

**Proposed contribution to the
Symposium *CONTEMPLATION, MISSION AND MARTYRDOM*
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In 2016, 17 men—lay persons and priests—were proclaimed “Martyrs” and “Blessed” by the Roman Catholic Church; they had died in Laos between 1954 and 1970. The death of 16 of them is attributed to a faction that is the direct predecessor of the present-day Government of the Democratic Popular Republic of Laos.

In the lengthy process that led to the proclamation of their martyrdom, the Bishops’ Conference of Laos strived to contextualise this event in the social and religious framework of their nation, in which the Catholic Church is but a tiny minority. They were confident that, in that way, the beatification itself could take place in Laos itself, and be understood and accepted by their political leaders as well as by the Laotian people of all faiths and affiliations. They faced insistent pressures from different sides—including Rome—, that kept urging them to accept a low-key beatification in a European country. However, they stood their ground, but had to present and defend their case.

This contribution will concentrate on the way the Bishops’ Conference of Laos endeavoured to expand the classical, Thomistic definition of ‘martyrdom’—a key element of the report demanded by Rome for the beatification of martyrs—in such a way that it would be relevant for their own social, religious and political context.

The canonical process allowing an alleged martyr to be recognised as such by the Catholic Church needs to prove, first of all, that the direct cause of his or her violent death was some form of hatred for the faith, or for a Christian virtue. In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI restated this forcefully in a letter to the competent dicastery: “It is... necessary, directly or indirectly but always in a morally certain way, to ascertain the ‘*odium Fidei*’ of the persecutor. If this element is lacking there would be no true martyrdom according to the perennial theological and juridical doctrine of the Church.”

Therefore, the bishops of Laos raised, and researched, the following question: With the understanding that we maintain the “perennial doctrine” integrally to enlighten the faithful, is there a complementary point of view, a reverse side of the same mystery, that can be understood here and now in our context? Otherwise, the risk is that proclaiming the martyrdom of our men will result in breaking up all interreligious dialogue, and yet additional restrictions being imposed on the Catholic Church in Laos.

The reasoning of the bishops can be broken down in four major points:

- A one-sided notion of ‘martyrdom’, in its Western definition, besides the strong objections it would meet in the context of Laos, is deemed ambivalent (cf. the Vietnamese linguistic use of “*liệt sĩ*” alongside “*tử đạo*” for the Laotian term ‘*moranasakki*’, ‘ມໍຣະນະສັກຂີ້’);
- To showcase the martyrs in this context, the focus point could be, or should be, the notion of ‘ancestors’ ‘*tổ tiên*’, ‘祖宗 / 祖先’, ‘*ບັນພະບູລຸດ*’, which is widely understood

in Southeast Asia, transcending all religious denominations; a lot can be learned from the reinterpretation of this notion through the Laotian Buddhist rites and customs;

- The Veneration of Ancestors, as accepted and promoted by Catholic teaching and practice in Southeast Asia in the late 20th century has roots in the Confucian tradition of filial piety; this helps shedding light on the martyrdom of the newly beatified in Laos, and on its blossoming for today through the cult rendered to them as a living link to the True Origin of All Things (万有真源); a rite of beatification would be the elevation of the most meritorious members of the community to the rank of ancestors to be venerated;
- The Buddhist teaching on *marañānussati* (contemplation of death, 死随念修习) will help overcome the contradiction between the aversion for those who have died a violent death, a deep-seated feeling common to most Laotians.

At the end of the day, the line of thinking that the local bishops pursued, and the option they took, was to prove a total success.

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Present:

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