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A man destined for elimination

Titus Zeman was born in Vajnory, near Bratislava (in Slovakia), on 4 January 1915, the first of ten children in a simple family. At the age of 10, he was suddenly healed through Our Lady's intercession and promised to "be her son forever" and become a Salesian priest. He began to realise this dream in 1927, after overcoming opposition from his family for two years. He had asked the family to sell a field to be able to pay for his studies, and had added, "If I had died, you would well have found the money for my funeral. Please use that money to pay for my studies."

The same determination constantly returns in Zeman: when the communist regime established itself in Czechoslovakia and persecuted the Church, Father Titus defended the crucifix symbol (1946), paying with his dismissal from the school where he taught. Having providentially escaped the dramatic "Night of the Barbarians" and the deportation of religious (13-14 April 1950), he decided to cross the Iron Curtain with the young Salesians to Turin, where he was welcomed by the Rector Major Fr Peter Ricaldone. After two successful crossings (summer and autumn 1950), the expedition failed in April 1951. Fr Zeman faced an initial week of torture and another ten months of preventive detention, with further heavy torture, until the trial on 20-22 February 1952. He would then undergo 12 years in detention (1952-1964) and almost five years on parole, always spied on and persecuted (1964-1969).

In February 1952, the Prosecutor General demanded the death penalty for him for espionage, high treason and illegal border crossing, which was commuted to 25 years in hard prison without parole. However, Fr Zeman was branded a "man destined for elimination" and experienced life in forced labour camps. He was forced to grind radioactive uranium by hand and without protection; he spent long periods in solitary confinement, with a food ration six times less than that of the others. He becomes seriously ill with heart, lung and neurological diseases. On 10 March 1964, having served half his sentence, he was released from prison on parole for seven years. He was physically unrecognisable and experienced a period of intense suffering, also spiritual, due to the ban on publicly exercising his priestly ministry. He died, after receiving amnesty, on 8 January 1969.

Saviour of vocations to the point of martyrdom

Fr Titus lived his vocation and the special mission to which he felt called to work for the salvation of vocations with a great spirit of faith, embracing the hour of "ordeal" and "sacrifice" and testifying to his ability, also due to the grace received

from God, to face the offering of his life, the passion of imprisonment and torture and finally death with a Christian, consecrated and priestly conscience. This is attested by the rosary of 58 beads, one for each period of torture, which he made of bread and thread, and above all the reference to *Ecce homo*, as the One who kept him company in his sufferings, and without Whom he would not have been able to face them. He guarded and defended the faith of young people in times of persecution, to oppose the communist re-education and ideological redevelopment. His journey of faith was a continuous “shining forth” of virtues, the fruit of an intense interior life, which translates into a courageous mission, in a country where Communism intended to wipe out every trace of Christian life. Fr Titus’ entire life was summed up in encouraging others to that “fidelity in vocation” with which he decisively followed his own. His was a total love for the Church and his own religious vocation and apostolic mission. His bold undertakings flow from this unified and unifying love.

Witness of hope

The heroic witness of Blessed Titus Zeman is one of the most beautiful pages of faith that the Christian communities of Eastern Europe and the Salesian Congregation wrote during the harsh years of religious persecution by communist regimes in the last century. Particularly resplendent was his commitment to young consecrated and priestly vocations, decisive for the future of the faith in those territories.

With his life, Fr Titus showed himself to be a man of unity, who broke down barriers, mediated in conflicts, always looked to the integral good of the person; moreover, he always considered an alternative, a better solution, a non-surrender to unfavourable circumstances to be possible. In the same years in which some apostatised or betrayed, and others became discouraged, he strengthened the hope of young men called to the priesthood. His obedience was creative, not formal. He acted not only for the good of his neighbour, but in the best possible way. Thus, he did not limit himself to organising the clerics’ escapes abroad, but accompanied them by paying in person, allowing them to reach Turin, in the conviction that ‘at Don Bosco’s house’ they would have an experience destined to mark their entire lives. At the root of this was the awareness that to save a vocation is to save many lives: first of all that of the one called, then those that an obeyed vocation reaches, in this case through religious and priestly life.

It is significant that the martyrdom of Fr Titus Zeman was recognised in the wake of the bicentenary of the birth of St John Bosco. His testimony is the

incarnation of Jesus' vocational call and pastoral predilection for children and young people, especially for his young Salesian confreres, a predilection that manifested itself, as in Don Bosco, in a true 'passion', seeking their good, putting all his energies, all his strength, all his life into this in a spirit of sacrifice and offering, "Even were I to lose my life, I would not consider it wasted, knowing that at least one of those I had helped has become a priest in my place."