

# Alexandre Planas Saurí, the deaf martyr (1/2)

*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 SAURÍ. 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 Saurí 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 Sarrià 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 clever 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.”*

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don Joan Lluís Playà, sdb

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# Servants of God John Świerc and eight Companions Martyrs. Pastors who gave their lives

*Extremist ideologies, that is, ideas raised to the rank of absolute truths, always bring suffering and death when they seek to impose themselves at any cost on those who do not accept them. Sometimes it is enough to belong to a nation or social group to suffer the consequences. This is the case of the Polish Salesian martyrs presented in this article.*

Nine Polish Salesian priests also belong to the number of victims of Nazism, Servants of God Fr Jan Świerc and his 8 Companions: Fr Ignacy Antonowicz, Fr Karol Golda, Fr Włodzimierz Szembek, Fr Franciszek Harazim, Fr Ludwik Mroczek, Fr Ignacy Dobiasz, Fr Kazimierz Wojciechowski and Fr Franciszek Miśka, who were killed *in odium fidei* in the Nazi death camps in 1941–1942. As priests, all the Servants of God were engaged in Poland in various pastoral and governmental activities and in teaching. They were completely uninvolved in the political tensions that agitated Poland during the wartime occupation. Nevertheless, they were arrested and martyred *in odium fidei* for the very fact of being Catholic priests.

The strength and serene perseverance preserved by the Servants of God in carrying out their priestly ministry even during their imprisonment represented a real act of defiance for the Nazis: although exhausted by humiliation and torture, in defiance of any prohibition, the Servants of God were guardians to the end of the souls entrusted to them and showed themselves ready, despite human weakness, to accept death with God and for God.

The concentration camp at Auschwitz, known to all as the death camp, and the camp at Dachau for Fr Miśka, thus became places of priestly commitment for these Salesian priests: Fr Jan Świerc and 8 companions responded to the denial of human

dignity and life, by offering the power of grace and the hope of eternity through the sacraments. They welcomed many fellow prisoners, sustained them through the Eucharist and confession and prepared them for a peaceful death. This service was not infrequently rendered in hiding, taking advantage of the darkness of the night and under the constant and pressing threat of severe punishment or more often death.

The Servants of God, as true disciples of Jesus, never uttered words of scorn or hatred towards their persecutors. Arrested, beaten, humiliated in their human and priestly dignity, they offered their suffering to God and remained faithful to the end, certain that whoever places everything before the divine will is not disappointed. Their inner serenity and their demeanour, which they showed even at the hour of death, were so extraordinary that they left their torturers astonished, and in some cases outraged.

Here are their biographical profiles.

### ***Fr Ignacy Antonowicz***

Ignacy Antonowicz was born in 1890 in Więśławice, Włocławek County, north-central Poland. In 1901 he entered the Salesian Secondary School in Oświęcim, where he remained until 1905. Between 1905 and 1906 he completed his novitiate in Daszawa. He made his perpetual profession in August 1909 in Italy, in Lanzo Torinese. He was ordained a priest on 22 April 1916 in Rome. Fr Ignacy taught dogmatics at the Theological Studentate in Foglizzo (Turin) between 1916 and 1917. In 1919, during the Russo-Polish War, he was a military chaplain in the Polish army. Between 1919 and 1920 he was in Krakow as a professor in the Theological Studentate. On 1 July 1934 he was appointed councillor of the Polish Province of St Hyacinth in Krakow until the end of 1936. In 1936 he took up the post as Rector of the Salesian Immaculate Conception Theological Studentate in Krakow, which he held until his arrest on 23 May 1941. He



was detained for a month in the Montelupich prison in Cracow, then taken to the concentration camp at Oświęcim. He was killed on 21 July 1941. He was 51 years old, with 34 years of religious profession and 25 years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Karol Golda***

Karol Golda was born on 23 December 1914 in Tychy, Upper Silesia. After finishing fourth grade, he moved to the Bolesław Chrobry Secondary School in Pszczyna. He attended sixth grade at the Salesian school in Oświęcim. In June 1931 he went to the House in Czerwińsk to begin his novitiate. On 15 January 1937 he made his perpetual religious profession in Rome. On 18 December 1938 he was ordained a priest in Rome, where he stayed for a further six months to obtain a Licentiate in Theology. In July 1939 he returned to Poland. The Second World War broke out and Fr Karol went to Silesia in October 1939 and then to Oświęcim where he stayed, as the occupying authorities did not allow him to travel to Italy. Fr Karol Golda was entrusted with teaching theology at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim and was appointed Prefect of Studies there. He was arrested by Gestapo officials on 31 December 1941 and killed on 14 May 1942, after only three and a half years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Włodzimierz Szembek***

The Servant of God Fr Włodzimierz Szembek, son of Count Zygmunt and Klementyna of the Dzieduszycki family, was born on 22 April 1883 in Poręba Żegoty, near Cracow. In 1907, he graduated from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow with a

degree in agricultural engineering. For about twenty years he was involved in the administration of his mother's estates and in the lay apostolate. When he turned 40, the Servant of God's religious vocation came to maturity. On 4 February 1928 he entered the aspirantate in Oświęcim. At the end of 1928 he began his novitiate in Czerwińsk. He made his religious profession on 10 August 1929. On 3 June 1934 he received priestly ordination in Cracow. On 9 July 1942 he was arrested by the Gestapo and taken to Nowy Targ. The following 19 August he was taken to Auschwitz concentration camp, where he died on 7 September 1942, exhausted by suffering and as a result of the mistreatment he had endured. He was 59 years of age, 13 of profession and 9 of priesthood.



### ***Fr Franciszek Harazim***

Franciszek Ludwik Harazim was born on 22 August 1885 in Osiny, Rybnik district in Silesia. He attended primary school first in Baranowicze, then in Osiny. In 1901, he entered the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim to attend secondary school there. He completed his novitiate in Daszawa in 1905/1906. On 24 March 1910 he made his perpetual vows. He was ordained a priest in Ivrea on 29 May 1915. Between 1915 and 1916 he taught at the Oświęcim High School, of which he was appointed headmaster between 1916 and 1918. In the years 1918-1920 he taught philosophy in the Salesian major seminary in Cracow (Łosiówka). From 1922-1927 the Servant of God held the post of headmaster at the Salesian High School in Aleksandrów Kujawski. In 1927 he returned again to the major seminary in Krakow as a councillor, teacher and educator of clerics. In July 1938 Fr Franciszek was appointed professor at the Krakow-Łosiówka house. He was arrested by the Gestapo in Krakow on 23 May 1941. He was first taken to Konfederacka Street and then, together with the other confreres, to Montelupich Prison. A

month later, on 26 June 1941, he was taken to Auschwitz concentration camp. He was killed on 27 June 1941 on the famous Ghiaione. He had not yet turned 56 years of age: of these 34 were of religious profession and 26 of priesthood.



### ***Fr Ludwik Mroczek***

Ludwik Mroczek was born in Kęty (Kraków) on 11 August 1905. In 1917, after attending school in Kęty, he was admitted to the Salesian institute in Oświęcim where he completed his secondary school studies. He did his novitiate in Klecza Dolna completing this on 7 August 1922. He made his perpetual vows on 14 July 1928 in Oświęcim. In Przemyśl he received priestly ordination on 25 June 1933. Ordained a priest, he worked in Oświęcim (in 1933), in Lvov (in 1934), in Przemyśl (in 1934 and 1938/39), in Skawa (in 1936/37), in Częstochowa (in 1939). On 22 May 1941, as soon as he had finished celebrating Mass, he was arrested and transferred with other confreres to the concentration camp at Oświęcim. Here he died on 5 January 1942: he was 36 years old, 18 years of religious profession and 8 years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Jan Świerc***

Jan Świerc was born in Królewska Huta (today Chorzów, in Upper Silesia) on 29th April 1877. He completed his secondary school studies at Valsalice, Turin. Between 1897 and 1898 he did his novitiate in Ivrea. Here he took his perpetual vows on 3 October 1899. On 6 June 1903 he was ordained a priest in Turin. In 1911 he was appointed Rector of the Krakow House by the then Rector Major Fr Paul Albera. From September 1911 to

April 1918, he was Rector of the Lubomirski Institute in Krakow. In 1924, for a period of seven months, he was engaged as a missionary in the Americas. From November 1925 to October 1934, he was Rector and Parish Priest in Przemyśl. On 15 August 1934 he was appointed Rector of the Lviv House. In July 1938 he took up the post as Rector and Parish Priest of the house at 6 Konfederacka Street in Krakow from 1938-1941. On 23 May 1941 he was arrested by the Gestapo together with other confreres and taken to prison in Montelupich. On 26 June 1941 he was transferred to the Auschwitz concentration camp and, after just one day, he was killed: he was 64 years old, 42 years of religious profession and 38 years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Ignacy Dobiasz***

Ignacy Dobiasz was born in Ciechowice (Upper Silesia) on 14th January 1880. Having completed primary school, in May 1894 he went to Italy, to Turin Valsalice, to do his secondary school studies there. On 16 August 1898 he entered the Salesian novitiate in Ivrea. He made his perpetual vows at San Benigno Canavese on 21 September 1903. He completed his philosophical and theological studies at San Benigno Canavese and at Foglizzo between 1904 and 1908. On 28 June 1908 he was ordained a priest in Foglizzo. He then returned to Poland: he carried out his pedagogical and pastoral activities in Oświęcim (in 1908, 1910, 1921 and 1923), in Daszawa (in 1909), in Przemyśl (1912-1914) and in Krakow (between 1916 and 1920 and in 1922). In 1931 he was in Warsaw as Vice-Rector. In November 1934 he went to Krakow where he remained as confessor and assistant parish priest. Here he was arrested together with other Salesian confreres on 23 May 1941. After a short detention in the prison in Montelupich, he was deported to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. On 27 June 1941, he died of ill-treatment and inhuman labour. He was 61 years of age, 40

years of profession and 32 years of priesthood.



### ***Fr Kazimierz Wojciechowski***

Kazimierz Wojciechowski was born in Jasło (Galicia) on 16 August 1904. Orphaned by his father when he was only five years old, he was taken into the institute of Prince Lubomirski in Cracow. He began secondary school in 1916 at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim. In 1920 he began his novitiate in Klecza Dolna. He made his perpetual vows on 2nd May 1928 in Oświęcim. Between 1924 and 1925 he taught music and mathematics in Łąd. On 19th May 1935 he was ordained a priest in Cracow. In 1935-1936 he was in Daszawa and in Cracow, where he taught religion and was appointed director of the oratory and of the Catholic Youth Association. The Servant of God was arrested in Krakow on 23 May 1941 with other Salesian confreres. On 26 June 1941 he was deported to Auschwitz concentration camp where, after just one day, he was killed. He was 37 years of age, 19 of profession and 6 of priesthood.



### ***Fr Franciszek Miśka***

Franciszek Miśka was born in Swierczyniec (Upper Silesia) on 5 December 1898. He completed his secondary schooling at the Salesian Institute in Oświęcim. He entered the novitiate in Pleszów in 1916. He made his perpetual profession in Oświęcim on 25 July 1923. He completed his theological studies in Turin-Crocetta. He was ordained a priest on 10 July 1927 in Turin. He then returned to Poland. In 1929 he was appointed counsellor and catechist at the orphanage in Przemyśl. In 1931 and for the next five years he was in Jaciążek as the Rector.

In 1936 he was appointed parish priest of the parish of Łąd. In 1941 he became Rector of the house of the Sons of Mary and parish priest of Łąd. On 6 January 1941, the Salesian institute in Łąd was transformed by the Gestapo into a prison for priests of the diocese of Włocławek and Gniezno-Poznań. Fr Franciszek was entrusted by the German authorities with the task of maintaining order and providing for the prisoners. For unspecified reasons he was transferred several times to Inowrocław and brutally tortured there. On 30 October 1941, the Servant of God was transported to Dachau concentration camp (Germany). Here, subjected to forced labour and inhuman living conditions, he died on 30 May 1942, the day of the Most Holy Trinity, in the camp's barracks hospital. He was 43 years old, almost 25 years of religious profession and almost 15 years of priesthood.



The reputation for holiness and martyrdom of the Servants of God Fr Jan Świerc and 8 Companions, although hindered during the communist period, spread as soon as they died and is still alive today. They were considered to be exemplary priests, dedicated to pastoral work and works of charity, warm and friendly, always available, interested in giving glory only to God, for whose sake they were faithful even to the shedding of their blood.

On 28 March 2023, the Historical Consultors of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints cast affirmative votes on the *Positio super martyrio* of the Servants of God John Świerc and VIII Companions, Professed Priests of the Society of St Francis de Sales, who were killed in *odium fidei* in the Nazi death camps in the years 1941-1942. We pray that they will be raised to the honours of the altars as soon as possible.

*Mariafrancesca Oggianu*

*Member of the General Postulation*