

November 13 - Blesseds Kamen, Pavel, and Josaphat

The feast of our three Bulgarian Marytrs is an opportunity for us to pause each year to reflect on

their legacy.

To remember means to render present among us these brothers whom the Church, as a result of their beatification, considers to be a gift for all Christians.

Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov, and Josaphat Chichkov compel us to broaden our horizons. To maintain among us the memory of our three martyrs helps us to understand ourselves better and the martyrdom (that is to say, the witness) to which the Lord is calling each of us today.

Almost 70 years ago, our three brothers were imprisoned. First, Kamen in December 1951, and then Josaphat and Pavel on July 4, 1952. During their imprisonment they were mercilessly beaten, tortured and interrogated and forced to live 15 to a cell built for 3 or 4….which meant that most of the time they could hardly find enough air to breathe adequately.

And then suddenly on September 29th they were subjected to a show-trial, a real legal mockery, well organized by the Communist authorities. The truly trumped-up charges were all fabricated, completely made up. In what did these accusations consist: of these three Bulgarian patriots who had dedicated their lives to the service of their people? Accused of being spies for the Vatican…..yes, of the Vatican, this all-powerful, menacing State of less than a square-mile in size. And accused of being capitalist agents plotting to overthrow the « legitimate » regime of the Bulgarian people. How ridiculous!!!

But we have to remember the post-War World II context ---the late 1940s and early 1950s. Bulgaria, whether it wanted to or not, found itself assigned by the powers-that-be to the Soviet bloc, a satellite of the Soviet Union that contolled it like a puppet. During these years there was a great persecution of the Catholic Church orchestrated out of Moscow. Joseph Stalin had identified the Catholic Church as its Number One enemy. Across the Communist world ---in Russia itself, but also in Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Albania, Romania, and the Ukraine, the Church was the target of particularly vicious attacks: foreign missionaries expelled; Catholic hospitals, schools and churches closed and expropriated; legal rights suppressed; Church leaders harassed, imprisoned, and even assassinated……among them, giants like Cardinals Mindzenty, Wyzinski, and Tomasek.

And Bulgaria did not escape this terror. When the time came for the Communist authorities to

decide which Catholic priests needed to be reduced to silence, the names of our three Bulgarian brothers quickly appeared at the top of the list. Why these three? Because of their influence among the young….the future leaders of the country. All three had worked in truly exceptional academic institutions founded by the Assumptionists, renowned for their tradition of having trained the best and the brightest.

They had to be eliminated!!

At their so-called trial on October 3rd, they were asked if they were guity or not. « Not guilty, » replied the youngest, 33-year old Pavel, in the name of all three. Brisked away from the courtroom, they were brought back later --- visibly beaten, emotion-less, their heads lowered, their shoulders drooping. Once again they were asked, « guilty or not guilty ». Like robots, all three responded, « Guilty. » Their sentence: death !!!

Less than six weeks later on the night between November 11th and 12th they were led from their cells around midnight and shot to death. Only once the archives were opened after the fall of Communism did we learn that their bodies had been thrown into a mass grave, never to be discovered.

After today’s celebration, shall we forget the lesson of their lives? Or shall we remember the words of St. Paul to the Romans in chapter 12 that we heard in the first reading, « I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.” Blessed Kamen, Pavel, and Josaphat, pray for us.