

# The Social Message Of John Macias

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**J**ohn Macias was born in 1585 in Rivera del Fresno in Extremadura, and died in Lima, Peru, on September 16th 1645. He was born into that Spain of the end of the 16th century which was busy carving out for itself an immense empire beyond the seas, in a new world.

He set off for the Americas in 1610 at the age of 25, and after some years joined the Dominicans in Peru as a cooperator brother, being porter of the religious house for the rest of his life.

A simple, hidden life apparently, but in actual fact, a life lit up by a wonderful religious spirit and especially, according to all who knew him and were associated with him, a life that was shot through by an extraordinary charity to all comers, but particularly to those who were very poor.



## The social message of a life given to the poor

(1) John Macias never preached and never wrote. This humble brother who is now honoured before the whole Church would have been very surprised if he had been told that his humble life carried a message for the world, and what is more a social message.

But it is precisely this humble life which bears witness before us today and which constitutes this message. After all is not that the very role of the saints recognized by the Church? The public honour given to them makes what they were and what they did well known, makes them known to the whole world. While still remaining part of the world in which they lived and which knew them, they now become the property of the whole Christian community, and an example for every human being in search of truly human values.

John Macias was very young when he set off as an emigrant for the new world. The ships which crossed the seas in those days carried all sorts of people: soldiers on their way to conquer, led by the lure of gold or glory; missionaries going to preach the Gospel to unknown races; merchants and those seeking adventure; and also the poverty stricken hoping to find better luck over there. These latter were the only ones whom nowadays we would really call emigrants, and John Macias was one of these.

He knew what it meant to be uprooted and torn away from his natural surroundings, from everything he was used to. He knew what it is like to plunge into the unknown. He experienced the normal mixture of hopes and fears, and the difficulty of putting down roots and adapting to new ways. He was one of those millions of people who down through the ages have been shuttled from one country to another, not for the fun of it, or for adventure's sake, but because they had to.

(2) Naturally it never crossed John Macias' mind to dramatize his own case, nor did he have more than a hazy notion of the extent of the social phenomenon of which his life was an example. He simply faced up to his destiny and lived it like a saint.

Of course he could have lived a holy life of love for the poor in any place and at any time, but in actual fact he became a saint in the deprived world of displaced people, amongst the very poor. And this is how we are challenged nowadays.

Because today we have become very much aware of the problem of emigration. Today: that is to say after several centuries of slave traffic on slave ships, and of the exploitation of foreign workers in cotton fields or coal mines, and after centuries of deporting and transplanting whole populations . . . How much time and suffering have been needed to make us aware. But as our age, has become aware of the problem it would be unpardonable of us - and history would be right to judge us very severely, - not to look for human solutions which will respect the dignity of man.

In a canonization solemnly proclaimed by the Church we should not see just the recognition of the merits and holiness of a servant of God. There is also a lesson for today, a call and a warning. The fact that today in John Macias an emigrant is canonized should draw the attention of all Christians to the seriousness and urgency of this social problem, and it is here that we can properly speak of a message.

(3) John Macias became a saint because he lived in love with the poor.' It is evidently because he himself was poor, underprivileged, uprooted, that he was able to understand the poor, the underprivileged, the uprooted, and that he

could understand that what they wanted most, and what they still want most, is to be loved, to be recognised, welcomed and accepted as brothers.

The miracle accepted for his canonization (the multiplication of rice for a poor community) is very much in the same line, and we have to try and grasp this message of fraternal love and put it into practice today, not neglecting any side of the question as it appears in our times.

The world has changed enormously since the days of John Macias. Not only have historical situations evolved considerably, but thanks to a more penetrating understanding of the Gospel - and also it must be admitted under the pressure of events - the Christian people has become aware of the much wider demands of charity. It is better understood that charity cannot be reduced to individual gestures of kindness or care, or even to the heroic sacrifices made by individuals in their service of others. We have begun to see that charity must affect, must touch, must transform every sector of human life and the organisation of human society.

Fraternal charity is not an optional extra for those who have the time, the money and the disposition. Fraternal charity is not simply a well-meant aid to make up for the defects of a social order which is crushing the poor. Naturally aid like this will always be necessary, but the first demand of charity is for justice for everybody. This was the well-known remark of a lecturer during a Social Week in France: "What is charity today must become justice tomorrow". To love one's brothers is above all to want them to be admitted as full-blooded members to our world and our society, to take concrete and effective steps to see that they are recognized, welcomed and accepted in their human dignity.

True charity today demands that we work, doing all that is possible for us and fully aware of our responsibilities - which are more far reaching and serious than we usually imagine - to build a society that is more just, more human, more fraternal. But I must add that a perfectly just world, with perfect laws, and where everybody's rights are respected could still be a cold world, with no soul, no hope, since there is no love. Justice on its own can be quite inhuman, and no social law can give rise to love. Indeed a follower of the Gospel should be quite sensitive to this, Christians are called to build a just world, where love is the bond which binds together men, races and communities. This is the message of the Gospel, and it is also the message of Brother John.

But really it is much more than a message, as it is something other than a kind of last will or posthumous lesson. Rather is it the shock of a new way of looking at the world, a burst of enthusiasm, a leaven, a spring welling up to new life.

### **Lessons drawn from a canonization for the Order of Preachers today**

What is true for all Christians today is of capital importance for us his fellow Dominicans. By his canonization our brother John Macias in the company of the saints of the Order of Preachers joins Saint Rose of Lima and Saint Martin de Porres, his fellow-countrymen, and everlasting pride of Peru. How could Dominicans not feel united in a special way with the Peruvian people and with all the peoples of Latin America ? It is quite natural that it is in that continent that the Order of Preachers, which is spread throughout the whole world, has the largest number working.

If they are to be faithful to the charism handed down to them by their founder, whom the Church salutes under the name *vir apostolicus* - the apostolic man - as well as to the example of Saint John Macias, the Dominicans working in Latin America should have two major preoccupations.

( 1 ) The first is to be authentic witnesses of an authentic Gospel. By authentic Gospel I mean one which is true and complete: a Gospel which, because it affects the whole of man, you cannot preach by repeating harmless platitudes, but which you must be able to grasp and recognize in the very many demands it makes as well as in the tremendous hope it brings to all men, especially the most deprived.

By authentic witnesses I mean men who themselves first live what they preach, men who in their personal lives as in their community life are open to the dynamism of the Gospel, men who live among the poor, sharing their anguish and bringing them hope, men in a word who experience that spontaneous mercy for the poor which should touch their hearts, but who, like John Macias and Dominic, find its true depth and dimension at the foot of the Cross.

(2) Their second preoccupation, and one of our principal objectives as Dominicans, must be to plant the Church deep in the minds of the people, in the native' genius of the Latin-American people. I cannot do better than quote some of the resolutions arrived at recently in Quito during a meeting of all the Dominican provincials and vice-provincials of the continent.

(a) Dominicans who come from other countries to work at evangelization should not try to bring in their own culture, but, on the contrary, should try to adapt themselves as far as possible to the culture of the people to whom they have been sent. This means that they themselves must be carefully chosen at the beginning, that they should be prepared for their work, and that they should be willing to adapt continually during their apostolate.

(b) Latin-American religious, for their part, must learn that they too need to be more closely associated with their own

milieu if they are to preach the faith in a way that corresponds to the needs of the people.

(c) Dominicans are invited by this assembly to choose to work for the poor, and all are recommended not look with suspicion on those who want to give themselves up completely to the service of the very poor.

(d) Lastly, the programme of studies - and we know that in Saint Dominic's Order assiduous study is a major obligation - should be designed keeping in mind the specific needs of the continent. To mention just one example, it is recommended that we examine, try to understand and interpret "popular devotion" which is an important element of Latin-American culture. This has elements of authentic faith, which needs to be purified and matured, made more committed and less external.' It is an important starting point for a fresh effort of evangelisation.

These are some of the ideas suggested to me by this canonization. The honour paid to one of our brothers from Peru fills us with joy, and with gratitude for the past, while it inspires us with new enthusiasm, and hope for the future. But though I have mentioned the sociological reasons which explain a canonization like this and make it particularly relevant today I have not touched on the fundamental motive for this honour, which must be x theological one. For a Christian, the ultimate aims of justice and charity go beyond the borders of this world. God is the Alpha and the Omega of the whole work of creation and salvation. John Macias' message is not just a social one, it is above all a theological one. In presenting to us the "opera bona" performed by the saints, the Church is bringing into sharp focus one aspect of the name and the face of God; she invites the Christian world to: "give the praise to our Father in heaven". (Matt 5: 16).