you."

Shortly before Bishop Proykov's visit, Fr. General had been asked to visit the Secretary of State's Office where Cardinal Parolin transmitted to him Pope Francis' personal wish that we do all in our power to remain in Bulgaria. Without hesitation, Fr. Benoit told us that as a faithful son of Fr. d'Alzon he could do no other but honor the Pope's wishes and so we have decided that we will not only leave our three religious there but will make another concerted effort to find others to reinforce them.

Just this past week Fr. Claudio, one of the three Assumptionists in Bulgaria, sent me a small booklet in which he and his two brothers reflect on the three martyrs and the meaning of the Assumptionist presence in Bulgaria. They write, "The feast of our three brother is approaching and once again we are called to reflect on the meaning of their witness today for the entire Assumption Family. That they died in this land, in this place, is important. Their presence here, the shedding of their blood here, has sanctified this land and we are deeply convinced that these lands are a heritage to be maintained and cherished because their meaning as symbol helps us to understand our very identity as Assumptionists. We are aware that the memory of our three Blessed Martyrs also brings with it a duty never to forget all of our Assumptionist brothers and sisters who have had the courage to bear witness to their Christian faith and their attachment to the Assumption unto death….. our kidnapped Congolese brothers Jean-Paul, Anselme, and Edmond, our assassinated brother Vincent Machozi, and our missing Argentinian brothers Carlos and Raul.

The presence of our three martyrs is a living source where we can draw strength, courage and faith. Their feast today is meant to be a day to recall our missionary spirit as members of the Assumption Family, to go wherever God is threatened in Man and Man is threatened as image of God."

Blesseds Kamen, Pavel and Josaphat, pray for us

Fr. John Franck, A.A.