



Letter of the General Minister  
**fra Mauro Jöhri OFMCap**

**THIRTY-FOUR NEW BLESSEDS:  
BR. THOMAS OF OLERA, CONFESSOR BR. ANDREW OF PALAZUELO  
AND THIRTY-TWO COMPANIONS, MARTYRS**

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**Sommario**

THOMAS ACERBIS OF OLERA.....5  
ANDREW OF PALAZUELO AND THIRTY-TWO COMPANION MARTYRS, 1935-1937 .....6  
CONCLUSION.....8

**THIRTY-FOUR NEW BLESSEDS:  
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**LETTER TO ALL THE FRIARS OF THE ORDER**

Prot. N. 00700/13

*Dear Brothers,*

1. I am happy to share with you the wonderful news that very soon thirty-four new Blesseds will be added to the already extensive rolls of the Saints and Blesseds of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin.

2. Br. Thomas Acerbis of Olera (1563-1631) will be declared blessed on September 21, 2013 in Bergamo. On October 13, 2013 in Tarragona, in a celebration that will be large because of both the number of blesseds—more than four hundred—and its reach, involving more than thirty Spanish dioceses and twenty-five Orders and religious Congregations, thirty-three Capuchin friars, victims of the Spanish Civil War killed *in odium fidei* during the years 1936-1937, will also be declared blessed.

3. The beatification of Br. Thomas of Olera, four hundred years after his birth, may come as a surprise! But the way his reputation for holiness has remained constant over time kept attention on his Cause for Beatification. In the end, there was an awareness of the value and reliability of the witness to a miracle, attested to in the documentation, through the intercession of Br. Thomas at the beginning of the last century. With the recognition of this miracle—even if it be 382 years after his death—Br. Thomas is now raised to the glory of the altars, offering us the figure of an amazing and quite wonderful Capuchin brother: a simple questor and teacher of spirituality for people of humble circumstances and also for those of high rank in the society of his time. The recognition of the authenticity of the miracle was the ‘last tile’ that was lacking for the ‘mosaic’ of beatification. It is a gift to be received with gratitude and a good opportunity to learn more about our confrere.

4. The Beatification of Br. Andrew of Palazuelo and that of his thirty-two companion martyrs calls to mind the tragic and unfortunate events of the Spanish Civil War during the years 1936-1937. It is recent history, recalling the ferocity of a fratricidal hatred that, in the name of totalitarian ideology, claimed so many innocent victims and continues to cast, in our own time, a hulking and menacing shadow. How is it possible—we will continue to ask ourselves—for human beings to arrive at such brutality against their own? How is it possible that this story, hate between Christians in particular, persists down to our day?

Is it that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.” (John 15: 18, 20)?

Our brothers were killed because they were religious and represented a reality, that of the Christian faith, that some wanted to eliminate from the face of the earth. Their memory is a

reminder and encouragement to remain steadfast in a faith that calls for witness even where it is threatened and challenged. May the intercession of these our Blessed brothers sustain us as we now get to know them in greater depth.

### THOMAS ACERBIS OF OLERA

5. Of the time of his birth at the end 1563 in Olera, a small village at the mouth of the Serio river, and of his childhood, we do not know much. The child of peasants and shepherds, until age seventeen he was a peasant and shepherd himself, helping his parents in their work. Illiterate because the small village lacked schools, he wanted to become a Capuchin and was received on September 12, 1580 at the friary of Santa Croce di Cittadella in Verona, becoming a lay friar of the Province of Venice. There he sought and obtained, although a lay friar, to learn to read and write. Living in the *school* and the *choir* with great intensity, his remarkable qualities and above all his virtues came to light during the three years of formation.

6. He made his religious profession on July 5, 1584 and was charged with the delicate and essential service of questing in Verona. He carried this out until 1605 when he was transferred to Vicenza with the same assignment. There he remained until 1612 before being in Rovereto from 1613 to 1617. He was at Padua in 1618 as porter of the friary, and in 1619, a few months after his arrival at the friary of Conegliano, he was sent to be part of the new Province of North Tyrol at the request of Archduke Leopold V of Habsburg. In the same year he reached Innsbruck, where he was once again assigned to questing. At the time Austria was the 'bridgehead' for the Catholic reform and above all the 'Catholic reconquest' of the German lands.

7. Obedience and humility made him the 'questing brother' for almost fifty years; love for souls made him a 'tireless apostle' in proclaiming the Gospel. With everyone, believer or not, he spoke of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. He taught the faith to all, the little and the great. He asked everyone, the great and the humble, to commit themselves to love. A true apostle, many "were astounded, and it seemed humanly impossible that a simple lay friar should speak, as he spoke, in such an elevated way about God." His commitment was a *fire of love*. "Everywhere he spoke of the things of God with such spirit and devotion that everyone was put in awe and wonder."<sup>1</sup>

8. At the same time, he invited and urged peacemaking and forgiveness; he visited and comforted the sick; he listened to and encouraged the poor; reading consciences, he denounced evil and facilitated conversions. In order to obtain from God what he envisaged for those he met, he stayed awake at night in prayer, scourging his body, imposing fasts and austerities on himself for the salvation of others.

9. Br. Thomas was also a promoter of vocations to consecrated life. In Vicenza he sponsored the erection of the monastery of the Capuchin Poor Clares, built at Porta Nuova in 1612-13. At Rovereto he sought from the commissioners of the city a Poor Clare monastery, which was then built in 1642. There he met and guided the thirteen-year-old Bernardina Floriani, who would become the mystic Venerable Giovanna Maria della Croce.<sup>2</sup> In Tyrol he was the spiritual guide of the poor of the Inn Valley, catechist, and promoter and defender of the Tridentine decrees for a true Catholic reform. Starting in 1617 he was friend and spiritual director to the

<sup>1</sup> Ippolito Guarinoni, *Deti e fatti, profezie e segreti del frate cappuccino Tommaso da Bergamo*, Brescia 2007.

<sup>2</sup> *Vita*, eds. Cristina Andreoli, Claudio Leonardi, Diego Leoni, Centro italiano di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Spoleto, 1995.

scientist Ippolito Guarinoni of Hall<sup>3</sup>, court physician in Innsbruck. There are many letters written to the archduchesses Maria Cristina of Habsburg and Eleonora, sister of Leopold V, as there were also many personal encounters with them. Br. Thomas was spiritual guide to Leopold and to his wife Claudia de' Medici, with frequent meetings at the palace and many letters.

10. To all he taught that “high wisdom of love” that “one learns from the precious wounds of Christ,” urging them to take refuge in “happiness in suffering.” He also counseled Archbishop Paris von Lodron, prince of Salzburg and spiritual director of Emperor Ferdinand II, staying at his side during the Thirty Years’ War (1618-48). During his stay in Vienna (1620-1621), Br. Thomas favored the conversion to the Catholic faith of Eva Maria Rettinger, widow of George Fleicher, count of Lerchenberg, who then entered Nonnberg Abbey as a Benedictine nun and became abbess. Still at Vienna, in 1620, he drafted the “moral concepts against the heretics,” published posthumously in *Fire of Love*. Here the source from which his writing was drawn is revealed: “I have never read a syllable of books: but I strive to read the suffering Christ.”

11. Love for Our Lady in his writings recognizes, among other things, her Immaculate Conception and Assumption. He made pilgrimage to the Holy House of Loreto three times (1623, 1625, 1629), recalling that “arriving at the that Holy House, I seemed to be in paradise.” To his friend Ippolito Guarinoni he pointed out a location near Hall, at the Volders bridge on the Inn river, such that a church dedicated to the Immaculate Conception could be built there. In 1620 the foundations were laid and, many criticisms and difficulties having been overcome, the church was completed in 1654. It was the first church on German-speaking land dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and St. Charles Borromeo. Even today it is considered an Austrian national monument.

12. Many who were present at his death, which came on May 3, 1631, considered it a ‘death of love.’ He was buried on Sunday, May 5, in the crypt of the chapel of Our Lady in the Capuchin church in Innsbruck.

### **ANDREW OF PALAZUELO AND THIRTY-TWO COMPANION MARTYRS, 1935-1937**

13. Br. Andrew was the first of thirty-three Capuchin friars killed *in odium fidei* by the militants of the Popular Front in the bloodiest years of the Spanish Civil War in the aftermath of the failed *Alzamiento* of July 18, 1936. Along with another four hundred priests, seminarians, and men and women religious, these brothers of the Province of Spain and the Province of Catalonia will be beatified on this coming October 13 in Tarragona (Spain).

14. The long list of Capuchin martyrs that begins with Br. Andrew of Palazuelo, killed July 31, 1936, was formed by the unification of six diocesan inquiries. The list follows, arranged by the dioceses where the inquiries were made and indicating the day on which each of the martyrs was killed.

#### ***Madrid:***

Br. Andrew of Palazuelo	† 31 July 1936
Br. Fernando de Santiago	† 12 August 1936

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ippolito Guarinoni, *ibid.*

Br. José Maria de Manila	† 17 August 1936
Br. Ramiro de Sobradillo	† 27 November 1936
Br. Aurelio de Ocejo	† 17 August 1936
Br. Saturnino de Bilbao	† 26 August 1936
Br. Alejandro de Sobradillo	† 16 August 1936
Br. Gregorio de la Mata	† 27 August 1936
Br. Carlos de Alcubilla	† 15 January 1937
Br. Gabriel de Aróstegui	† 23 August 1936
Br. Primitivo de Villamizar	† 20 May 1937
Br. Norberto Cembranos de Villalquite	† 23 September 1936

***Oviedo:***

Br. Bernardo de Visantofia	† 14 August 1936
Br. Arcángel de Valdavidia	† 14 August 1936
Br. Ildefonso de Armellada	† 14 August 1936
Br. Domitilo de Ayoó	† 14 August 1936
Br. Alejo de Terradillos	† 14 August 1936
Br. Eusebio de Saludes	† 14 August 1936
Br. Eustaquio de Villalquite	† 14 August 1936

***Malaga:***

Br. Ángel de Cañete La Real	† 6 August 1936
Br. Luis de Valencina	† 3 August 1936
Br. Gil Del Puerto de Santa María	† 6 August 1936
Br. Ignacio de Galdácano	† 6 August 1936
Br. José de Chauchina	† 6 August 1936
Br. Crispín de Cuevas Alta	† 6 August 1936
Br. Pacífico de Ronda	† 7 August 1936

***Oriuhel:***

Br. Eloy de Orihuela	† 7 November 1936
Br. J. Crisóstomo de Gata de Gorgos	† 25 December 1936
Br. Honorio de Orihuela	† 2 December 1936

***Santander:***

Br. Ambrosio de Santibáñez	† 27 December 1936
Br. Miguel de Grajal	† 29/30 December 1936
Br. Diego de Guadilla	† 29/30 December 1936

15. To this list must be added the name of Br. Carmelo De Colomé (diocese of Girona, Capuchin Province of Catalonia), martyred August 25, 1936. He is listed in the diocesan inquiry of Tarragona which includes 147 martyrs led by Bishop Manuel Borrás Ferré, auxiliary bishop of Tarragona and by Br. Agapito Modesto, religious of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

16. It is impossible to give even some brief information about their lives, their activities, or about their age. But we can affirm with absolute certainty that all of them, from the oldest to the youngest, remained steadfast in the faith and faced martyrdom with patience and humility. Not resigned, but made intrepid and daring by the grace that gives the strength of martyrdom to the little ones and the simple. Reading the thousands of pages of diocesan inquiry, one finds in each witness the beauty and freshness of the faith of our brother martyrs. Likewise, one can also glimpse, even in the accounts of some of the persecutors themselves, the strength with which the martyrs faced death in the name of Christ. In contrast, a premeditated plan is evident, a plan to destroy the Church, to break down churches and murder priests, religious, or whoever was said to have been a Catholic. A plan that all of the martyrs knew to be destined to failure, in the certain knowledge that their offering would not have been made in vain and that the suffering of their present moment was not without sense, but rather something that entered into the great Mystery of the saving God.

## CONCLUSION

17. Once again our Order is experiencing a moment of grace in giving to the Church brothers who followed Christ with authenticity. They were made credible by their living and by their dying. We see how Christ has joined them to the mystery of his life and death, of service and of self-gift even to holding back nothing for oneself. We see here the words of our Seraphic Father St. Francis realized: "Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally." (*A Letter to the Entire Order*)

18. Every time and every historical moment has its difficulties and struggles. Br. Thomas of Olera lived in a complex period, full of contradictions and violent clashes, but also in a fascinating time that let shine through and shed light on the passion of man and his desire either to assert himself or to let God assert and show himself, visibly and tangibly. The Order had entrusted questing to Br. Thomas, the 'seeking' for the subsistence of the friars and the poor of the friary; grace transformed him into the sought-after advisor of nobles and servants, into the learned spiritual teacher who knew how to pronounce the word that pointed to the hidden Christ, as the true mystics and true contemplatives of the Mystery know well how to do.

19. Similarly, the friars killed in Spain in the years 1936-1937 did not do anything but accept Grace, witnessing that the History of Salvation is fulfilled even when circumstances seem less than favorable, and they were able to give an account of the vocation and the call to listen to Christ, to follow him and serve him.

20. It may be that in celebrating the new Blessed we notice a certain sense of being estranged: we hear them far away, belonging to another time, unreachable in their heroic witness. Yet, apart from any such feeling of distance, I think it important to emphasize that belonging to the same religious family permits us a healthy sense of pride. Proud to be part of this Order that was the channel by which the Spirit of the Lord has lifted up so many paths of heroic sanctity. These new Blessed have gone before us with their witness of fidelity to the Gospel even to the shedding of blood. In this way they invite us to live our Capuchin life today with renewed enthusiasm and sincerity. We are and shall be their heirs only in the measure in which we recognize that we have come from them and if, strong in this bond between generations, we reach confidently towards the future.



21. May the Virgin Mary, Mother and model of faith, intercede for us and support us in our task and service to the Church and to the world, that the spiritual desert, which seems to extend further each day, finds in us courageous farmers who know how to protect the seed for sowing when we too are asked to witness to faith in Christ.

Br. Mauro Jöhri,  
General Minister OFMCap

Rome, August 15, 2013  
Feast of the Assumption

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