

December 16

**Blessed Joseph Tien, priest
and his companions, martyrs**

Memorial

(Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Prot. N. 566/15, October 17, 2016)

During the Indochina War, between the years 1954-1970, seventeen followers of Christ in Laos suffered martyrdom for the sake of His name. Among these martyrs were the young priest, *Joseph Tien* (Ban Then, December 5, 1918 - Muang Xoi, June 2, 1954), the first martyr of Laos, and some catechists [*Paul Thoj Xyooj* (1941-1960), *Joseph Outhany* (1933-1961) *Thomas Khampheuane Inthirath* (1952-1968), *Luc Sy* (1938-1970), *Maisam Pho Inpeng* (1934-1970)]. Members of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris [Fr. *Jean-Baptist Malo* MEP (1899-1954), Fr. *René Dubroux* MEP (1914-1959), Fr. *Noel Tenaud* MEP (1904-1961), Fr. *Marcel Denis* MEP (1919-1961), Fr. *Lucien Galan* MEP (1921-1968)] and of the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate [Fr. *Mario Borzaga* OMI (1932-1960), Fr. *Louis Leroy* OMI (1923-1961), Fr. *Michel Coquelet* OMI (1931-1961), Fr. *Vincent L'Hénoret* OMI (1921-1961), Fr. *Jean Wauthier* OMI (1926-1967), Fr. *Joseph Boissel* OMI (1909-1969)] also offered their lives in sacrifice so that the Gospel could be heard. The Church in Laos recognizes these blessed as their founding fathers.

Eucharist

Common of Martyrs: For several martyrs.

Collect

God of infinite providence,
you chose Blessed Joseph Tien, priest,
and his companions, martyrs,
to establish your people among the Laotians.
Grant to us, we pray,
that by putting ourselves at the service of the least of our brethren,
we may also, through their intercession,
merit to possess the kingdom of heaven.
Through Jesus Christ....

Office of Readings

Common of Martyrs: several martyrs.

2nd Reading

Account of the disappearance of Blessed Marcel Denis by a contemporary.

(F. Marcel Vignalet-Verges, M.E.P. In memory of Father Marcel Denis, missionary in Laos, who disappeared in 1961: *Positio super martyrio*, Roma 2014, pp. 1122-1125)

We will meet again in heaven.

After fifteen years of work, on April 17, 1961 Marcel Denis disappeared forever. In those times and places disappearances were nothing rare: you had to expect everything, especially the worst.... When you turned down the trail, no one – not even you – knew where and when you would arrive as the hazards were many.... The distances are great, rutted tracks, and turbulent rivers must be crossed either by wading or swimming. There is no sign on the horizon, no mail or postman, no telephone, no doctor or policeman. Just beautiful exuberant and ruthless nature, cruel to the weak-kneed, indifferent to all. Here and there, a village, with its patch of rice fields, a small island lost in the immense forest, feared by men as the kingdom of evil spirits and ferocious beasts. Alone, one does not adventure in too far and never without a machete and protective amulets, because you can only rely on yourself and Heaven....

The famous Indochina War raged the entire time that Marcel was in Laos. The vast expanse of his area was alternately crossed by government or revolutionary troops without one or the other able to impose their law. Depending on the ebb and flow of each, you could come across an ambush, or be caught in a skirmish or a shootout. Depending on the direction in which you were traveling, you could be accused of treason or espionage, and all this amid the looting, burnings, and denunciations, which led to bloody repression and vengeance. It is in this climate that the missionaries moved about every day, with the quiet conviction of doing their duty in an ordinary world. They would have laughed at you if you had taken them for heroes, but each of them could tell you about many comic or tragic adventures they had been through....

The real picture is given by those who did not return! At the Thakhek mission alone, alongside Marcel, in those years, Father Malo died of exhaustion in his march as a captive in 1954, Father Dubroux was killed in 1959, Father Tenaud disappeared in 1961, and Father Galan was killed in 1968. They are on the long list of martyrs in the Hall of Martyrs at the Rue du Bac.

On the morning of April 17, 1961, Marcel, who was in Thakhek at the time, learned that the village of Phon Sa-at, about 30 kilometers away, was threatened by the Viêts who had already taken the entire eastern part of his sector. He had left his catechist Unla and his family there. He decided that he needed to go cover for them and take responsibility for all the complaints that the revolutionaries were surely going to make against the head of the small Christian community. He was fully aware of the risks and knew that he would be treated as an enemy of the people, a servant of imperialism, a spy of colonialism and other similar crimes. He knew how little concern the Viêts had for human rights, for the dignity or the lives of those who were not on their side. Yet he went to parry the blows and divert to himself the charges he

foresaw. A few days earlier, we had been with the group of Thakhek for a day of prayer and reflection. Once again, we had agreed on what to do faced with these advances and retreats of the opposing forces. The Gospel dictated the answer: the missionary is a pastor, not a mercenary.... The Good Shepherd does not flee before danger.... He gives his life for the sheep.... Marcel knew his Gospel and he left without looking back. We probably will never know the truth about his final days, the humiliations or the sufferings he had to endure. The last reliable testimony is that of Unla, his catechist, who saw him leave Phon Sa-at at the wheel of his Jeep, surrounded by his jailers who could not drive.

"They did not seem all that bad, said Unla later. They let him come back to get his breviary and Father took the opportunity to tell us unequivocally: Adieu. We shall meet again in Heaven."

Response

Cf. Mt 5:44-45, 48; Lk 6:27

V. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute or curse you. * In that way you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.

R. You are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. * In that way...

Prayer

God of infinite providence, you chose Blessed Joseph Tien, priest, and his companions, martyrs, to establish your people among the Laotians. Grant to us, we pray, that by putting ourselves at the service of the least of our brethren, we may also, through their intercession, merit to possess the kingdom of heaven. Through Jesus Christ....
