 Reading time: 8 min.

Alexandre Planas Sauri, born in Mataró (Barcelona) on 31 December 1878, was a lay collaborator of the Salesians until his glorious death as a martyr in Garraf (Barcelona) on 19 November 1936. His beatification took place together with other Salesians and members of the Salesian Family on 11 March 2001, by Pope Saint John Paul II.

The list of Spanish martyrs beatified by Pope John Paul II on 11 March 2001 includes layman Alexandre PLANAS SAURÌ. His name is one of the Salesian martyrs of the Tarraconense Province, a subgroup of Barcelona. The testimonies about his life also describe him as “of the family” or “cooperator”, but everyone describes him as “a genuine Salesian”. The village of Sant Vicenç dels Horts, where he lived for 35 years, knew him by the nickname “*El Sord’*” “El Sord dels Frares” (The Deaf man of the friars). And this is the expression that appears on the beautiful plaque in the parish church, placed on at the back, on the exact spot where Alexandre stood when he went to pray.

His life was cut short on the night of 18 November 1936, along with a Salesian Brother, Eliseo García, who stayed with him so as not to leave him alone, as Alexandre did not want to leave the village and seek a safer place. Within hours both were arrested, condemned by the anarchist committee in the municipality, and taken to the banks of the Garraf, on the Mediterranean, where they were shot. Their bodies were not recovered. Alexandre was 58 years old.

This is a note that could have made it onto the events page of any newspaper and fallen into utter oblivion. But it did not. The Church proclaimed them both blessed. For the Salesian Family they were and always will be “signs of faith and reconciliation”. Reference will be made in these pages to Mr Alexandre. Who was this man whom people nicknamed “*el Sord dels frares*”?

The circumstances of his life

Alexandre Planas Saurì was born in Mataró (province of Barcelona) in 1878, six years before the train that took Don Bosco to Barcelona (to visit and meet with the Salesians and the young people at the Sarriá house), stopped at the station in this city to pick up Doña Dorotea de Chopitea and those from Martí Codolar who wanted to accompany him on the last leg of the journey to Barcelona.

Very little is known of his childhood and adolescence. He was baptised in the city’s most popular parish, St Joseph and St John. He was, without a doubt, a regular

attender at Sunday celebrations, activities and parish celebrations. Judging by the trajectory of his later life, he was a young man who was able to develop a solid spiritual life.

Alexandre had a significant physical impairment: he was totally deaf and had an ungainly body (short in stature, and curvature of the spine). The circumstance that brought him to Sant Vicenç dels Horts, a town about 50 km from his home town, is unknown. The truth is that in 1900 he was among the Salesians in the small town of Sant Vicenç as an employee in the daily activities of the Salesian house: gardening, cleaning, farming, running errands… A clerver and hard working young man. And, above all, “good and very pious”.

The house in Sant Vicenç dels Horts was bought by Fr Philip Rinaldi, former Provincial of Spain, in 1895, to house the novitiate and the philosophy studies that were to be carried out later. It was the first Salesian formation centre in Spain. Alexandre arrived there in 1900 as an employee, immediately earning the respect of everyone. He felt very comfortable, fully integrated in the spirit and mission of the house.

At the end of the 1902-1903 school year, the house underwent a major change of direction. The Rector Major, Fr Michael Rua, had created the three provinces of Spain. Madrid and Seville Provinces decided to organise formation in their respective provinces. Barcelona also transferred the novitiate and philosophy to Girona. The house in Sant Vicenç dels Horts remained practically empty within a few months, inhabited only by Mr Alexandre.

From that year until 1931 (28 years!), he became the guardian of the house. Not only of the property, but above all of the Salesian traditions that had become strongly rooted in the population in just a few years. His was a benevolent presence and work, living like an anchorite but in no way foreign to the friends of the house who protected him, for the sick of the town he visited, life in his parish, the parishioners he edified with the example of his piety, and for the children at parish catechesis and the festive oratory he animated together with a young man from the town, Joan Juncadella, with whom he formed a strong friendship. Distant yet close at the same time, with no small influence on people. A singular character. The reference person for Salesian spirit in the village. “*El sord dels frares*“.

The man

Alexandre, a handicapped and deaf person who understood others thanks to his penetrating gaze, of the movement of their lips, always answered lucidly, even if

he spoke softly. A man with a good and bright heart: “*A treasure in an ugly earthenware jar, but we, the children, were able to perceive his human dignity perfectly.”*

He dressed as a poor person, always with his bag slung over his shoulder, sometimes accompanied by a dog. The Salesians let him stay at the house. He could live on what the garden produced and the help he received from a few people. His poverty was exemplary, more than evangelical. And if he had stoo much, he gave it to the poor. In the midst of this kind of life, he carried out the task of caretaker of the house with absolute fidelity.

As well as the faithful and responsible man, was the good, humble, self-sacrificing man of an invincible, though firm, warmth. “He would not allow anyone to be spoken ill of.” Then there was the gentleness of his heart. “The comforter of all families.” A man of transparent heart, and upright intention. A man who made himself loved and respected. The people were with him.

The artist

Alexandre also had the soul of an artist, an artist and a mystic. Isolated from outside noise he lived absorbed in constant mystical contemplation. And he was able to capture the innermost feelings of his religious experience in material things, which almost always revolved around the passion of Jesus Christ.

In the courtyard at the house he created three clearly visible monuments:

Christ nailed to the cross, being laid in Mary's hands and the holy sepulchre. Among the three, the cross presided over the courtyard. Passengers on the train that ran past the farm could see it perfectly. On the other hand, he set up a small workshop in one of the outbuildings of the house where he carried out the orders he received or small images with which he satisfied the tastes of popular piety and distributed them freely among his neighbours.

The believer

But what dominated his personality was his Christian faith. He professed it in the depths of his being and manifested it with total clarity, sometimes even ostentatiously, by professing it in public. "*A true saint*" a "*man of God*" people said. "*When we arrived at the chapel in the morning or in the afternoon we would always unfailingly find Alexandre praying, on his knees, doing his pious practices.*" "*His piety was very deep*." A man totally open to the voice of the Spirit, with the sensitivity that saints possess. The most admirable thing about this man was his thirst and hunger for God, "*seeking ever more spirituality*."

Alexandre's faith was first of all open to the mystery of God, before whose greatness he would fall on his knees in profound adoration: "*Bowed down by his body, his eyes lowered, full of interior life... placed at one side of the church, his head bowed, kneeling, absorbed in the mystery of God, fully immersed in meditation on holy pleasure, he would give vent to his affections and emotions*..."

"*He would spend hours before the tabernacle, kneeling, with his body bent almost horizontally to the ground, after communion*." From contemplation of God and his saving greatness, Alexandre drew a great trust in Divine Providence, but also a radical aversion to blasphemy against the glory of God and his holy name. He could not tolerate blasphemy. "*If he sensed a blasphemy he would either become tense as he looked intensely at the person who had uttered it, or he would whisper with compassion, so that the person could hear: 'Our Lady weeps, Our Lord weeps.'*"

His faith was expressed in the traditional devotions of the Eucharist, as we have seen, and the rosary. But where his religious impulse found the channel best suited to his needs was undoubtedly in meditation on the passion of Christ. "*I remember the impression we had of this deaf man on hearing him speak of the Passion of Christ*."

He bore the mystery of the cross in his flesh and in his soul. In its honour he had erected the monuments of the cross, the deposition and the burial of Christ. All accounts also mention the iron crucifix he wore hanging from his chest, and whose chain was embedded in his skin. And he always slept with a large crucifix beside

him. He did not want to take off the crucifix even during the months of religious persecution that culminated in his martyrdom. “Am I doing anything wrong?” he would say. “And if they kill me, so much the better, then I already have heaven open.”

Every day he would make the Stations of the Cross: “When he went up to the study room, Mr Planas would enter the chapel, and when we came down after an hour, he was finishing the Stations of the Cross, which he did totally bent over, until his head touched the ground.”

Founded on this experience of the cross to which was added his profound devotion to the Sacred Heart, the Deaf man’s spirituality was projected towards asceticism and solidarity. He lived as a penitent, in evangelical poverty and a spirit of mortification. He slept on planks without a mattress or pillow, having beside him a skull that reminded him of death and “some instruments of penance”. He did not learn this from the Salesians. He had learnt it previously and explained it by recalling the spirituality of Jesuit St Alphonse Rodríguez, whose manual he used to read in the novitiate house and which he sometimes meditated on during those years.

But his love for the cross also drove him to solidarity. His austerity was impressive. He dressed like the poor and ate frugally. He gave all he could give: not money, because he had none, but always his fraternal help: “*When there was something to be done for someone, he would leave everything and go where it was needed*.” Those who benefited most were the children in catechesis and the sick. “*He never missed the bedside of a seriously ill person: he would watch over him while the family rested. And if there was no one in the family who could prepare the deceased, he was ready for this service. Favoured were the poor, whom, if he could, he helped with the alms he collected or with the fruit of his labour.”*

(continued)

don Joan Lluís Playà, sdb