

1. Short Introduction

Father Eustaquio van Lieshout ended his beautiful life in the city of Belo Horizonte in Brazil on Monday, August 30, 1943. Two weeks later, on Monday, September 14, I started my ss.cc. career and became a student in our apostolic school in SintOedenrode. It was wartime and it was only in January of the next year, 1944, that the Dutch provincial received the news of the death of Eustaquio.

We were also told this bad news, we who were the hope of the Congregation. For our teachers it was a good opportunity to praise our missionary vocation and tell us about our beautiful work in Brazil.

That was the first time that I had heard of the life of this great missionary. Many years later I had to study his life and work in order to write a biography of the man and I must say that a confrere, who until then I had not really known, became a good friend. Today I am going to try to share with you something of the sympathy and friendship I feel toward this great member of our community.

First I will offer a short biography of our Father Eustaquio. Then there will be a section entitled 'Eustaquio and Damien'.

2. The Life of Father Eustaquio van Lieshout

2.1. Family and Religious Formation

Huub (Hubertus) van Lieshout was born in the village of Aarle-Rixtel in the Dutch province of Brabant on November 3, 1890 into a Catholic family consisting of eleven children, who were all given a thoroughly religious upbringing. Three of the girls became religious sisters, while Huub already at an early age wanted to become a missionary, just like his great example Damien De Veuster (1840-1889), the apostle of the lepers on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. For that reason he wanted to join the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts.

Huub van Lieshout made his grammar school studies as pupil in a Latin school (1903-1905), followed by some years at the Damien Institute of the Fathers of the Sacred Hearts in Grave (1905-1913). In 1915 Huub took vows in our Congregation and assumed the religious name Eustaquio. On completing his studies of philosophy and theology, he was ordained priest on August 10, 1919.

2.2. Pastoral Work in Holland

After being ordained Eustaquio helped the master of novices for a short while as his assistant in the monastery at Vierlingsbeek. After that he spent some time in pastoral work in the town of

Maassluis. There he was chaplain to a group of Belgian glassblowers. After that he was a very much valued assistant in the parish of Roelofarendsveen.

Already as a pastor in Holland, Eustaquio visited all the parishioners but especially those who were ill or in other ways in need. He put himself out for the sick, and it is particularly from that pastorate that stories have been preserved of sick people, who also benefited physically from Eustaquio' visits.

2.3. *Agua Suja*

In the twenties of the past century the Dutch Province of our Congregation began to look for an area of mission in Latin America. Fathers Eustaquio van Lieshout, Egidius (Gil) van den Boogaart and Matthias van Rooij were appointed to the future mission. The pioneers first went to Spain to learn Spanish but in 1925 they were sent instead to Brazil, a country in which Portuguese was spoken.

In July 1925 Eustaquio received his first appointment to Agua Suja, a remote country parish, to which each August thousands of pilgrims came to visit the shrine of Our Lady. Eustaquio reorganized the rites of pilgrimage, renewed the Catholic life of his parishioners and began building a new church. However, in his letters he wrote that he was spending much time attending to the spiritual and physical needs of the sick. I quote:

'On the last day of the year gone by a little sick child, 13 years old, died. For more than three months I had taken care of him twice a day. The little boy had been accidentally wounded by a revolver shot by his playmate. His wounds were incurable and he was totally paralyzed from the waist down. What suffering that little boy underwent, yes, what suffering. He was poor and moreover abandoned by his parents. I want to put on the cross for his grave: Abandoned by my parents, but God took care of me.'

2.4. *The Miracle Worker of Poà*

Beginning in February 1935 Eustaquio and his confreres were working in parishes near the great industrial city of São Paulo. He was parish priest of the little town of Poà. The fathers had a lot to do with the spiritism, which was on the rise. Therefore Eustaquio began to help the sick, as the spiritists also did, with blessed water, at first with water from Lourdes and then with water that he himself blessed.

A number of miraculous events occurred and thus the name of Eustaquio became well known. By his blessing and prayer he cured sick people and gave people help in various ways. He became a real hero, 'The Thaumaturge of Poà', the miracle worker of Poà, and each day a great many people wished to meet him for a moment. A confrere of Eustaquio wrote on 15 April 1941:

'For some time rumors are going around in Brazil that wonderful things are happening in Poà. Our parish priest always wanted to make the sick the object of his special attention. Now every day hundreds of people come with bottles and jars to fetch water and then wait in long queues to be admitted to the holy man, to have the water blessed, to talk about their misery and illness, to ask for advice and to commend themselves to the prayers of Father Eustaquio. He lays hands on everybody and tells them to say one Our Father and one Hail Mary when they are drinking the water.'

2.5. *The Last Years*

The enormous influx of people to Poà could not last long. In May 1941 Eustaquio was sent away on holiday. He hid himself for some time on a farmhouse in the interior. From October that year he resided at our college in Patrocinio. During that time Eustaquio thought of leaving Brazil, even of returning to Holland. He put that desire to his superiors but the war was on in Europe, and so the miracle worker of Poà remained in Brazil.

At the beginning of 1942 Eustaquio was given a temporary pastoral appointment in the parish of Ibia. After some months, in April 1942, he was appointed parish priest of the poor parish of San Domingos (Saint Dominic) in the big town of Belo Horizonte. He began to build a church for his parish. But here too people began to converge as before in Ibia. In Belo Horizonte however it could somehow be controlled.

Eustaquio fell seriously ill in 1943 as a consequence of an infection caused by an insect bite. On his deathbed he wanted to see once more his fellow-pioneer and superior Gil van den Boogaart. Once his friend arrived, everything was all right, and Eustaquio could die peacefully. It was August 30, 1943. The funeral was a triumphant procession and more and more people visited the grave.

2.6. *The Beatification*

In 1948, when Eustaquio's church in Belo Horizonte was finished, he was given a final resting place in the new church. There also an ever increasing number of people came to pray at his tomb. Many years later, in Belo Horizonte in June 2006, we celebrated the great feast of the beatification of our confrere Eustaquio van Lieshout.

3. **Eustaquio and Damien.**

3.1 *Happy childhood*

Sjefke De Veuster as well as Huubke van Lieshout had very special parents. They were Catholic country people with their own farm. The two fathers had to work hard and the mothers ruled their big households well and firmly. The men were common decent Catholic fathers of a family, but it was the women who paid special attention to the religious education of their bunch of children.

Both boys had a good number of sisters and brothers, with whom they got along fine. Jefke De Veuster loved to join in the work on the farm, but Huubke van Lieshout already as a child did not like dirty farm work very much. He was an altar boy for the sisters (here in this convent) and loved to play "mass" with his little sisters in the attic.

Both boys received a real religious education. It is not very surprising that four of the De Veuster children and four Van Lieshouts chose religious life and priesthood. Sjef De Veuster chose to join our Congregation somewhat later in life, but Huub van Lieshout went to Latin school right after primary school to start studying for the priesthood. Then he read a book about Father Damien and that made him want to become a member of our Congregation and to go to the missions. And so he became a student at our apostolic school in Grave.

3.2. *Children of the Sacred Hearts.*

As ss.cc. students brothers Damien and Eustaquio differed quite a bit. Damien was a good student, who worked steadily and didn't like cockiness. Eustaquio, on the other hand, had quite a

bit of difficulty in the beginning with studies and was - perhaps as a way of compensating - heavily romantic. He wrote some sentimental poems and as an actor did romantic scenes in plays with much pathos. He had also taught himself a rather solemn way of speaking with a low voice.

What made a deep impression on both brothers was the day of their profession. This was before there were temporary vows and they made perpetual vows immediately after the novitiate. They lay prostrate under the black shroud as a sign of dying to the world. That experience comes up several times in their later letters. They made difficult decisions as a consequence of that experience of dying to the world.

Very striking is what both Damien and Eustaquio said on their deathbed. Both of them testified to their fellow brothers that they were happy to have the privilege of dying in the service of the Sacred Hearts. Both of them were grateful that they had confreres beside them who helped and supported them at the hour of their death. Shortly before his death Damien and Father Wendelinus heard each other's confession and renewed their vows together. Eustaquio died at the moment that his confrere and good friend, Father Gil van den Boogaart was finally at his side. It was the moment he evidently had been waiting for.

3.3. *Pastoral care of the sick*

Damien as well as Eustaquio had the opportunity to prepare themselves extensively for their later special pastoral care for the sick. Damien did so as a hardworking missionary on the big island of Hawaii, Eustaquio as assistant pastor in some Dutch parishes. At that time both priests already showed great concern for the sick. Little by little that particular ministry became more and more a high priority for Damien as well as for Eustaquio.

In 1873 Damien went to Molokai and there dedicated himself totally for 16 years to those suffering from leprosy. As pastor in the countryside of Agua Suja Eustaquio also showed great care for the sick, but once he was in Poà he became the "Miracle worker of Poà" because of the great help he gave increasing numbers of sick who visited him in the thousands until it became really impossible.

Damien as well as Eustaquio were always foremost and especially what we would call "shepherds of souls". The spiritual well being of their sick was for both of them the greatest concern. But besides that both of them did all they could to help the sick in other ways. Damien transformed Molokai into a place where leprosy patients could have a worthy life. Eustaquio helped the sick with medicines, laying on of hands and blessed water, perhaps a bit less efficient than what Damien did, but very important for the Brazilians, who really profited from it. What especially attracts one's attention when one gets acquainted with Damien and Eustaquio is their intense emotional concern for the sickness and suffering of their people. Fortunately our two great brothers had developed their emotional life and so they could be really close to the people in their sickness and sorrow with their empathy and, in that way help, them.

3.4. *Living with Superiors and Fellow Religious*

One of the great differences between our Flemish and Dutch blessed is certainly what they experienced with superiors and their brothers. Both of them tried to be good religious. The decisions of their superiors counted for them as the last word. They adhered to it, even when it was very difficult. The word of their superiors was for them the word of God, and that gave sure direction to their lives and works. Besides that Damien and Eustaquio were truly community persons. They found it difficult to be alone and needed confreres around them.

It was Damien who had a very difficult time with this. His bishop as well as his provincial definitely found it difficult to take the hot-tempered and sometimes nagging Damien. They sometimes treated him in a really rude way. And the couple of confreres who were sent now and again by his superiors as colleagues were difficult and frustrated men that the superiors wanted to be rid off. Only in his last year of life did Damien have confreres near him, with whom he could feel at home.

Eustaquio had been much more fortunate. The Superior of the Brazilian fathers was Father Gil, his old friend as student and co-pioneer. He was an intelligent and sympathetic colleague, with a very open eye and heart for the ups and downs of his brothers. Also with his confreres in Agua Suja, Poà and Belo Horizonte Eustaquio had been lucky. They were fine colleagues who helped him where they could, made it enjoyable for him at home and assisted him splendidly in his last sickness.

3.5. Faith, hope and charity

Superiors and brothers certainly play a large role in the life of a religious. However, also important are surely the spiritual sources from which someone draws his life and works. On this point there is really little difference between Eustaquio and Damien. Both were men with a simple but very great faith. They believed intensely in God's loving presence in men and the world. From that belief they drew strength to do what they saw as their special vocation: to share in their own way that love with others and so bring the Kingdom of God somewhat closer to mankind. In their letters, especially those of Damien, this extremely solid faith, inherited from his family and Congregation, was often expressed in simple but sometimes touchingly beautiful words.

Damien and Eustaquio were optimists. Their strong belief in God and in eternal life with God inspired them in their often very heavy and difficult work. That work had meaning and guaranteed men a better life here and in the hereafter. Time and time again it brought something of the reality of the Kingdom of God to their often dismal lives. The two men toiled and labored for their sick, managed to bring some light in their lives and sometimes considerably improved their living situation. And the one thing that is so important for a human being, namely being seen and accepted, that perhaps was the nicest thing they gave to their poor wretches. But one had to be very sure of oneself to keep one's faith in the midst of the misery that Damien and Eustaquio encountered. They did that with hope in the God, of whom it is said, "God is love."

What struck me especially in Damien as well as in Eustaquio, is the following. Both of them were emotional men, and it was exactly their fierce emotions that caused them to be so moved by the sickness and sorrow of people. At times both were literally moved to tears because of the great pain and sorrow of the people around them. And that is why they were able to do and to mean so much for the sick: the dismal sufferer of Molokai and the poor sick man of Brazil.

Sadly many religious have never really learned to handle well their emotions. What suppression and dryness in the lives of many sisters, brothers and fathers! Traditional religious asceticism dealt with emotions and feelings in a very peculiar way. Strong feelings toward other people were considered a danger to salvation. But look at how the two heroes of our story handled them! Damien and Eustaquio gave their fierce emotions plenty of scope in a great and intense concern and pity for people who were marginalized because of sickness. They didn't suppress their emotions but made use of them in a superb way in their great love for people in distress.

4. A Short Conclusion

What can be the best conclusion of this short story? I think it is the following. The core of the lives of Eustaquio and Damien was to be always ready for anyone who was sick, for all those experiencing sorrow and suffering, for all those who needed them and continually appealed to them. Damien and Eustaquio understood to an unusual degree what it means to be a member of a Congregation of the Sacred Hearts, a family of religious that tries to live the love of God and to make it visible to every child of God.

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