

Like Jesus, He Gave His Life Protecting His People

Compiled by Paul Landolfi, SM

Recently, the World Council of the Marianist Family (i.e., representatives of all the branches of the Marianist Family) met and chose the Solemnity of the Annunciation as its own patronal feast. The Feast of the Annunciation is now being celebrated as Marianist Family Day.

The following account is based on reports from Marianists in Colombia by Father Cecilio de Lora and from an interview conducted by Dan Klco, SM, and Mike Sullivan, SM, with Carlos Barragain, SM, who lived and worked with Brother Miguel, and from a prayer service in Colombia on the Feast of the Annunciation.



**Miguel (“Michel”) Ángel Quiroga
1972-1998**

Miguel is one of our Latin American brothers who gave his life in the line of duty. His friends and neighbors called him Michel. Michel was born in Facatativa, Colombia, a small rural area on the outskirts of Bogota on October 1, 1972. His parents were Susana Gaona and Gustavo Quiroga.

Michel grew up in a barrio named after John F. Kennedy, the late American president. As a young boy Michel was very involved with the parish of Nuestra Señora de la Caridad, run by the Marianists in the Barrio Perpetuo Socorro of Bogata.

Michel was very straightforward in his dealings with others. Some would say that “he called a spade a spade.” The term “simple” has been used to describe Michel, meaning that he was unpretentious and identified with the poor and marginalized of his country. Michel was creative and artistic; he used these talents in his teaching and in the community. He was known to be able to come up with something out of nothing. In other words, Michel could creatively use whatever materials he had on hand to create something of beauty.

Until 1992 the indigenous peoples of Colombia did not have the right to own land. Consequently, these are the people who were and are most marginalized within the country—these are the people with whom Michel most enjoyed working. When laws were passed to give marginalized peoples the right to own land, not many of the people understood what this meant and even more were afraid to exercise their new rights. Miguel Ángel, along with many other missionaries, spent a lot of time teaching the people of their new rights and convincing them that they could take advantage of the new laws.

After high school graduation Michel began his pre-novitiate period with the Marianist community, and a year later, in 1991, he made his novitiate in San Clemente, Risaralda. On December 12, 1992, he consecrated himself to God as a Marianist and made his first profession of religious vows. He worked for a year in Lloro, in the Diocese of Quibdo, in the midst of the Choco rainforest, and then returned to Bogota to study at the Universidad Pedagógica, where he

earned a licentiate in social sciences in December 1997. During those studies, he taught at the Colegio Interparroquial de Sur (in south Bogota), at that time directed by the Marianists.

In January 1998 he was assigned again to the Marianist Community in Lloro. The Chocóan church had always been known for its commitment to the poor and its work for peace and social development and was admired throughout the country.

GIVING ONE'S LIFE FOR ONE'S FRIENDS

It happened on September 18, 1998, in the forest of Chocó on the Atrato River, near the town of Lloro. A group of some twenty heavily armed paramilitaries detained the two boats in which Michel; the parish priest, José María Gutiérrez, SM; Fredy, a lay Marianist; and a group of some forty local farmworkers were traveling. They were on their way to a small village to celebrate its patronal feast.

The paramilitaries demanded identification from everyone. One member of the group did not have any documentation to show. At this Michel and Father José knew that the man was in serious trouble. The parish priest identified himself and attempted to plead for the group. The paramilitary did not listen. Father Gutiérrez and Brother Michel began to challenge the paramilitary on the legality of their search. "What is the problem? You have no legal right to stop us and demand our papers." The leader of this band of armed men approached Michel and shot him through the heart. He died instantly. Many in the area believe that the assassin knew the Marianists and their work. The man who did not have documentation was not taken; his life was spared.

Michel was one of several missionaries killed during the summer and fall of 1998. Concerned for the safety of the missionaries, the bishop of the diocese petitioned the president of Colombia for police protection for the missionaries. The president agreed to honor this request. To maintain and witness their solidarity with the poor, the Marianists in Colombia refused the offer of police protection. The feeling of the brothers was, and is, "When the poor have police protection, then we too will enjoy the same." Marianist Brother Miguel Ángel Quiroga lost his life doing what he loved most: helping the poor in Colombia, South America.

SOME OF HIS PERSONAL THOUGHTS

"If we don't change the postures of the heart, we won't be able to change our country."

"I realized that God called me to unite my life to that of Jesus, working generously with the poor" (June, 1990).

"I thank God for this whole time of grace during this year of pastoral experience in the midst of the Chocóan people.... Living in this situation of suffering and joy, oppression and hope, death and life...has enriched my Marianist life" (September 1993).

"I want to give myself from the depths to that which has no limits to its depth. For me this depth is the following of Jesus in the Marianist life" (October 1997).



A Prayer he recited each day after Holy Communion:

*Lord Jesus, unite Your life to my life,
Unite my life to Your life,
Unite our lives with the lives of others,
So that I might know how to share and be a brother,
And work at building up in this world,
the Kingdom of God, our Father,
In justice, life, and liberation
For the poor and oppressed,
From our Marianist path in Your footsteps as the Risen One.
Amen.*