

SERVANT OF GOD EZECHIELE RAMIN (1953-1985)

The missionary life and martyrdom of the Servant of God Fr. Ezechiele Ramin can be summarized by a sentence that he himself uttered during his homily at Sunday Mass on February 17, 1985, in Cacoal, Brazil, just twelve months after his arrival in that country: “The father who is speaking to you has received death threats. Dear brothers, if my life is for you, my death too will be for you.”

Ezechiele was born in Padua, Italy, on February 9, 1953 to Mario Ramin and Amirabile Rubin. He was their fourth child of six. The parents, of modest means, succeeded with great sacrifice to realize the dream of educating all their children, but their primary desire was to give them a solid human and Christian formation, which would prepare them to face the trials of life. He spent a peaceful childhood and adolescence, anchored to the values of faith and religious practice, study and work, sacrifice and sobriety, love and mutual help, simplicity and honesty. It was a family shaped above all by the mother’s total dedication. Her day was illuminated by the daily Mass and by the prayer with which she often accompanied her housework.

Ezechiele completed his scholastic career with the belief that study was important for life, beyond being his “work” of those years. An awareness of the poverty in which a great part of humanity – then called the Third World – lived, led him to carry out practical forms of solidarity with the oppressed. He joined the “Open Hands” association in Padua and offered his support to the summer work camps that financed micro-projects in the Third World through the collection of used paper, glass, iron, and rags.

Ezechiele always kept in mind the need to be aware of marginalization and poverty in society.

In a speech he offered on World Mission Sunday in October 1971, when he was just eighteen years old, Ezechiele said, “Christ is now on the road to Emmaus, in the streets. He is the face of the poor brother, the old man devoured by leprosy, the millions of hungry, the 600,000 undernourished children. Our Christianity is a strong commitment that can become, if we want, a witness of life to those around us, because one never arrives before God alone.” The experience of “Open Hands” was so intense and meaningful for him that he continued it in Florence in 1973-74, while he was carrying out a trial period with the Comboni missionaries.

At the end of the summer, when his parents asked him about which university he wanted to attend, he invited them to get in the car and brought them to the Comboni Missionary Institute in Verdara. He surprised them by saying, “Here is my faculty!” They were perplexed, as were all of the others to whom he communicated his plans, because he had never spoken about it before. It was a choice he had considered in silence. It matured in the secret of his conscience as he had walked between home and school, along high mountain paths or while cycling through his beloved Euganean Hills. It had not been an easy choice. He spoke of this during his encounter with a Comboni priest who was visiting his school to give a vocation talk, at the end of which he confessed to the priest, “You spoke of Jonah who was afraid of going to Nineveh. That Jonah who is afraid is really me.” Was it the fear of undertaking such an arduous missionary vocation, the fear of not having what it takes or being faithful to the end? In fact, we do not know the fears that may have weighed upon his heart during this time of discernment because the available correspondence dates back to 1972, after he had already made his decision; one that he would never turn back on. In fact, after his struggle making a decision, he was filled with peace and serenity that came from knowing that one has responded to an insistent call. “To bring Christ is to bring joy,” he wrote. “I follow the path of the

missionary, not on my own initiative, but because God sought me and continually asks me if I want to follow him.”

In September 1972, Ezechiele left Padua, his family and his friends, to begin the journey that would eventually lead him to the priesthood. On May 26, 1976, he asked to consecrate himself to God by taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and becoming part of the Comboni Missionary Congregation. When he had made his vows, Ezechiele was sent to England to learn English in anticipation of being sent to complete theological studies in Uganda. But because of the precarious political situation in that country and the difficulties related to obtaining a residence permit, he was sent to the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where he lived and studied until June 1979. During the summer holidays he was sent to an African American parish in Richmond, Virginia, in the southern United States. It was the America of the excluded, of the lost, of those left behind in the race for material success and of those who needed help, even an open ear to listen to their story. He said to one of his brothers, “Poverty was in every house.... I met people who were forty years old who asked me what they should do. I’ve been with alcoholics, with homeless people, with 13-year-old pregnant girls. They all just asked to be heard, to be understood.” In short, Ezechiele showed that he possessed a particular predisposition and sensitivity in grasping the needs of the poorest of the poor and a capacity to stand by their side.

After his experience in the United States, he went to Lisbon to learn the language of the people he was destined to serve for the rest of his life. He arrived in Brazil on January 20, 1984, and spent a few weeks in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. In March he moved to Brasília to take courses in Brazilian culture and pastoral care. As he got to know Brazil, he became aware, not only of the situation of the Church there, but also of the dramatic condition of the poor, especially of the farmers, who had been driven off their lands by the invasion of powerful multinational companies that occupied large pieces of land to raise livestock for meat

export to well to do countries. At the end of June, with his period of preparation completed, Ezechiele reached the Cacoal mission in the state of Rondônia, in Amazônia Legal.

In those days, along with the very difficult social situation of the country, the state of Rondônia was racked by two disruptive forces. On the one hand it was sustaining a constant migratory influx, especially from the northeast. On the other hand, its traditional native lands were being invaded. In fact, more than half of the aboriginal population of Brazil lived in Rondônia. During those months, an area on the outskirts of the Cacoal parish at the border between the states of Rondônia and Mato Grosso had become a hotbed of tension, because a group of landless farming families had settled there to work some of its uncultivated land.

Father Ezechiele knew the area and the conflicts that were present there, since it was part of his pastoral assignment. He travelled to the most afflicted area on July 22 and 23 to minister to the people and to work together with the president of the local trade union. In one of the communities that he visited, the settlers' wives pleaded with him to go and convince their husbands to stop tilling the land that was now claimed by one of the multinational companies. The presence of these itinerate farmers on land claimed by a large corporation could lead to armed confrontation and result in many unnecessary deaths. In fact, they had already been threatened and intimidated by the corporation's armed guards. The women said that Fr. Ezechiele was the only one who had the moral authority and credibility to convince their husbands to withdraw and wait for more opportune times, a credibility that he gained during his months of pastoral care of the people. On the following day, just before dinner, Fr. Ezechiele presented the situation to his confreres, members of his religious community. Some of them agreed to come out to act as support the next morning, given the extreme gravity of the conditions of the farmers. These were critical moments and there was some dissension from the established plan even though Fr. Ezechiele emphasized the

enormous danger that the farmers were in and the heartfelt appeal made by their wives.

A swarm of anguished thoughts and worries must have besieged him that night, because very early the next morning on July 24, while his confreres were still asleep, he decided to leave with the community's jeep together with a friend who was a member of the trade union. At 11:00 a.m., they arrived in the town of Aripuanã (Mato Grosso), a hundred kilometers from Cacoal. They found a dozen of the farmers gathered together and nearby there was a group of men hired by the landowners to act as guards. Fr. Ezechiele and his friend spoke to the farmers, encouraging them to avoid any violence or provocation, given the danger of possible uncontrollable accidents with the armed guards.

The meeting was brief and Fr. Ezechiele was convinced that he had persuaded them to peaceful and nonviolent resolution of the tensions. As they headed out, the armed guards drove ahead of them with an off-road vehicle. After a few kilometers Fr. Ezechiele and his traveling companion found the road blocked by the guards' vehicle. They had time to guess what was about to happen and gunshots rang out. They both jumped out of the jeep but the gunmen focused their fire on Fr. Ezechiele. He shouted, "I am a priest! Men, let's talk!" There was no mercy. He was shot 75 times before he could reach the dense forest. A true execution. It was about noon on July 24, 1985. Fr. Ezechiele's companion slightly wounded by the jeep's windows, after hours of walking in the forest, found the farmers who had left the meeting place. Picked up by a truck bound for Cacoal, at one o'clock in the morning he informed Fr. Ezechiele's confreres. They immediately left to inform the police and the bishop, but the police would not agree to escort them to the site of the shooting until morning.

Fr. Ezechiele's body lay fifty meters from the jeep, riddled with bullets. No doubt they wanted to kill a priest who represented the local diocese that clearly sided with those suffering poverty and injustice, the indigent landless farmers. It is worth noting that Fr. Ezechiele always wore a

cross. It was ripped off during his execution. A larger wooden cross was erected upon the site of his death. It, too, was torn down. But, in the end, the community that now bears his name has replaced the wooden cross with one made of durable concrete.

