

Reflection on Fr. Robert Hopwood, C.Ss.R.
by Fr. Humberto Villalba, C.Ss.R.

The big puzzle of human condition reaches his apex in the presence of death. We worry about the pain and progressive dissolution of the body. Guided by an instinct of our faith, we push back the possibility of an entire ruin and of a definitive disappearance. And the fact is that the seed of eternity that God implanted in our structure, when faced with the unyielding being to the matter, subsets sail against death.

While any imagination and speculations crumble against the reality of death, the Church, our Mother and Teacher founded in God's Word, assures us that man has been created by God to exceed the border of the faience of the tomb. When Martha of Bethany complained to Jesus, adducing that if he had been present, his friend Lazarus would not have died, the Lord consoled her, assuring her that her brother would rise again.

Martha was not consoled by the response and reminded the Teacher that she was not ready to wait for the resurrection of the last day. Jesus decided to break any barrier of doubts and said to her “Martha, I am the resurrection and the life whoever believes in me will not die forever.”

We are saddened, as Lazarus’s sister was, for the death of Fr. Roberto Hopwood, but we do not have a single question to ask the Lord. Those who have lived with him, those who have met him, know, without a doubt, that “Robertito” (little Robert) believed that Jesus is “the resurrection and the life.”

Fr. Robertito, the affectionate title the people nicknamed him, lived 54 years in Paraguay. At the age of 27, he embarked on the “big adventure.” His first appointment was in the hot northern part of Paraguay: the north without any drinking water or electricity; the north without streets; the north where life had no due dates, Bella Vista. The horse was the only channel of mobility.

Robertito was known throughout the whole region.

He traveled through all the little towns — not more than 20 houses in each one. He visited the villages of slave traders where the farmhands were treated as slaves. Robertito would come back to the community, after 30 or 40 days, only to bathe, wash his clothes, and again return to the field. When he was not in the field he would feel nostalgic for the field.

And in the field one does not speak Spanish. How did Robertito get them to understand Guarani mixed with Portuguese? Love has no language. Robertito lived through his priesthood completely dedicated to the people; to the poor who had nothing to eat. That is why he founded the Society of Saint Vincent for the poor people of a village that was dying because it did not have the means to care for their health. That is why he built a completely free Medical Clinic. He was totally dedicated to a naked village for which he gathered secondhand clothes from friends in the United States and distributed them among the poorest.

If we ever wanted incursion into the intimate life of the Redemptorist Missionary, Robert William Hopwood, affectionately nicknamed by the Paraguayan people Father Robertito, all we have to do is open Chapter 25:34 of Matthew:

“Then the King will say to those in on his right: Come blessed or my Father! Take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world. For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me into your house. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to see me.”

Robertito, with his usual restlessness, will probably rise and ask himself: “But, Lord, when did I see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you drink, a stranger and receive you or without clothes and dress you?” The King will get up, look at him with great pleasure and will say to him: “My son, Robertito, for 53 years you did it with the most abandoned of Paraguay, for 53 years you fed me and gave to drink. You received me with the kindness of your priesthood and dressed me in the nakedness of the poor. Take possession of the Kingdom that has been prepared for you from the beginning of the world.”

The Redemptorist Missionary, Robert William Hopwood, truly rests in the peace of the Lord.

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