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A short biography of Fr. Sanvitores, by Fr. Juan Ledesma

Source: Fr. Juan Ledesma's The Cause of Beatification of Ven. Diego Luis San Vitores (see bibliography), pp. 2-8, 14.

Biographical profile of the servant of God

Among those who excelled in sanctity in the 17th century Assistance of the Society of Jesus in Spain, and of whom there remained a pleasant memory not only in the areas where they lived, but generally in the history of the Society, the one who stands out is the Venerable Diego Luis de San Vitores. What gave him special fame was the Mission of the Mariana Islands of which he was the founder, and the glorious martyrdom with which in the end he crowned his apostolic labors. It must, however, be noted that before he left for this difficult enterprise he had sanctified with his virtues the Jesuit Provinces of Toledo in Spain, of Mexico and of the Philippines.

In view of these countries where the Servant of God gave evidence of his sanctity, we will develop according to their order the profile of his biography.

In Spain.

The Servant of God was born in the city of Burgos, Spain on 12 November 1627.¹ He was baptized [Diego Jerónimo] in the parish of San Gil of the same city on the 19th of the same month. His parents were Don Jerónimo de San Vitores and Doña Francisca de Maluenda. Due to his devotion to Saint Louis de Gonzaga, with eventual paternal permission, the name Luis was adopted by the same Servant of God.²

1 Ed. note: Archives of the Parish of San Gil, Burgos: "Libro tercero de los bautizados... comenzado en 26 de Julio de 1610 años. Acaba en 10 Abril de 1652."

2 Ed. note: He changed his middle name to Luis only in 1640, after he entered the novitiate, according to the testimony of his confessor, Fr. Diego Ramirez. He did it to show his admiration for then-Blessed Luis de Gonzaga.

Very soon, in 1638, the family had to transfer its residence to the capital city of Madrid, where his father, Don Jerónimo, was made Procurator for Burgos for whatever business there may be for that city in Madrid. Thus, at the age of 11, we see Diego taking grammar courses in the Imperial College, which was administered by the Society of Jesus. In addition, thanks to his exemplary conduct, by election of his own companions, he was made Prefect of the Sodality of Mary.

In spite of strong paternal objections he begged and was granted admission at the age of 13 into the Society of Jesus. But he did not pronounce his first vows until the canonical age of 16.

He completed his novitiate in 1643. Then at the College of Alcalá de Henares he passed on to study Arts for 3 years and Theology for 4 years, excelling in both courses, to the extent even of crowning them with the Public Defense. His priestly ordination took place in the same city at the age of 24 on 23 December 1651.

Then he made his 3rd year of probation in the novitiate of Villarejo de Fuentes where he had made his first year.

Then began his apostolic life after this painstaking intellectual and religious formation. First he taught grammar in the College of Oropesa in 1653, then theology for a year in Madrid, and lastly, until 1660, philosophy at the University of Alcalá. But his zeal could not be confined solely to the classroom. From the very beginning of his teaching years his free time, particularly during the summer months, was given to the sick and the poor in the hospitals, and, especially to the giving of missions in the surrounding villages, where he preached with extraordinary fervor and apostolic spirit the *Doctrina* [catechism] and the Act of Contrition.

Over and over again he offered himself to the Superiors, and begged to be assigned to the missions in the Indies, where he yearned to shed his blood for Christ. On 12 November 1657, at the age of 30, he crowned these ardent desires with a special vow to employ the rest of his days in the missions. Finally he wrote a long and fervent letter to his Father General, Gosvino Nickel, dated 2 July 1659 [see Doc. 1659B]. In it he revealed the favors God made to him until then, to which he wished to correspond by giving himself up in sacrifice for the good of souls in pagan lands.

Fr. General was so impressed by this letter that he wrote to his Provincial [Doc. 1659C], telling him that he would gravely fail in his obligation and his conscience if he did not destine Fr. San Vitores to the mission of the Indies which he so justly desired, although with the proper religious indifference. Accordingly, the Servant of God was assigned to the Philippines.

In Mexico.

His trip towards the port of departure became a veritable missionary journey since he preached so many missions on the way. On 14 May 1660 he embarked in Cadiz, and arrived at the port of Veracruz in New Spain on the following July 28. But he had a

forced delay of not less than 2 years in the capital city of Mexico for lack of a vessel to continue his journey. The historian Fr. Francisco Javier Alegre,¹ writing on this delay, says that the Servant of God, in search for a relief to his zeal, used to preach continuous and fervent popular missions. And to make the fruit of these last, he applied himself especially to the promotion of the Sodality of St. Francis Xavier. Such was the success of his labors that Fr. Francisco Solano, who eventually became his companion in the Marianas, assures us that the esteem he won in Mexico was not less than that which they had in Goa for St. Francis Xavier.

At long last, on 5 April 1662, he was able to set sail from the port of Acapulco on his way to the Philippines, God in his eternal designs saw to it that he had to get there by way of the then-called Ladrones Islands. And that was precisely how God provided for the evangelization of those islands and for the glorification of our Servant of God. According to Astraín,² he took cognizance of the nature of those islanders. And when he learned that no-one until then had preached the gospel to them he felt internally moved to procure such blessing for them.

In the Philippines.

He arrived in the Philippines on 10 July 1662. In due course he was appointed Master of Novices, Prefect of Studies and Professor of Theology in the College of Manila, Prefect of the Sodality of Mary for the Spaniards and Minister for the natives. However, he had first to study the Tagalog language. This he did in the Residence of Taytay. There in a short while he mastered the language and was able to preach in it, giving missions within and around the capital city of Manila, but particularly in the island of Mindoro.

Never, however, in the midst of this apostolic activity did he forget his Ladrones Islands. He appealed to his Superiors, to the Archbishop, and lastly to the King himself, Philip IV [Doc. 1663B]. Fruit of these efforts was the Royal Cedula, which was signed on 24 June 1665 [Doc. 1665D]. It ordered the evangelization of those islands.

But there was need to go there by way of Mexico to solicit material help. He arrived there on January 1668, and obtaining in a short time what he was after, by March of the same year he was already on his way to the Marianas, accompanied by 4 priests, 1 scholastic and 30 auxiliaries, the latter almost all Filipinos.

In the Mariana Islands.

That archipelago's most memorable date is 16 June 1668, when the missionaries disembarked on Guam, the principal and largest of the islands. The day following was Sunday. The first Mass was celebrated, in which the Servant of God preached in the natives' language, for during the voyage, even before, he had been learning it. The suc-

1 Ed. note: "Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en Nueva España" (Rome, 1959).

2 Ed. note: "Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en la Asistencia de España" (Madrid, 1908-1925).

cess was beyond expectations. For, adding together the baptized on the island of Guam with those of the other islands, it was realized that from 16 June 1668 to 21 April 1669, the resulting total of those who had been baptized was 13,289.¹ Remarks Fr. Astraín: "Rarely has there been a mission to the infidels begun with such prosperity and received with such good will."

Greater was the fruit of this Mariana Mission at the beginning of the 3rd year and the second to the last of the work in it of the Servant of God. He had already visited by himself the first 13 islands. Those baptized were 30,000.² Add to them the multitude of catechumens, five properly built churches where divine services were held with full solemnity. There was also a college for boys, named San Juan de Letrán, whose students cared for the service of the church, sang daily in two choirs the Christian doctrine, and bell in hand went along the streets to summon other children to the catechism class. They served too as catechists and interpreters. For this and for another college for girls the Servant of God eventually obtained the assignment by the Queen of 3,000 yearly ducats [rather pesos].

Such fruit could only be harvested at a cost of much labor and sacrifice, of perilous crossings of stormy seas, in the midst of fratricidal quarrels between rival towns. In fine, such labor had to deal with natives who were uncivilized, savage, barbaric and superstitious. But above all, there was the opposition of two principal adversaries, a Chinaman by the name of Choco and the *Macanas*. The former spread the calumny that the Fathers killed the children with the baptismal waters, and the sick with the holy oils. The *Macanas* played the part of prophets, promising through the skulls which were kept in the homes such goods as water, cures, fish. Together they were the principal causes for the uprisings of the natives against the Fathers, including the deaths, like those of Fr. Luis de Medina and several catechists, particularly those that occurred up before the martyrdom of the Servant of God on 31 March and 1 April 1672.

In view of the massacres of these two last days, the Servant of God, who at the time was building a church some distance away, ordered that all should proceed to the central Residence of San Ignacio, whereto he himself would be on his way. Passing through the village of Tumon he learned of the recent birth of the daughter of a certain Matapang. He asked him to let him baptize her. The child's father, who had already apostatized from the faith given him in baptism, refused and, even uttering blasphemies, threatened the Father with death. This he actually inflicted on him with the thrust of a lance into his chest, while a pagan fellow native, who had been incited by him, parted his head with a cutlass. Meanwhile the Father was begging God to forgive his assassins, Matapang climaxed his crime by snatching from the Father, his holy crucifix, and stepped on it amid calumnies and blasphemies.

1 Ed. note: Yes, but the addition was done wrong, as the numbr for Guam was counted twice.

2 Ed. note: Fr. Sanvitores visited 10 islands at most. The number 30,000 is also a mistake; this was an estimate of 13,000, but the official report was badly translated into Latin, as the word "triginta" was wrongly used to traslate 13.

The Servant of God died on the morning of 2 April 1672, at the age of 44. His death was held as a true martyrdom, signs of which are the Mass and *Te Deum* which, when the news arrived, were celebrated in Manila, Mexico and Madrid. These signs are further confirmed by the Processes of Guam (1673), Manila (1676-77), Mexico (1676-79), and Toledo (1688-89). This reputation for martyrdom or *fama martyrii* is also established by much that has been written on it until our days.

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However, for reasons, not easy to specify, the Process of Toledo was [then], as far as we know, the last official act for continuing the Cause of his beatification.

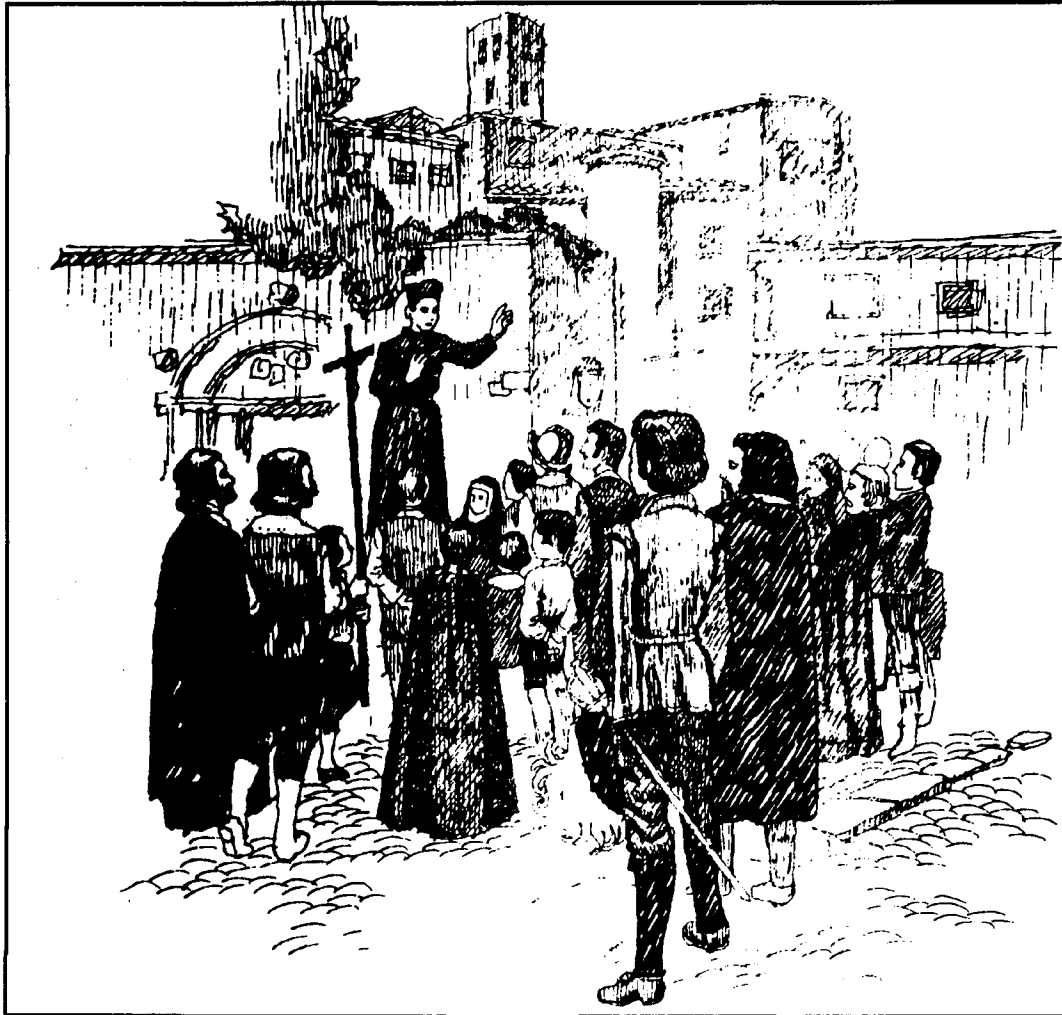
Reasons for delay in the Cause of the beatification.

At the outset we can say that these reasons were not intrinsic to the merits of the Cause, but purely extrinsic. Witness is the history of those centuries, especially the 18th and 19th. They were most difficult for the whole Society of Jesus, due in particular to the persecution of the Bourbonic Courts and Jansenists who were in power in Spain.

The same should be said of the persecution of Tombal in Portugal and of the royal Ministers in France, all of whom were instigated by the Jansenists and the Masons, sworn enemies of the Society and of the Papacy. The climax of these persecutions was the suppression of the Society of Jesus in the 18th century, first by the Kings in Spain and Portugal and their dominions, and then by the Pope in 1773 in the universal church, although the decree of the suppression was not promulgated in the kingdoms of Russia and Prussia.

No less should be said about the 19th century. The Society of Jesus was hardly restored by Pius VII in 1814, when the expulsion of the Jesuits took place in Spain in the years 1820, 1835, 1854 and 1868, and in Naples and the Sicilies and the greater part of Central Italy in the years 1859 and 1860, in Venice in 1866, in Germany in 1872, in Rome in 1873, in France in 1880. Although the times of the 20th century were not so disastrous for the Society of Jesus, there we have the two world wars...¹

1 Ed. note: Fr. Sanvitores, the Apostle of the Marianas, was finally beatified only in 1985.



Brother Sanvitores preaching in Arganda when a teenager. *When on the way to the Jesuit novitiate of Villarejo, southeast of Madrid, Brother Sanvitores stopped to rest at the half-way town of Arganda, where he practiced preaching to an impromptu crowd. (From Fr. Risco's *The Apostle of the Marianas*, Manila, 1970).*