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BOOK REVIEW

Francisco García, *The Life and Martyrdom of Diego Luis de San Vitores, S.J.* Translated by Margaret M. Higgins, Felicia Plaza and Juuan M.H. Ledesma. Edited by James A. McDonough. MARC Monograph Series 3. Guam: Richard Flores Taitano Micronesian Area Research Center. xxvii, 529 pp. ISBN 1-878453-55-6

reviewed by

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This life story of Diego Luis de San Vitores was written by Francisco Garcia S.J. and first published in 1683, in Spanish. Later, portions of the original were translated into English at various times. In an uncoordinated effort, three people translated separate sections of Garcia's work into English depending on their own immediate interests and purposes. The first was Margaret M. Higgins who published her translation of sections dealing particularly with the Mariana Islands serially between 1936 and 1939. In 1972 a second section (Books 1 and 2 and part of Book 3) was translated by a Mercedarian sister, Sr. Felicia Plaza. The final portion (Book 4 and most of Book 5) was the work of Fr. Juan Ledesma S.J.

These separate portions have now been gathered together into this book. In his Introduction to this publication, Fr. Francis X. Hezel S.J. noted that these three separate translations of selected portions were edited and brought together by Fr. James McDonough S.J. Thus, all sections of Garcia's book have now

been translated into English and are here published in their entirety for the first time.

The book is easily divided into three sections, the first of which deals with the main three periods in the life of Fr. San Vitores and consists of Books 1-3. This section may also serve to illustrate steps in the spiritual development of a young man who dedicated himself to the service of his God. This dedication is, I think, particularly seen in his consuming desire to convert others from lifeways that he was convinced would lead to a deplorable future for them.

Book 1 – In this section, Garcia deals briefly with the birth and family life of San Vitores, his dedicated efforts to be accepted by the Society of Jesus, and some of his early experiences in the Church. It finishes with his embarkation for Mexico on what he supposed to be his life's mission to Japan.

Book 2 – Here Garcia recounts his work as a devoted and very determined Catholic missionary in Mexico, the Philippines and then in the Mariana Islands of the northern Pacific.

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Book 3 – Records a brief history of the early struggle to introduce the Catholic faith to the Marianas and the development of the Catholic Church as a central part of local life and culture. Fr. San Vitores clearly contributed greatly to the introduction of Catholicism to the Mariana Islands and to consequent cultural changes that have been enormous in their effects and extent.

The second section (Book 4) steps aside from the perhaps more historical records of the first three books to concentrate on what Garcia plainly sees as a list of sublime qualifications that lift Fr. San Vitores far above most missionaries. In it, he lists a variety of Christian virtues attributed to Father San Vitores in his life, as well as numerous miraculous occurrences that have been credited to him after his death.

In the third and final section (Book 5), Garcia discusses the lives (and in many cases, the deaths) of some of those who accompanied Fr. San Vitores and who laboured with him in their mutual service of the Church and their God. He also details some of the events that followed as Spanish colonial rule was enforced and the Catholic faith took strong root in the Marianas.

Garcia seems to have two primary intentions. First, this is a testament to the life of a man he admired greatly, and second, it is a vigorous encouragement to others of the Catholic faith (perhaps particularly those interested in Jesuit society). However, the latter should not discourage non-Catholic readers, as this quite remarkable story is a fascinating record in its own right and on several levels. It provides many insights into a variety of cultures from the 1600s. For instance, important elements of Spanish culture of the time are evident, there are strong examples of Catholic religious culture generally and particularly of the Society of Jesus, and of course there are many examples of local, traditional cultures. It highlights elements of life in a family that held considerable social power within Spain, as well as it does the strong relationship between Church and politics. Strangely enough, it also provides elements of a 17th century travelogue.

For a non-Christian it will probably sometimes appear fantastical as it relates the author's conviction of the hand of God evidenced in many ways throughout the life of San Vitores – as a child, as a young man, as a priest, as a dedicated evangelist, and following his death, as a saint chosen of God. It is the story of a Catholic priest who from a child was convinced he was called to the Society of Jesus. It details many of his experiences in his single-minded pursuit of this goal, and following its successful attainment, of his equally single-minded pursuit of salvation for others. It attributes miraculous causes to many events during his life and following his death that others might question. A most extensive list of such events, all of which have been formally researched and accredited as miraculous by the Church, is included. In doing this, the work also concentrates on how his beliefs and convictions were translated into the way he lived his religion. Garcia unashamedly sets out to make this work a celebration of the life and death of a man he sees as being particularly virtuous. Consequently, it naturally emphasises specific parts of Fr San Vitores' life in which his strong religious beliefs and personal convictions are displayed most strongly.

Garcia relates events from Vitores' childhood to illustrate the way in which, and from an early age, he was seen to focus his attention on serving the God he worshiped. He briefly discusses portions of Vitores' time studying and, later, teaching in the Jesuit college. He refers to some of Vitores' actions at various stages of his life as a priest to illustrate his dedication to his calling. It would be easy to suggest that data may have been carefully selected (or at least interpreted favourably) whilst other, less favourable, data was excluded. There remains, however, a consistency throughout the record of this man's life that is difficult to deny and which cannot be ignored. Whether preaching in the villages and towns of 17th Century Spain, in Mexico, the Philippines, or in the Mariana Islands, Garcia's record shows that Fr San Vitores remained true to his convictions and consistent in his methods.

There are elements that relate scenes and activities that may horrify some readers. For

example, on one occasion (p. 86) a “Jew” was “burned at the stake” in what many would today consider a barbarous public display but which was more widely accepted by society then. Garcia records that Fr. San Vitores saw the end was near for this man and spoke to him in such a way that he recanted, though previous conversations and arguments had been unsuccessful. Garcia is convinced that this “conversion” was miraculous and attributes it to the influence of Fr. San Vitores. Nevertheless, the victim died, apparently from his injuries, although it is recorded that he “died a Christian”. Depending on the reader’s point of view this may be either a victory or a defeat.

Others may consider the use of military force (see for example pages 216, 218-224) in the preaching of Christianity to be inconsistent with the promotion of a religion that considers the Mosaic commandment “do not kill” to be a fundamental requirement. However, it must be remembered that this book is centred in political and religious cultures of the 17th century.

Plainly, the book has been written from the viewpoint of a person who was convinced that Diego Luis de San Vitores lived a life that was thoroughly deserving of canonisation. Consequently, it appears in a style that some today may consider to be laboured, verbose, and perhaps even biased in its interpretations of events, actions and words. Some will almost certainly question its interpretation of events and historical accuracy. Whether this is so or not perhaps depends, at least to an extent, on the reader’s own perceptions of Catholicism and the effects of European colonialism. What is certain is that this book, based as it is upon letters and written reports, provides an historical source for a critical period of the development of the cultures of the Mariana Islands of today.