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THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

Saint Serapio: Martyr of Faith and Christian Charity

When the need is great, God sends His messengers to offer help and comfort. Great indeed was the need of Christians held captive under the Muslim yoke. Seeing their suffering, Saint Serapio was so moved that he gave himself up as a hostage, since there was not enough money to pay the ransom for all the prisoners.

Who was this Serapio?

Born in England toward the end of the 12th century, he embarked on a military career in his youth and participated in a campaign against the Moors in Spain under the command of the Duke of Austria. He chose to remain on the Peninsula in the service of King Alfonso IX of Castile, but later laid down his arms to enter the Order of Mercy, which had just been founded in Aragon by St. Peter Nolasco. Its express purpose was to rescue Christians held captive and enslaved by the Muslims.

The chronicle of the Order recounts that it arose as a result of a Marian apparition under the title of Our Lady of Mercy (equivalent to “Virgin of Mercy”), who commissioned the pious Pedro Nolasco—later canonized—to found a congregation dedicated to the rescue of Christians. This also explains the name of the Order. The Mercedarians began to raise funds and organize “rescue campaigns” from time to time.

When Serapio entered the Order of Mercy, he became a fervent religious. He devoted himself wholeheartedly to the pursuit of perfection and the conscientious fulfillment of his religious duties and assigned tasks, becoming an example and inspiration to his brothers in the community. For this reason, his holy founder, Peter Nolasco—whom Serapio had had the joy of knowing and imitating as a model of holiness—entrusted him with the formation of the novices of the Order. At one point, Serapio attempted to bring the Order to England, but was unsuccessful.

Later, Peter Nolasco sent Serapio and a brother to Algiers in North Africa. The misery was overwhelming, and the number of Christian captives enormous! The funds they had been provided with were barely enough to pay the ransom for eighty-five Spanish

Christians. However, captives from other nations pleaded so insistently about their dire situation and the constant danger to their faith—due to continuous torture, threats, and seductions by the Mohammedans—that Serapio, deeply moved by their bitter affliction, decided to stay in Algiers to comfort the abandoned. He entrusted his companion Berengario with the task of taking the freed captives back to their homeland and raising more funds in Spain to ransom those who remained.

The holy conduct of this servant of Christian charity—his self-sacrificing and completely disinterested concern for the unfortunate slaves—was a source of comfort and edification for his Christian brothers, but it also had a profound impact on some Muslims. Serapio even had the joy of baptizing several Moors. These conversions, however, aroused the wrath of the king of Algiers, who had this troublesome preacher of Christ imprisoned. He was tortured in an attempt to make him renounce his faith, but Serapio remained steadfast, thus granting the Church the testimony of so many martyrs who, strengthened by the Lord, endured all torments for His sake and did not cease to praise Him amid the blows.

Serapio did not merely endure the torture; he also clearly expressed to his executioners what he thought of Muhammad and the religion he had founded. With that, he sealed his death sentence.

The king condemned him to death on the cross and handed him over to the fury of the mob, fanatical in their hatred of Christians. Serapio was hung upside down between two posts, so that his hands and feet formed a cross in the shape of an X—like the cross of St. Andrew.

Amidst the terrible torments, Serapio gave thanks to God for the gift of faith and, as a true disciple of charity, continued to intercede for the poor Christian captives. They wept at the sight of the suffering of their benefactor and friend, who had not spared his own life to rescue them.

In this way, Serapio became the first martyr of the Order of Mercy, giving his life for captives and slaves. At the same time, he was a courageous confessor of the Christian faith.

His example invites us to give our lives for our brothers and sisters—each in the place God assigns us—and to courageously profess our Christian faith, so that, seeing our works, people may know the goodness of God and come to know the Name of the One who enables us to do them.

Meditation on the Gospel of the day: <https://en.elijamission.net/2023/11/17/>