Commemorating the 426th Anniversary

of the Five Franciscan Martyrs of La Florida

September 13-18, 1597

*by Rev. Thomas K. Murphy, OFM 1*

**T**he story of the Five Franciscan Martyrs of Spanish Florida was well told in many writings by Fr. Alexander Wyse, OFM, Vice Postulator for the Cause of these martyrs, until his death in February, 1998. Sections of this account are adapted from a pamphlet he wrote in 1988 to promote the cause of the martyrs. Some updates to his writings were made with his permission. In addition, archaeologist John E. Worth, Ph.D., made available in 2004 his latest determinations of the most likely geographical locations for the Guale missions that existed in 1597 (Worth, 2004). With his permission, this information has been incorporated into this revised account of the Five Franciscan Martyrs of *La Florida*, who gave their lives in testimony to the sanctity of Christian married life in 1597, witnessing to the Church’s teachings on matrimony in behalf of the Guale Indians who had embraced the Catholic Faith.

The Guale Indians were a confederation of *Muskogean*-speaking Indians located in coastal Georgia. The Spanish referred to this area as *Guale* because of the chiefdom of that name in the principal town on St. Catherines Island (*cf.* Thomas 1988, 12). The head chief of this people, called the *mico*,

. . . was an overlord who not only enjoyed prestige and external signs of respect, but also received periodic tribute — in the form of pearls and ornamental shells — from the subject villages. In this little world, he clearly was a personage of importance, whose favor would be vital to the spread of the Gospel, just as his example was a telling factor in setting the tone of the society over which he presided. The office of mico was transmitted by heredity — not pure primogeniture, but a relationship of blood. Brothers or nephews or cousins might receive the title as readily as the sons of the deceased mico.

One of the surprising features of Guale society was that it was basically matrilineal — their kinship, their blood ties, were traced from a common ancestress through the female line. Women could, and sometimes did, occupy even the office of mico. Yet, despite that strong feminist tradition, generally women were held in low esteem. Nothing more clearly demonstrated this cultural disparity than did the institution of polygamy . . . (Wyse 1982, 79).

It had been the custom, especially among the chiefs, to take second or third wives in order to demonstrate superiority, to satisfy sexual needs, to assure themselves of numerous progeny, and to cement various political alliances. The subtle effects of this practice on the female population — a diminishment of their equal human dignity and an impairment of their full human development — were probably little noticed or expressed in the Guale culture.

The friars were tireless in their efforts to teach the Indians the inherent beauty and goodness of Christian marriage, marriage which by its nature must be monogamous and indissoluble. Just as the Christian pledges his or her complete fidelity to Christ, his Church, and its teachings at Baptism and the other Sacraments of Initiation, so the Catholic Christian Sacrament of Matrimony requires the pledge of life-long fidelity between a man and a woman. This kind of pledge is a severe challenge to any human being. Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus preferred the more accommodating approach of Moses. The Apostles at first could not understand how this teaching of the Master could be kept. Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus insists that in the divine plan husband and wife *are no longer two but one flesh*. *Therefore, let no man separate what God has joined* (*cf.* Gn 2:24 and Mt 19:3-10). In the Guale villages that were disposed to embrace Christianity, every provision was made for the gradual strengthening of the Indians in their Christian profession, not least in the practice of the virtues of Christian family life. The friars presumed that these Indians would grow in an understanding of the sacred union that would be theirs with Jesus through receiving the sacrament of Baptism — a union leading to eternal life. The friars also presumed that in time the grace of God would provide the Indians holy and enduring bonds with their chosen spouse — just as the grace of God had done for their own Christian parents in Spain and indeed for so many Christian parents throughout the world who treasured their faith in Jesus.

When Governor Gonzalo Méndez de Canzo (1597-1603) arrived at St. Augustine in June, 1597 there were six friars laboring among the Guale Indians. Three of them had been in Guale from perhaps as early as 1587. Fr. Blas Rodríguez was born in Cuacos, Spain and came to Florida in 1590 as a newly ordained priest from the province of *San Gabriel*. By reason of his fatherly bearing he was held in high esteem among the Indians as well as among the friars. He was in charge of Mission *Santa Clara de Tupiqui* (at the present-day town of Pine Harbor on the Sapelo River, a short distance east of Eulonia, Georgia). This peaceful spot offered a wide view over the vast salt marshes all the way to distant St. Catherines and Sapelo Islands. Fr. Blas held the office of Franciscan Superior of the Guale missions. During his years among the Indians he had become familiar with their language, customs, and mentality.

Also on the mainland about eight miles northeast of Tupiqui was Fr. Pedro de Corpa, a native of the small town of Corpa near Villabilla in Castille. He was the resident friar at Mission *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* in the Guale village of Tolomato (located in the present-day Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge on the south bank of the South Newport River, beside the salt marsh channels west of St. Catherines Island). It was later said of Fr. Pedro that he “knew the language well. He experienced much toil with the Indians because the time had not yet come for them to esteem the honor of being Christians; nevertheless by his good example and perseverance he converted them” (Oré 1936, 71; Fr. Luis Gerónimo Oré, OFM was appointed in 1616 to make the first official Visitation of the *La Florida* missions and provided the first written account of what transpired there). Tolomato, an important Indian governmental center, was considered a model community. There the Indians were instructed in the new faith and also in such arts and skills as promoted their general well-being and culture.

The third friar who was well-experienced with the Guale Indians was Brother Antonio de Badajoz, also of the province of *San Gabriel*. He was already advanced in years when he came to Florida in 1587 from a remote part of western Spain. He was endowed with a shining candor and simplicity of soul and was gifted with a facility in the Guale language. Both Fr. Pedro de Corpa and Bro. Antonio de Badajoz are mentioned in a Spanish poem called *La Florida*, the first poem written on American soil. Its author was Fr. Alonso Escobedo, OFM, among the first large group (twelve) of Franciscan friars who ventured into the *La Florida* mission territory in 1587.

The other three friars in Guale came to St. Augustine in the first group that was requested by Governor Domingo Martínez de Avendaño (1594-1595), a predecessor of Governor Méndez de Canzo. They arrived in St. Augustine in late September, 1595. There, on October 4, the feast of St. Francis, the newly arrived friars prayed to the Lord “to give each one that destiny which He deemed most fitting for the conversion of these souls which they came from Spain to seek” (Geiger 1937, 64).

Fr. Miguel de Auñón is described as “preacher of the province of Castille, a native of the city of Zaragossa, of a well-known family, and of noble blood, a man of great spirit, grace and voice, [who] was loved and cherished by all with whom he dealt. He was much loved by the Indians . . . ” (Oré 1936, 68). Fr. Miguel had an unusual experience during his brief stay in St. Augustine. When his band of friars had been passing through Cuba on their way to Florida, someone had noted this engaging young friar-missionary and arranged to have Fr. Miguel reassigned to minister to the Spanish community in Havana rather than to the aboriginals of Florida. Fr. Oré later wrote this brief account of Fr. Miguel’s subsequent abortive voyage back to Havana:

. . . he embarked for that city, but was unable to reach it in over 40 days, although it is a short journey of six or seven days. I, myself, have made the journey twice. They were unable to round Cape Cañaveral, a trip of two or three days. Seeing their inability to make headway they returned [to St. Augustine]. The reverend preacher said: “God did not send me to the city of Havana, but to this land to instruct the Indians; here I intend to remain till death, because I have to receive therein some great favor from God; thus I believe that my inability to proceed farther with the journey has not been in vain.” With this he soon prepared himself to go among the Indians (Oré 1936, 68).

Fr. Miguel was assigned as pastor of the important mission *Santa Catalina de Guale* (on St. Catherines Island), where the experienced Bro. Antonio would assist him in learning the Guale dialect and in carrying out his many new duties at this prominent Indian governmental center.

The other two newly arrived friars assigned to Guale, Fr. Francisco de Beráscola (also spelled Veráscola) and Fr. Francisco de Ávila, were accompanied to their missions by Governor Martínez de Avendaño. Fr. Francisco de Beráscola was another fascinating friar. His father was an affluent official of his native Basque town of Gordejuela in northern Spain. In his native province of Cantabria he volunteered for the Florida missions in the full vigor of his 30th year. His towering stature and physical strength earned for him among the friars the playful nickname *Cantabrian giant* and caused admiration among the Guale Indians. He was especially close to the young braves whom he delighted by joining in their native sport, a rough and strenuous game like football. Fr. Francisco was sent to establish an Indian mission on the Darien River (at the present-day Fort King George Historical Site just east of Darien, Georgia). This mission was called *Santo Domingo de Asao* and at the time was the southernmost mission among the Guales. Fr. Francisco’s imposing presence and easy camaraderie won him a ready acceptance as the spiritual guide of the village. Fr. Francisco de Ávila was assigned to the mission at Tulafina, the northernmost Guale mission, several miles up the Medway River. Fr. Oré reports that he was “a young priest of the province of Castille, and a native of the city of Toledo . . . a man of great spirit . . . ” (Oré 1936, 70).

The tranquility of the Guale missions was disturbed when Juanillo, a grown nephew and heir of the chief and a baptized member of Mission *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* in Tolomato, reneged on his baptismal promises and took a second woman into his household. The bad example of Juanillo seemed like a threatening conflagration that could destroy the fledgling community of believers being weaned away from polygamy.

Privately Fr. Pedro reminded Juanillo that as a baptized Christian he had to remain faithful to his lawful wife. The priest’s exhortation had no positive result; Juanillo continued to flout the law of Christian marriage. Fr. Pedro then referred the matter to the regional superior of the Guale missions, Fr. Blas Rodríguez at Mission *Santa Clara de Tupiqui*. From Fr. Blas, Juanillo received the same admonition to break off his relationship with the second woman and remain faithful to his wife. Neither warning had any effect on Juanillo. So, the two missionaries publicly denounced Juanillo’s scandalous conduct and declared him deprived of all rights to leadership of this Christian community.

Juanillo thereupon openly apostatized from the faith. Abandoning the mission village, he rejoined the pagan Indians living in the surrounding woods, and with their backing he organized a revolt. Some dissatisfied Christians, including a few chiefs, joined them. Some time later, on the night of September 12, Juanillo returned to Tolomato with a band of warriors, whose war-feathers and red-smeared bodies indicated their intent to kill. On the morning of September 13, the day before the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, they broke into the missionary’s house, where they found Fr. Pedro at prayer. Without a word, one of the rebels clubbed the priest on the head with a *macâna* (a wooden club about 2½ feet long with one blunt end, usually carved, the other end narrowed into a handle). A final brief prayer came to the lips of the horribly wounded missionary, and without the least sign of resistance, Fr. Pedro de Corpa gave up his life. Then, as if to demonstrate the spirit which moved their revolt, in the presence of the dead friar, the insurgents forced the women of the village to engage in an immoral orgy. The mutilated head of the slain missionary was set up on a pole at the town landing on the sound, and the body secretly buried in the woods so that the Christian Indians would not be able to find it. The mob completed its sacrilege by burning the church and destroying the sacred images.

Clearly intent on taking revenge on Fr. Blas Rodríguez for his firm stand in the case of Juanillo’s bigamous conduct, Juanillo next led his bloodthirsty band to Mission *Santa Clara de Tupiqui* eight miles southwest of Tolomato. When Juanillo and his followers appeared at the Tupiqui mission, Fr. Blas asked to be allowed to celebrate Mass, after which, he promised, he would not impede them from carrying out what they intended. Some of the Christians of the mission came to assist at the last Mass of the kindly friar, weeping as they contemplated the horrible fate that was before him. The Mass ended, the priest consoled his faithful children and then spoke to the rebels:

“My children, for me it is not a difficult thing to die, for death of the body will come although you be not the instrument of my death. Every hour we must expect it; at the end we shall have to die. What hurts me is your loss, and that the devil has been able to make you commit so great an offense against your God and Creator; it hurts me, likewise, that you are so ungrateful for the work which I and the other fathers have undertaken for you in order to teach you the way to heaven.” Then he said to them, weeping: “Look, children, now you have time, if you wish to depart from your evil intention; God our Master is merciful and He will forgive you.” But that sacrilegious people paid no attention to his counsel and tears, but rather they despoiled the relics and vestments of the church and everything the father had in his cell. Owing to his requests and petitions, they held him for two days without killing him. During this time he prepared for death with the best disposition and care he could, like a good religious and Christian (Oré 1936, 75-76).

On September 16 they killed him by bashing in his head with a *macâna*. His body was left exposed, to be devoured by the vultures and the beasts of the forest. When after several days no bird of prey or animal had touched it, a faithful Christian Indian took it and buried it in the woods.

Juanillo and his associates, after slaughtering Fr. Pedro on the 13th, had sent word to the *cacique* of the Indians on St. Catherines Island to kill the two friars residing there. This the chief refused to do, instead informing Bro. Antonio of the rebels’ demand and offering a canoe with Indian rowers to take him and the priest to San Pedro Island (present-day Cumberland Island, southernmost of the barrier islands of coastal Georgia), where the Indians were all faithful Christians. Not giving credence to the threats, Bro. Antonio chose not to communicate the message to his companion on either of the two occasions when the local chief told him what was afoot.

On September 17, the horde of rampaging rebels appeared on the island, demanding that the two missionaries be put to death immediately. Staunchly refusing, the *cacique* boldly told them he would do no harm to the friars, even offering to the rebels everything he owned if they would allow the missionaries to go free. When that offer was rejected, he went to Fr. Miguel, reported the whole story to him, and with tears explained that now he was powerless to save the two benefactors of his people from the fury of the mob. The day was that on which Franciscans recall the imprinting of the wounds of Christ on the body of their founder, St. Francis of Assisi. Fr. Miguel offered the Mass of the feast, with Bro. Antonio assisting him.

Poignant were the words he read: *May I never boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ! Through it the world has been crucified to me and I to the world* [Gal 6:14]. Strength for their coming torture, and consolation, they found in the words of the Gospel: *Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps. Whoever would save his life will lose it, whoever loses his life for my sake will save it* [Lk 9:23-24]. Mass over, the two friars spent four hours in devout recollection and preparation for death. Renewing their Franciscan vows, they voluntarily accepted their impending sacrifice, offering their lives for the conversion of the people they had come to serve and save (Wyse 1982, 85).

The rebels then fell upon and killed old Bro. Antonio. At first they hesitated to approach Fr. Miguel because of their great respect for him. When a pagan Indian suddenly stunned him with a *macâna*, all the Christian Indians tried to rescue him. In the confusion, another pagan Indian came from behind him with a *macâna* and crushed his head. The chapel, the house, and the mission compound were ransacked for anything of worth or of curiosity to the blood-crazed group. Desecrated and profaned, the bodies were left exposed on the sandy soil. When the sacrilegious crowd finally left the island, some faithful Christians buried the bodies of the friars at the base of the large cross which Fr. Miguel had recently erected as a sign of mercy and salvation for all.

Considerably to the south of St. Catherines, on the mainland near the mouth of the Altamaha River, was Mission *Santo Domingo de Asao*, shepherded by Fr. Francisco de Beráscola, the “Cantabrian giant.” Fr. Francisco was not at his mission when the murders were taking place at the three stations north of Asao. He had gone to St. Augustine — the capital city of the whole Spanish enterprise in Florida — to get some supplies for the mission he had begun to build. During his absence, with rumors of the terrible doings of the last several days, the Indians of Mission *Santo Domingo* began to grow restive. Not having yet learned the meaning of Christian fortitude and sacrifice, these new Christians were intimidated by their own *cacique* into joining the revolt. They resolved to add their priest, Fr. Francisco, to the list of the slain. When he returned from St. Augustine, he was met at the waterside by a group of young Indians, formerly his friends. Feigning a welcome, they embraced him — but then turned on him with a sudden vicious fury. Lashing him to a tree, they beat him to death with an ax, hacking his young body, so strong and muscular, to pieces. In all probability the date was the 18th of that fateful September of 1597. Fr. Francisco de Beráscola was thus the fifth friar in *La Florida* to give up his life during that six-day period which included the feasts of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and the Stigmata of St. Francis.

Dying in obscure Indian villages on the Georgia coast, in the last years of the sixteenth century, these men are not persons whose story is widely known [see endnote]. In that sense they perhaps typify the thousands of no-longer remembered missionaries who came to the New World from France, Portugal, Spain — from Spain especially — to spend themselves in bringing Christ’s teachings to the nations of this hemisphere. What does distinguish them, however, from the rest of that army of anonymous apostles is that it was their lot, by their death, to bear heroic witness to the doctrine they had preached in life. In this sense they stand out, and their courage deserves to be recognized and their names to be honored.

They stand out also by reason of the motive [of those who] brought about their deaths. They were slain out of a hatred for and violent rejection of Christ’s teaching on the sacredness of marriage. Their death was therefore patently a profession, in the fullest possible measure, of the law proclaimed by the Master for His followers. They had come to teach it in His name, and their teaching they sealed with their blood.

The five martyrs of *La Florida* are glorious witnesses to this Christian teaching on marriage. In our own day, in our tortured society, when — to our woe — marriage, even Christian marriage, is so roundly attacked and its sanctity flouted, their example is a timely lesson and a blessed boon. They died for the truth that Christian marriage, the sign of Christ’s own unbreakable union with humanity, and the symbol of His love for His Church, is sacred and is beautiful by reason of the lifelong fidelity, love, and unity which must distinguish it (Wyse 1982, 87).

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**Endnote:**  Other factors about their obscurity is the fact that the Guale province was ultimately overrun by English-sponsored slave-raiding and piracy, and was finally abandoned by the Guale and the Spanish alike by the end of 1684; moreover, the Christian descendants of the Guale relocated to Cuba in 1763 with the Spanish, and blended into the population, losing their identity as Guale very quickly; if the Spanish Catholic presence had remained on the Georgia coast, no doubt the Guale martyrs would have been canonized long before now (John Worth, personal communication).

***References:***

1 Adapted from: *The Cradle of the Catholic Church and the Franciscan Order in the U.S.A.* Rev. Thomas K. Murphy, OFM © 1998. Reprinted with permission. Secular Franciscan Order, Five Franciscan Martyrs Region, September, 2023.

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Visit **www.diosav.org** for updates on the Cause of the Martyrs from the Catholic Diocese of Savannah.

Visit **www.ffmr-ofs.org** for information on the Secular Franciscan Order, Five Franciscan Martyrs Region, Florida, South Georgia, and Lower Alabama.

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**Prayer for Beatification**

The following short prayer is recommended for invoking the intercession of the Five Franciscan Martyrs of *La Florida*, Servants of God whose blood bore witness to the sanctity of Christian marriage, for the Guale Nation of coastal Georgia and for the whole world, in September 1597:

*O Lord Jesus Christ,*

*reward the apostolic zeal*

*of Fray Pedro de Corpa*

*and his four Companion friars,*

*Blas, Miguel, Antonio, and Francisco,*

*who labored for the spiritual well-being*

*of the Natives of Georgia*

*and gave their lives in witness*

*to the Christian faith.*

*Through their merits and intercession*

*graciously grant the favor I humbly ask of You,*

*so that, for the glory of Your Name,*

*their heroic sacrifice*

*may be officially recognized by the Church.*

*Amen.*

(Permissu Ordinarii Dioec. Savannensis)

Below is the most accurate depiction of the Five Franciscan Martyrs of La Florida based on historical evidence, written descriptions, and literature written at the time of their martydom. The depictions of the Guale Native Americans has been altered to reflect their known appearance at that time.

