

Beatification of Dr Josep Samsó i Elias

Archbishopric of Barcelona

Parish Church of St Mary of the town of Mataró

Dr. Josep Samsó i Elias, a priest

The bishop of Barcelona, Mons. Manuel Irurita called God's servant "the prince of the bishopric's catechists" and "the brightest light in my diocese". His written preaching also did a lot of good, especially the "Guide for Catechists".

Josep Samsó i Elias was born in the Barcelona town of Castellbisbal on 17th January 1887. He was the son of Jaume Samsó Olivella, a pharmacist, and Josepa Elias Puig. He had a sister called Montserrat and belonged to a middle-class, catholic family.

When he was 7, his father died. The family then moved to the town of Rubí, where a sister of his mother lived. It was probably this situation which made Josep Samsó develop his love for the family and his sense of austerity. He studied in a Marist Brothers' school, where he made his first Holy Communion. From this moment on he began to show his call to become a priest. He studied the first three years of Latin with the curates of his parish church. His teachers realized that he was a good student who stood out because of his pious nature and talent.

In 1900 he entered the Seminary of Barcelona. His health was weak, so his family moved to the town of Sarrià to take care of him. His mother prayed with great faith to the Virgin Mary, and a doctor prescribed the right medicine for his son.

Thanks to a benefactor, he was able to finish his Degree in Theology in the Pontifical University of Tarragona, which in those days was equivalent to a Doctorate. From then on he was known as Dr Samsó. He was not old enough to be ordained, so he became private secretary to Bishop Laguarda of Barcelona, who wanted Dr Samsó to continue working with him after his ordination. But Josep Samsó wanted to devote himself to Parish life.

He was ordained a priest on 12th March 1910 and was appointed curate of the village of Argentona. There he began a successful pastoral activity – he organised the children's catechism, he sent men to do spiritual exercises, he also took care of social work action, the Saint Isidre patron group and a savings bank. He was there for seven years and is still remembered.

In 1917 he took up the position of parish priest of church in the village of Sant Joan de Mediona. People there were upset because of the previous parish priest leaving, and didn't receive Dr Samsó very enthusiastically. Two years later, when Dr. Samsó left, they were upset again. Amongst other things, he organized a mission and he achieved many important things for the Church.

Bishop Reig suggested he move to the church of St Mary's, in the town of Mataró. He was then 32 years old. He consulted his spiritual director and accepted the Bishop's offer. He arrived in Mataró on 30th August 1919 and became parish priest church on 1st September 1919. He was assassinated on 1st September 1936, in the cemetery of Mataró.

Dr. Samsó, a catechist

When Dr Samsó was studying in the Seminary he already showed an interest in children's catechism, and he always invited children to participate in the Sunday Catechesis in different churches. When he was ordained a priest, he celebrated his first Mass on Saint Joseph's day. He wanted a simple ceremony, with no presents except for a chalice given to him by his protector Dr Fiol, the parish priest of Rubí, and altar clothes made for him by a nun who was a family relative.

As curate of Argentona, catechism was the most important task he did, as a result of his devoted work and his good relationship with the children. He motivated them with parties at the end of the course, in which he also invited the city authorities. At one of these parties, Bishop Mas of the city of Girona said: "If only I had two or three curates like Dr Samsó in my diocese!" The influence of Dr. Samsó would make a life-long impression on his pupils.

In the church of St Mary's of Mataró, there were 400 or 500 children on the Sunday catechesis courses. He really was committed to Catechism. He used to welcome the boys and the girls at the door, with a smile, and used to speak to them at the end of the lesson. The catechism, which was divided into different sections, also consisted of stimulus, assistance, prizes, trips, tickets for the cinema or the theatre and end of year parties. He also talked to the children who would visit him in his office.

When the Republic abolished Religion in schools, he started catechism in various other places. Not only did children attend these courses, but the youth and adults as well. It was a big success. The theologians from the Seminary would go to the church of St Mary's once a year to see how the catechism was taught. Dr Samsó attended the Catechism Congress in the city of Saragossa and the Catechism Week in the town of Reus, as he was already a well-known expert on this subject.

His worries for the good training up of the catechists and for the contents of the catechism formed part of his "Guide for Catechists". Some catechists asked him to publish his catechism. He obtained the church licence in 1936, and in 1940 it was published clandestinely by some of his followers. In 1955 a new edition was published. It was in use in the church of St Mary's of Mataró and in some other churches until the Second Vatican Council, which updated the liturgy before revising the catechism.

Regarding these facts, it is not surprising that Dr Samsó was considered an exceptional catechist. Dr Joan Tusquets wrote in 1935: "Dr Samsó has been the first one to notice the importance of good training in catechism. And he was also the first to develop the sense of the need for children to receive instruction in catechism. And it was him who ignited the fire of the catechism zeal". The Bishop of Segovia Daniel Llorente described him as "a great catechist. His

pedagogical style is classical and therefore valid forever. And these biblical, liturgical and popular features have a lot in common with the Second Vatican Council.”

Dr Samsó, a parish priest

At the beginning of the 20th century the parish of St Mary’s of Mataró had thirty priests. The young new rector began his task with the organization of the church. He insisted on punctuality in the schedule of masses and he started pastoral care with great devotion.

He was an intelligent, vigorous man, gifted with qualities of governance and work. He was methodical, highly orderly, punctual in everything, and demanding with himself. But he was also a simple and austere man –he slept on a straw mattress, and he kept cilices on his bedside table. He was serious and commanded respect, but he was understanding with others and easy to talk to. His sister described his schedule: he would get up at 5 in the morning, celebrate mass at 6 o’clock, and then meditation for the faithful at 7. He worked in his office and attended people until noon. At lunch or dinner, he opted for healthy food. He was nice and polite to everybody. After lunch, he took an hour’s rest. In the afternoon, it was time for the activities outside the church –he visited schools, hospitals, etc. In the evening, he had meetings. He went to bed at 11.

Apart from the catechism for children, which was his great devotion, he also taught at various religious schools and spent a lot of time in the confessional as a spiritual director of many people, especially the youth. He trained a lot of priests, monks and nuns, and Christian families. He often visited his seminarians in Barcelona, and kept in touch with the monks who had belonged to his parish. The nuns of the Sacred Heart of Mary belonged to his parish and he took good care of them. His pastoral youth community was mainly centred on the Congregations of Mary, which was set up in the parish in 1903. Dr Samsó increased the congregation with a new Congregation for married men. He was genuinely worried about the Christian education of everybody –children, young people and adults. He said: “Ignorance is the cause of many problems”. His job, in fact, made a deep impression on the parishes of St Mary’s of Mataró and St Julian’s of Argentona.

In January 1924, he officially became the parish priest of the parish after passing an exam. When he took up the position, he said that he would work especially for children, for the elderly, for the poor and for ill people. He asked the citizens to collaborate with the restoration work of the church and the construction of a great organ. When the restoration was finished, the temple was awarded the title of Minor Basilica. He was a lover of popular religious music and he promoted liturgical prayers.

Dr Cebrià Montserrat wrote in 1944 that “Dr Samsó, apart from having great qualities, was a priest with an intense inner life, devoted to deep prayer, given to the practice of deep thinking.”

A martyr

“A sign of the truth of Christian love, ageless but especially powerful today, is the memory of the martyrs. Their testimony must not be forgotten. They are the ones who have proclaimed the Gospel by giving their lives for love... This century now drawing to a close has known many martyrs. Martyrdom is the most eloquent proof of the truth of the faith, for faith can give a human face even to the most violent of deaths”. (Pope John Paul II).

Dr Samsó didn't become a martyr by accident –he followed a way of faith and giving of self which prepared him for this grace. The events of 6th October 1934 showed the stature of a parish priest who also felt he was the pastor of the enemies of the Church. A group of anarchists burst into the rectory, took him to the central nave of the church and threatened him and a curate with weapons. They made them pile up some chairs in front of the altar and poured solvent over them. They wanted Dr Samsó and the others to set fire to them. But despite the threat, Dr Samsó refused. The anarchists lit the fire and ran away. The firemen didn't come to the church, it was the parishioners who put the fire out. Some days later, these people were arrested. When Dr Samsó was interrogated, he said that he didn't know them. He didn't want to reveal their identity so as not to let them come to any harm. When he talked about these facts, he said: “This is the most beautiful gift I can give to the Lord on my last day. There is only one which could surpass that –giving my life for Jesus”.

Josep Puig i Pla, a historian from Mataró, has written about Dr Samsó and Joan Peiró, a well-known socialist established in Mataró: “Both of them had strong personalities and convictions. And both of them had a great influence amongst their followers. One and the other, in those tragic and tumultuous times, had the same ending –a violent death. They died true to their ideals and setting an example to be followed. They were killed by intolerance and free violence.”

The mood of the country was tense, and this was reflected in Dr Samsó's words. On Saint John's day in 1936 he said to Reverend Mother Carme Majó: “Whatever happens let us put ourselves entirely in the hands of the Lord. Every day at prayer I prepare myself for martyrdom because I'm sure that it's not only words but facts which await us.”

The witnesses assure us that he never got involved in politics. His death had nothing to do with the Civil War. On the night of 18th/19th July 1936, the rectory and the church were searched by the police. They were looking for weapons. Dr Samsó told them: “You can look wherever you want, I don't care. I have always defended the church in every possible way except with weapons, because Jesus Christ, my Divine Teacher, defended his Church by dying, not by killing.”

The police left. In the evening, Dr Samsó and the curates, helped by some people, took the Blessed Sacrament to a safe place, left the rectory and took refuge in some parishioners' houses. He said his usual “God above all”. He stayed at a house near the church, from where he could give orders on how to save different items.

On 30th July he decided to leave the house where he was staying, to avoid problems for the family who hosted him. He wanted to go to Barcelona via the inland route. He was wearing

secular dress, a moustache and sunglasses and had his hair dyed. A woman recognized him at the train station, just before the train pulled in. She betrayed him. He was arrested and taken to the prison of Mataró. He would spend 33 days there.

There was no official reason for his arrest. Once in the prison he found many acquaintances, some priests and many lay people who had been arrested because of their religious ideas, and some other common prisoners. He comforted them all. The parishioners visited him and hid the Eucharist inside the food parcel which they brought him. On the day he died he received Communion. He shared everything he had with his fellow inmates.

We have some words from his fellow inmates: "He accepted all the tasks that the guards gave him naturally. He turned the prison into his parish church". Josep Viñas, a soldier, said: "He was a real pastor who made the most of everything to glorify God –he turned the prison into a place of spiritual retreat". Dr Castellsaguer said that "he was a father to the prisoners". Dr Samsó even converted a prisoner to Catholicism. Salvador Cabot Rosset, another one of his fellow inmates, said: "We could see his holiness in prison by the way he talked to the 35 prisoners and gave us advice of resignation, as we all were afraid of what could happen to us. He told us he would be the first victim. When he was called on 1st September, at about 11 o'clock in the morning, he called us together and embraced all of us, one by one, advising us to be resigned and saying: "We'll meet up in Heaven, when God wants."

In Mataró there was a group of war volunteers which was called Malatesta, after the Italian anarchist. They had to leave for the front. But as a condition for leaving, they asked for the death of all the prisoners. The authorities refused, but after the threats made by the group Malatesta, they reached an agreement: the death of the parish priest of St Mary's.

He was brought out of jail without a trial and brought to the cemetery where he was assassinated. When he left, he was calm. A parishioner said: "He waved to me when he passed my house in the car". In the cemetery, he told the executioners that he forgave them, as Jesus had forgiven those who nailed him to the cross. And with his arms opened, he exclaimed: "Embrace me, I forgive you all". He asked them not to harm his mother. He also requested not to be blindfolded –he wasn't a criminal and he wanted to die looking down at the town and the parish he so loved. His integrity impressed his executioners, and only one dared to fire.

There were two witnesses present, apart from the executioners. Two boys had followed the car, climbed the wall of the cemetery and seen and heard everything. One of them died in the war, the other one lived to be able to testify in the process of beatification.

After Dr Samsó's assassination, an announcement was made from the town hall balcony: "Justice has been done. The rector of St Mary's has been killed". The Group Malatesta left. Everybody was profoundly concerned. The facts were immediately commented on throughout the town and the bishopric. The people of the church immediately considered him a Saint, and under those painful circumstances they started to commend themselves to him. Some people went to the cemetery to scoop up blood-stained ground. One antireligious leader said "If only we had men like Dr Samsó in our group!"

In 1944, Bishop Modrego ordered Dr Samsó to be buried in the Church of St Mary's. His mortal remains were moved on 22nd October 1944 in a big display of joy: the bishop, some priests, the congregation etc all gathered there. The favours received through his intercession were put together in the 'Positio' for the beatification process. Every 1st September a Mass is celebrated in the church of St Mary's of Mataró and in the church of St Julian's in the village of Argentona.

In 1959 Bishop Modrego started the diocesan process of canonization which was stopped later on like that of all the martyrs of the Spanish Revolution. Cardinal Ricard Maria Carles then instructed the process to be made "*ex novo*" on 13th March 1996. This was completed remarkably in the church of St Mary's on 18th March 1998. The closing ceremony was a joyful, devout paraliturgy. Bishop Joan Carrera, who presided over the ceremony, said that he had never seen any other canonization process with such a closing ceremony.

On the occasion of St Mary's millennium, the cardinal of Barcelona Lluís Martínez Sistach asked the Pope for the beatification of the most emblematic parish priest of this church from the last century.

The ceremony took place in Saint Mary's Basilica on Saturday 23rd January 2010 in the presence of a huge number of faithful and the country's leading authorities. The ceremony was presided over by some of the Pope's representatives, more than twenty bishops and 400 priests from all over Catalonia. To mark the occasion the bishops called a Priests' Day since the beatification of Dr. Samsó, the shepherd and remarkable martyr, coincided with the Priest's Year which the Holy Father had called to mark the anniversary of the Parish Priest of Ars.