

BLESSED BENEDICT DASWA (1946-1990)

Pope Francis, in his decree of beatification, described Benedict as a “diligent catechist, a thoughtful teacher, a witness of the Gospel to the point of shedding his own blood.” Tshimangadzo Samuel Daswa was born on June 16, 1946, in the village of Mbahe in the province of Limpopo, South Africa, in what is now the Diocese of Tzaneen. He died a martyr for the faith on February 2, 1990, and was beatified on September 13, 2015.

When Benedict became a Catholic, he understood that there were aspects of African culture, such as the widespread practice of witchcraft, magic, and ritual murder, which he could no longer accept. His position against these profound and obscure problems of his culture led him to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom. His brutal death by stoning and beating has made him a hero to all Christians in Africa and to all those throughout the world who struggle to be free from the slavery of sorcery. Benedict Daswa lived his Christian vocation with contentment and enthusiasm, but at the same time with modesty and humility, as shown by his Christian witness in various areas of his life. After his baptism, and especially after getting married in the Church to Shadi Eveline Monyai in 1974, Benedict became a guide for the young and spent many hours and weekends with them to catechize and teach them.

When the first pastoral council was formed in his parish, he was elected its president. He helped teach catechism to children and adults, leading the Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest, visiting the sick and the non-practicing, and helping the poor and needy. In church, he helped start a nursery school. Every once in a while the small Christian community

gathered at his home and during these meetings the Rosary was recited and the Word of God was shared.

In the family, Benedict was a model husband and father, totally devoted to ideal of the family being a “domestic church.” In the classroom, he was not only concerned with providing students with a good level of education, but above all instilling in them fundamental moral values so as to form their personalities. Being a skilled and motivated sportsman, Benedict imparted to young people the value of hard work, discipline, fairness, and team spirit. As principal of the school, he was respected and scrupulous, and he motivated and trained his staff to provide the best possible education to the students, involving the parents as collaborators in the entire educational process.

In the public sphere, Benedict made no secret of his position against witchcraft, magic, and ritual murder, which still have the power to prevent the development and progress of a society. Witchcraft allegations are often driven by jealousy, fear, and suspicion towards those who appear to be more engaged and successful in their undertakings. Benedict realized the need to free individuals from these paralyzing effects, allowing them to take personal responsibility for their lives and become mature adults.

This is why his role in helping people achieve true inner freedom was important not only for the Church, but for the whole of society. Both in the local community as a counselor and advisor to the village chief, and in the ecclesial community as a catechist and prayer guide, Benedict demonstrated a spirit of genuine Christian love, respect, generosity, honesty, and freedom. But above all, and in every situation, Benedict was a man of prayer whose spiritual life was constantly nourished by the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and the Word of God. This great mystery of faith and love meant everything to him. It was the center of his life.

He was never ashamed to admit his great faith in God for it was God who gave him strength. People who knew him very well testified that the growth in his relationship with God was clearly visible, as was the fidelity

with which he lived the values he had embraced at his baptism. He wanted Catholics to be proud of their faith and to assume a real responsibility towards the Church he loved so much. This meant working at the local level for priestly vocations and religious life, being active in the Church and supporting her financially.

His position against witchcraft was not very popular, because he was opposed to something rooted in local culture. There were others who, like Benedict, considered the world of witchcraft as the fruit of evil, fear, mistrust, enmity, injustice, and violence, which they thought people should abandon and free themselves from. But most of them, including religious ministers, were silent for fear of reprisals. Benedict was different. He spoke openly and forcefully in public, opposing those who resorted to witchcraft. Benedict Daswa never compromised. He always adhered to his Christian faith.

He defended those who refused to pay to consult the *sangoma* (the shaman), because he did not want people to pay for something that was false. Above all, Benedict did not want any innocent man to be killed or banished from the village as an alleged sorcerer. What normally happened is that through rumors and gossip, a finger was pointed at someone, often an elderly woman or some other vulnerable person. People didn't seek any proof of guilt, but turned to a *sangoma* who usually confirmed their suspicions. The one accused had no opportunity for defense.

Between November 1989 and January 1990, flooding struck the village where Benedict lived with his family. On January 25, 1990, during a storm, the roofs of some huts were struck by lightning and caught fire. It was widely believed that when lightning struck a house, it was caused by a person who was a sorcerer. According to traditional culture, sorcerers had to be captured and killed, as well as anyone who protected them, because they posed a threat to society. This was traditional culture. Benedict was aware of the growing pressure against him.

So the following Sunday, the village leader called a council meeting to address the issue. Benedict had not yet arrived when it was decided that

some members of the community would have to consult a *sangoma* in order to find the sorcerer who had sent the lightning. But first they would have to raise the money needed to pay for it. When Benedict arrived, he immediately tried to change their minds, pointing out that their decision would lead to the death of innocent people. The meeting ended with their firm resolve and Benedict's refusal to collaborate. His enemies gathered a group of young people and adults to kill him. Friday, February 2, 1990, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, became a feast day for Benedict Daswa's entry into paradise.

The most significant aspect of Benedict's witness has to do with his ability to critically embrace what was good in his culture, but to bravely challenge the cultural elements that hindered the realization of life to the fullest. Benedict firmly believed that marriage was a relationship of partners for life, a faithful sharing of life and love. In a rural, patriarchal, and traditional African community in apartheid-era South Africa, Benedict gave a prophetic witness to a respectful attitude towards women's equal dignity. He believed in a faithful and monogamous marriage that finds its full meaning in the Christian sacrament. As testified by his sons, he was never ashamed to help Eveline, his wife, in household chores that were generally reserved to women. He prayed every day with his family and encouraged all parents to pray with their children. He organized regular family reunions and acted as a mediator and counselor for couples in difficulty. And finally, Benedict was a fervent teacher and educator, becoming the principal of the Nweli Primary School where he taught for many years. And perhaps above all, as pointed out by those who knew him, he was a profoundly humble man, who always used the power of confrontation and dialogue that came to him from his faith and friendship with Jesus.

He never renounced his African culture, but embraced its best aspects, purified and matured by faith. His story reflects his sincere commitment to the values of Ubuntu ethics, a commitment to the common good and the service of life. The example he offered through his daily life – as a lay

person, a family man, a diligent catechist, and a thoughtful teacher – is what many South Africans today consider the most significant legacy of his life: not against their culture, but for the good of their culture and that of every culture and nation.

