

Torture in his history taints Spanish martyr's beatification

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 12, 2007 All Things Catholic

Declaring someone a saint, in Catholic theology, has never meant that he or she lived a perfect life, a point that applies with special force to martyrs. Even great sinners, the church believes, are redeemed by shedding their blood for the faith.

In principle, therefore, the discovery that a martyr has skeletons in the closet does nothing to weaken the value of his or her sacrifice. Yet in practice it can raise hard questions -- if not about the sanctity of their death, then the wisdom of publicly applauding their lives. Such may be the case with one of the 498 martyrs of the Spanish Civil War set for beatification in Rome on Oct. 28: Augustinian Fr. Gabino Olaso Zabala, who was among 98 Augustinian priests and seminarians executed by Republican forces from 1936 to 1939.

In a nutshell, the charge is that during a much earlier period in his life, when he was a young missionary in the Philippines, Olaso was guilty of torture.

According to written testimony from the victim, Olaso participated in the 1896 torture of a Filipino priest named Fr. Mariano Dacanay, who was suspected of sympathy for anti-Spanish revolutionaries. Dacanay's own account asserts that Olaso and a handful of other Augustinians encouraged guards who were administering the torture, and that at one point Olaso himself kicked Dacanay in the head, hard enough to leave the suffering priest semi-conscious.

Historians generally regard Dacanay's testimony as credible. Augustinian Fr. Fernando Rojo, the Rome-based postulator for the cause of Olaso and the other Augustinian martyrs, told *NCR* Oct. 10 that he does not see "any reason to doubt the basic historical accuracy of the facts" contained in Dacanay's account.

To be sure, Olaso's conduct must be understood in the context of his times, since the late 1890s were a violent era in the Philippines. Two years later, Olaso and other missionaries were themselves imprisoned by nationalist rebels and severely beaten, not in retribution for the torture of Dacanay, but simply because that's what the revolutionaries often did with Spanish priests. Rojo says the Filipinos evidently did not consider Olaso a prime villain, since they freed him after 18 months.

Moreover, whatever conclusion one reaches about Olaso, it has no bearing on the witness of the other 497 Spanish martyrs who will be beatified later this month, killed for refusing to renounce the faith four decades later and half a world away.

Nonetheless, the revelation that someone set for beatification by Pope Benedict XVI was a willing participant in torture may be disconcerting - in the first place for Filipinos, who see the 1896 rebellion as a key moment in the birth of their nation; and more broadly for those concerned with contemporary moral and legal debates over torture, especially in the context of the "war on terrorism." Despite clear official Catholic teaching against torture, some may wonder if the church is sending a mixed message by beatifying someone who apparently administered torture himself.

If nothing else, Olaso's story may serve as a sobering reminder that, under the right circumstances, even people of deep faith and personal courage are nevertheless capable of almost anything.

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In the 19th century Philippines, protest against Spanish rule often had an anti-clerical edge, since many missionaries worked hand-in-glove with the colonial forces. Contemporary critics coined the term "friarocracy" to describe a system in which Augustinian, Franciscan and Dominican missionaries were responsible for education and health measures, keeping census and tax records, supervising the selection of local police and town officers, maintaining public morals, and reporting alleged acts of sedition to the regional authorities.

When revolutionary energies began to stir, according to Jesuit historian Fr. John Schumacher in his 1981 book *Revolutionary Clergy*, the reaction among the Spanish, including the missionaries, was one "of fury and hysteria, venting its rage on any prominent Filipino elements considered less than friendly, and ready to believe the most extravagant charges."

In this context, a number of Filipino priests regarded as potentially disloyal were arrested in late August 1896 and accused of being Masons, as well as being part of a conspiracy to massacre Spaniards. Nine of these priests, including Dacanay, were incarcerated at a seminary in Vigan, one of the oldest Spanish settlements in the Philippines. At the time, the seminary was run by the Augustinians.

Dacanay, who was released a year later, wrote a first-hand account of what happened to him while under arrest. Portions of it were published in the 1982 book *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain*, by an Episcopal missionary in the Philippines named William Henry Scott.

Dacanay wrote that on Oct. 29, 1896, he was visited by the Augustinian superior of the seminary, who urged him to confess his crimes. When he protested his innocence, civil guards were summoned who placed him into a posture called the "bamboo foot," which Dacanay described as "a barbarous punishment, not fit even for animals":

The victim is made to squat down on his haunches. A thick bamboo is passed beneath both knees, and then his two wrists are tied together in front with a rope, with his arms under the bamboo on each side. In this position, the victim is nothing but a ball, for if he attempts to move, he is sure to roll over on the ground. ? In this contorted and painful position, [the guards] struck me many blows on the shoulders with a thick bamboo they call 'brute' every time I answered in the negative, leaving me horribly swollen and bruised.

Dacanay then described the role of the Augustinians during this torture, including Olaso.

Present during this heartrending and horrendous spectacle were the Provisor and seven superiors of the seminary, who, instead of sympathizing with my sufferings and cruel torture, much to the contrary watched my martyrdom with visible signs of pleasure. They even went to the extent of encouraging the guards to treat me more cruelly - Father Gabino Olaso, for one. ? And when I fell over due to the blows and the fatigue, rolling over on the floor, they added to my sufferings by kicking me roughly as if I were a football. When I fell, I struck my head against a post, causing a wound. Another time I rolled over near Father Gabino, who was pacing quietly around the room, and he gave me another tremendous kick in the head which completely stunned me."

Dacanay said that the torture was repeated on Nov. 2 and 4, again in the presence of the Augustinians, and that all told he received some 300 blows while in the "bamboo" posture. He also reported that the Augustinians, including Olaso, repeatedly entered the cells of detained priests to demand that they confess to various crimes, even inspecting their bodies for scars from "blood oaths" administered in secret rituals by Filipino rebels.

Following his release, Dacanay's account was reported in the Filipino press. Shortly afterwards he was returned to priestly ministry by Archbishop Bernardino Nozaleda y Villa of Manila, a Spanish Dominican and later the archbishop of Valencia - an improbable step, according to Schumacher, had there been any doubt about the truth of Dacanay's report, or any credible evidence that he was actually a Mason or a member of any armed group.

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Two years later, as the Filipinos were sweeping to victory, most of the remaining Spaniards in the country, including many missionaries, were arrested. In 1898, Olaso and a number of other Augustinians were taken prisoner by a rebel commander named Simeon Villa.

Olaso and the other missionaries were placed in the basement of a convent, where they were told that they would be killed if they did not give Villa money. When the priests said they had already turned over whatever they had, their arms were tied behind their backs. The rebels then kicked the priests and whipped them with rattan rods, according to an account later compiled by Spanish Dominican Fr. Julian Malumbres.

Olaso spent the next year and a half imprisoned by the rebels, subject to various forms of mistreatment, until he was eventually released and allowed to return to Manila. By that stage, the United States had defeated Spain in the Spanish-American War and, as part of the peace settlement, now regarded the Philippines as part of its own

territory, initiating another round of revolutionary violence. The country would not achieve full independence until 1946.

From Manila, Olaso found his way back to Spain, where he continued teaching and held various leadership positions within the Augustinians until his martyrdom in 1936.

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Olaso, to be sure, is hardly the first martyr with a checkered past. To take one recent case, St. Mark Ji Tianxiang of China, killed during the Boxer Rebellion, was canonized in 2000 despite the fact that he was an opium addict barred by his parish priest from the sacraments for almost 30 years. Likewise, Fr. Jean-Marie Gallot was executed during the French Revolution and beatified in 1955 by Pope Pius XII. In the early 1980s, the French press unearthed documents apparently showing that Gallot had belonged to a Masonic lodge in Laval, France, in defiance of church discipline forbidding Catholics from being Masons.

At the time, the Vatican issued a statement asserting that whatever Gallot may have done during his life, his death as a martyr rendered it moot.

"Even if the Laval lodge had been Masonic in the sense condemned by the church," the statement read, "and even if Gallot had given his allegiance to it (in any case, a thing that remains to be proven), with his martyrdom, he would have washed this away, as with other possible faults - even, hypothetically, serious ones of his past - by becoming a hero of the faith, professed even to the shedding of his blood."

Given this theology, Olaso's halo is not in doubt. Whatever his sins, they would have been wiped out on the basis of his martyr's death. That principle, however, doesn't resolve prudential doubts about the wisdom of singling him out for formal beatification.

Rojo, the postulator for the cause, said that the events of 1896 were not considered as part of the canonical investigation of Olaso's case, which was closed at the diocesan level in 1963 (well ahead of the 1982 publication of Scott's book), and which concerned only the final 35 years of his life. Officially, therefore, church authorities reached no judgment about Olaso's role in the Philippines.

Nonetheless, Rojo insisted upon two bits of context for evaluating what happened in 1896: first, that of "an authentic civil war," in which missionaries such as Olaso genuinely feared for their lives; and second, that of a young 26-year-old Basque priest "who had just arrived in the islands, and who could have understood the situation only from the point of view of his fellow foreigners."

Rojo concedes that none of that can justify "acts of abuse and violence, in this case inside a seminary," and he told *NCR* that what Olaso apparently did to Dacanay is clearly "to his discredit." Rojo said that Olaso's time in the Philippines represents "the darkest period of his life."

Yet, Rojo argued, whatever "debt of human justice" Olaso owed was paid in full, first of all by his grueling 18 months in prison, and then by the "holocaust of his life" in Spain four decades later.

Xaverian Bro. Reginald Cruz, a church historian and lecturer at the Maryhill School of Theology in the Philippines, said he has "no doubt" that Olaso is a legitimate martyr. Nonetheless, Cruz said, the Oct. 28 beatification may generate controversy.

"The 1896 revolution is generally viewed as the pivotal moment in Philippine nation-building," Cruz said. "From a symbolic point of view, Filipinos emotionally relate to the event as Italians and Mexicans do to the *Risorgimento* and *Cinco de Mayo*."

In that context, Cruz said, even though the nine priests imprisoned in the Viga seminary are not well known, the beatification "has the potential of becoming a cause célèbre, especially since Olaso would be awarded a halo by the church in spite of what he did to the Filipino clerics."

More generally, Cruz argued, "it's hard to reconcile" the church's teaching against torture "with the act of beatifying someone who committed the very act the church condemns."

"The Church needs to be very careful about the models of faith it is proposing for the faithful," Cruz said. "We need to tell the whole story of our martyrs and not make it look like we're glossing over the extremely embarrassing parts. Otherwise, we lose our credibility."

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Whatever one makes of Olaso, his story inevitably invites reflection on contemporary controversies over torture, especially with regard to the U.S.-led war on terrorism.

The official Catholic judgment is clearly negative. The Catechism of the Catholic Church declares that "torture, which uses physical or moral violence to extract confessions, punish the guilty, frighten opponents, or satisfy hatred, is contrary to respect for the person and for human dignity."

In his 2006 message for the World Day of Peace, Benedict XVI appeared to indirectly apply this teaching to the war on terror when he wrote, "Not everything automatically becomes permissible between hostile parties once war has regrettably commenced."

Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, was asked by reporters at the time if the pope was referring to accusations that the United States tortures terror suspects, or hands them over to other nations for torture.

While stressing that Benedict "was not condemning anyone," Martino said the pope was "inviting" all countries that have signed the Geneva Conventions governing the conduct of war to respect them. He also said the Vatican abhorred torture for whatever reason.

"Torture is a humiliation of the human person, whoever it is," Martino said. "The church does not allow these means to extract the truth."

In light of the apparent tension between Olaso's Oct. 28 beatification and this teaching, it's possible that church officials will face pressure to clarify that the beatification should not be read as an endorsement of Olaso's earlier conduct.

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A final note about the church and torture.

Realists sometimes argue that in dire circumstances, especially when "the clock is ticking" on an alleged plot, torture may be the only way to compel terrorists to reveal their plans. Critics usually retort that torture doesn't work, since subjects will often confess to anything to make it stop. While it's a poor means of getting at the truth, these critics say, it is an excellent way of turning borderline radicals into convinced militants, burning with the desire for revenge.

Ironically, one of the most-discussed case studies regarding the use of torture involves the late Pope John Paul II, and once again the setting is the Philippines.

In January 1995, firefighters in Manila arrived at a downtown apartment where a chemical fire was burning. Police were called to the scene when sulfuric and nitric acids were discovered, along with beakers, funnels, and most ominously, fuses. Though the apartment was deserted when they arrived, police later arrested a Pakistani militant named Abdul Hakum Murad when he came back attempting to retrieve a laptop computer.

This was five days before John Paul II was due to arrive in the Philippines for World Youth Day, so the police suspected a plot against the pope. Murad refused to cooperate, and, according to news reports, was subjected to various forms of torture: most of his ribs were broken, cigarettes were extinguished on his genitals, he was forced to sit naked on ice cubes, and water was forced down his throat to simulate drowning. Eventually, Murad revealed details of plans to kill John Paul drawn up by Ramzi Yousef, a Kuwaiti terrorist linked to Al-Qaeda who was among the architects of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Murad also provided information about a scheme to blow up 11 commercial airliners, and to fly another plane into the headquarters of the CIA.

Murad is currently serving a life sentence at a federal "supermax" prison in Florence, Colorado.

Some experts say the case illustrates that torture is occasionally necessary; others argue that virtually all of the useful information surrendered by Murad was on his laptop, or strewn among other evidence collected from the scene. Without such corroboration, they argue, it would have been difficult to know whether to take his confession seriously. Further, they note, Murad broke down only after interrogators posing as Mossad agents threatened to take him to Israel, suggesting it was psychological trickery rather than brute force that made the difference.

In any event, the story raises harrowing questions that can seem like something ripped from a spy novel, but which could realistically face future popes: If authorities think they're on to another plot to kill the pope somewhere down the line, would the pope want them to use torture to try to get the truth? To put that question differently, would a pope feel obliged to try to persuade them *not* to use torture, given Catholic teaching on the subject? Would the pope even have the right to express such a position - especially if, as in the Murad case, he was not the only intended victim?

These are hardly questions any pope would be eager to ponder, but they do unfortunately reflect the temper of the times.

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