

Hidden Corners of the World

The Forgotten Mission of Diego Luis de San Vitores

When most people imagine a mission of evangelization to distant lands, they probably think of Asia, or maybe Africa. The most obscure continent is undoubtedly Oceania. Even to this day, this speckling of small islands in the South Pacific is inhabited mainly by indigenous tribes who share the same Polynesian roots. For hundreds of years, their beliefs were as primitive as they were. Yet back in 1668, a brave missionary was struggling in the tiny Mariana Islands to convert the scattered natives. His name was Father Diego Luis de San Vitores.

Diego Jeronimo de San Vitores was born in Burgos, Spain on November 12, 1627. When four, he contracted diphtheria and smallpox simultaneously. Everybody thought him dead, but when a relic of a certain Saint Dominic of Soria was applied to him, he was miraculously revived. As a child, he was amazingly mature, not lying, swearing, or gossiping like most other children of his age. He was particularly harsh on himself with penances, fasting almost every day and wearing a prickly hair shirt.

Drawn to the Jesuits from a young age, Diego faced withering opposition from his parents and relatives when he wished to enter the society, especially his father, who wanted San Vitores to carry on the family name. Once, he was kept prisoner by his own mother in her house, faced with impending deportment to Seville. By either miracle or incredible chance, he walked past both his mother and a room full of servants to safety at the Jesuit seminary. Finally, he triumphed, becoming a member of the Society of Jesus on July 25, 1640. Despite his youth, the Society was eager to welcome him on account of his great virtue and holiness. His second name was changed to Luis, and he was ordained in 1651.

San Vitores hoped to be sent as a missionary to China or Japan. Instead he was assigned to the Philippines, which had already been mostly converted. Accepting this minor disappointment meekly, he

set sail from Cadiz in May 1660. At his halfway point in Mexico, he visited the miraculous picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe and had an interlude of successful preaching in Mexico City. His many new friends said farewell to him sadly as he left from Acapulco in 1662, but Diego was brimming over with joy for the missionary work to come as he finished the last leg of his journey.

En route to the Philippines, the ship passed through the *Ladrones* or Isles of Thieves (soon to be known as the Marianas). San Vitores was dismayed by the natives' pagan ways and ignorance of Christianity. When he realized that their poverty and the worthlessness of their land were the reasons of their isolation from Christ, he was heard to lament, "Why are there so few men who are greedy for the richest mines in the world, namely the souls redeemed by the precious blood of Christ?" After five years of tedious labor in the Philippines, appeals he had written from his headquarters in Manila, asking for approval for a mission to the *Ladrones*, were finally recognized thanks to his father and the queen's Jesuit confessor. Overjoyed, Diego rushed back to Mexico to gather funds.

After gathering plenty of money from his eager friends, San Vitores reached Guam, the largest of the Marianas, on June 15, 1668. Because of a previous appearance of the Virgin Mary, the islanders were more warm and welcoming than expected. San Vitores met a Christian from an earlier shipwreck in the area and baptized his two-year old daughter. Soon over 1500 natives had been baptized, and more were pouring in. Some villages even hid the paths from town to town so the missionaries would have to stay with them! But the mission was not destined to stay so easy. An "idolatrous chinese" named Choco, cast ashore several years before, began spreading the rumor that the holy water used for baptism was poisonous. This tale caught on quickly because the people that the missionaries hastened to baptize were the ones already near death.

Diego, confronting this peril courageously, went straight to the source. He converted Choco himself in a process that lasted for three days, baptizing him and proving the rumor false once and for all.

After many more journeys and baptisms, Diego began to construct a boys' seminary on Guam. He also dedicated a church in Agadna, the largest village on Guam. The boys from the seminary accompanied him on his voyages from village to village, interpreting and teaching catechism, and they served punctually in the nearby church.

San Vitores' usual means of converting the natives was very ingenious. Instead of immediately plunging into complex topics, he told them that man walked upright, with eyes lifted to the heavens, because he was destined to reach heaven. The animals, he explained, crept on all fours because they were not meant to rise on the last day. He then stated that the child Jesus had come down to show men how to get to heaven. From there, Diego diverged into topics like Mary or the Holy Trinity, and thence on to anything the *Marianos* needed to learn. This clever approach did not discourage the natives as it would if he started with things they could not instantly grasp.

Soon, another dangerous obstacle was placed in Diego's path. The *Macanas*, or medicine men, were furious that San Vitores was robbing them of their former power by converting their loyal demon-worshippers into devout Catholics. A group of natives ambushed a boy in San Vitores' service and killed him for his knife and machete. When some suspects were rounded up for trial, every one examined was furious. Recalling their former life of comfortable sin, about 2000 *Marianos* joined to attack San Vitores and his small squad of soldiers. This series of battles lasted from July to October, but the Spaniards won out in the end and the mission was able to continue.

After the evangelization of the Marianas had been going on for some time, several of San Vitores' companions had been martyred during wars and hostile encounters with medicine men or native nobles. His turn was soon to come. On April first, 1672, Diego went with his Filipino friend to search for a missing convert. On the way, he stopped to baptize a newborn baby girl. The father, whose name was Matapang,

was a Christian baptized by San Vitores himself. Nevertheless, he insulted Diego when the priest asked for permission to baptize his daughter.

Matapang then went to another native and told him to help come kill San Vitores. At first the man refused, but when Matapang called him a coward, he consented. In the time it took them to gather their weapons, San Vitores, with the mother's consent, baptized the baby. This infuriated Matapang beyond all reason. He and his companion flung spears at Diego and his friend Pedro Calungsod. Amazingly, Pedro dodged the lances, and with his skill in martial arts was capable of fleeing or killing his opponents. However, he stayed by Diego's side, and was eventually pierced by a well aimed shot. San Vitores barely had time to say the last rites over his dead companion before he too was fatally stabbed. Their bodies were thrown into a nearby lake.

After his death, several miracles were performed, such as the healing of three painfully sick nuns, the mysterious appearance of money several times for a indebted friend, and his appearance to console his father on the day of his father's death. Sadly, the missionaries after him brought smallpox to the Marianas, wiping out most of the population. Today the Marianas, Guam in particular, are cut off from the rest of the world. However, they are by no means strangers to Catholicism, thanks to San Vitores.

Diego Luis de San Vitores scorned all material gains of his missionary work, caring little for worldly glory. His only thought was for the people he was evangelizing, and fame never crossed his mind. This is just as well, for probably less than one out of a million people has ever heard of him. But this virtuous Jesuit deserves more than an obscure history. His humility, the true mark of a Christian, drove him to choose the most lowly mission possible. He deserves to be canonized a saint.

Bibliography

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