

“You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22). Between the 17th and 19th centuries in Vietnam 130,000 Christians were martyred. Today we honor 117 of those martyrs including Saint Andrew Dung-Lac and his companion martyrs. There were 37 Vietnamese priests, one seminarian, 10 Dominican tertiaries, and 48 other lay Vietnamese. In addition to the many sons and daughters of Vietnam, there were missionary priests and bishops from Spain and France.

Whether we are speaking of Vietnam or the United States, there is always a dark tendency to be suspicious of foreigners, to push them away, to treat them as less than human. In 1832, the Vietnamese Emperor banned all foreign missionaries. The Vietnamese were asked to deny their faith by trampling crucifixes. The faithful endured one wave of persecution after another.

Andrew Dung-Lac came from poverty. His parents were not Christian, and yet they saw truth, beauty and goodness in the Christian missionaries and entrusted their child to a catechist who helped to form him into strong Christian. He became a priest in 1823 and served as parish priest and missionary in numerous places within Vietnam. Here in America, we take a collection to provide for the needs of the church. On more than one occasion, the faithful took up a collection to pay ransom for their priest to keep him out of prison. Fr Andrew was not entirely grateful. He was willing to die for his faith and stated, “We who continually hide ourselves spend money to escape the persecutors! It would be much better to let ourselves be arrested and die.” December 21, 1839, he was granted his wish. He suffered the martyrdom with a beheading like John the Baptist.ⁱ

In 1862, the colonial French signed a treaty with the Emperor guaranteeing religious freedom to Catholics, but persecutions continued. By 1954, “persistent persecution forced some 670,000 Catholics to abandon lands, homes and possessions and flee to the south.”ⁱⁱ Imprisonment was the fate of many Catholics in the north during the era of the Vietnam War and after it. Many left the country and resettled in the United States creating strong and vibrant faith communities.

Each of the Vietnamese martyrs and refugees has their own tragic story but taken as a whole, they offer a profound witness. There is only one God who created heaven and earth. We are liberated and set free by Jesus Christ, the Son of God who died for our sins. If Christ did not abandon humanity, then the Christian cannot abandon Jesus. There is truth and beauty and goodness in every culture. Within the Vietnamese culture one is taught to respect and venerate ancestors. We do this in Christianity through the veneration of the saints. “The Vietnamese Church, with its martyrs and through its testimony, was able to proclaim its commitment and its will not to reject the country’s cultural tradition and legal institutions.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus wants to incarnate himself in the culture of not only Vietnam, but in every culture.

The martyrs teach us to stand up for the faith with vigor, to be patient, to face each difficulty with a profound trust in God and to boldly proclaim Christ crucified. Martyrs give witness to every generation. Thus, the faith of our ancestors comes alive in the present and gives hope for the church of the future. “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23).

ⁱ vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19880619_martiri.html

ⁱⁱ franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-andrew-dung-lac-and-companions

ⁱⁱⁱ vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19880619_martiri.html