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Padrecito Miguel Pro y Hermano Sanchito

Malcolm Rodrigues SJ

October's featured Jesuit in the special 2014 calendar from the Jesuits in Britain is Blessed Miguel Pro, who was executed by firing squad in Mexico in 1927 for the crime of being a priest. Malcolm Rodrigues SJ reflects on his friendship with a Mexican Jesuit brother who had known Fr Pro and who radiated the joy and good humour that characterised the martyr that we remember this month.

Long before I went to Mexico for my theological studies, my eldest sister had acquired a great devotion to Father Pro, and she belonged to a sodality of women who were praying for his canonisation. On a regular basis, she would relate to us some of the comical situations he got into with the civil authorities, notwithstanding the danger he faced. When I left the then British Guiana in 1960 for the Jesuit novitiate, which was located in Roehampton, London, Michael Pro SJ slipped off the horizon and was replaced by the English Martyrs, for whose canonisation we prayed daily, until two years later when the retreat for my first vows began. The retreat director was Rev. Paul Brassel SJ, Professor of Moral Theology at Heythrop College, then near Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire. At some point during the retreat, he produced a black-beaded rosary which, he explained, belonged to Miguel Pro and which he held in his hand as he faced the firing squad. Most of the novices made use of the opportunity to recite the rosary using Fr Pro's rosary beads. I recall on 10 September 1962, when we set out from Roehampton after our vows to move to Heythrop College for our philosophy course, a fellow traveller whispered to me: 'Did you use Miguel Pro's rosary during the retreat?' I replied yes, why did you ask? He, with a great smile, said, 'I think that is one of at least six rosaries doing the rounds!' I returned the smile and left the rest to the Lord.



Enter Brother Sanchez SJ

After nine years in the UK, which included novitiate, philosophy studies and then a degree in Physics, I returned to Guyana for a year of teaching at a private Hindu school in the Corentyne area of the country. During that period, I was informed that I was to study theology in Mexico, beginning in October 1970. Immediately, Blessed Miguel Pro came back on the horizon and I proceeded to

try to learn as much Spanish as possible in the time before I was due to leave. I eventually arrived at the Jesuit theologate situated in Rio Hondo, Tizapan, an over-crowded *barrio* in Mexico City. It was around the middle of July, and I was soon allotted a tutor to get me ready for classes which were to begin in October. Meanwhile, the residence was almost empty except for three brothers, the rector and two professors. One of the brothers was Brother Sanchez, who knew Fr Miguel Pro and who was now responsible for looking after his tomb, which was situated in the local cemetery. Brother Sanchez was lovingly referred to as 'Hermano Sanchito' because of his small stature and his jovial disposition. We met up each morning at the early Mass, around 6.00am, and then proceeded to breakfast during which I asked questions about Miguel Pro, which Sanchito was always delighted to answer. He explained that Miguel was rather a sickly person, but this was difficult to detect as he was always jovial and involved in his ministries, which at the time were forbidden by the government. Miguel behaved, said Sanchito, as though life was as normal as ever.

Each day listening to Sanchito, I had a feeling that even now, so many years after Miguel's martyrdom, he and Sanchito were still in touch with each other somehow. He told me a story of how Miguel was once approached in the streets by army personnel who began to question him. Miguel was very relaxed and jovial in his exchanges with them, and when some businessmen approached and asked if everything was alright, Miguel responded yes, while referring to the soldiers as just doing their duty. After exchanging greetings amid laughter, each one went on his way. Sanchito saw the incident as a narrow escape on Miguel's part.

Brother Sanchito invited me one Sunday morning during breakfast to accompany him to Fr Pro's tomb, the care of which was his main apostolic task; this 'apostle' at that time was 98 years old. I was delighted and we arranged to meet at the front entrance of the house at about ten o'clock. When I arrived, there were quite a number of things that needed to be loaded up for the journey. But we had to wait on Sanchito, whose task it was to see that all that was necessary was there to be loaded. With great care, Sanchito produced a list from the pocket of his religious gown and carefully in silence checked everything, while the driver of the car and I stood waiting on instructions. I, at that time being the youngest, was given a wicker basket loaded with small bottles of oil and instructed to place it carefully in the boot of the car making sure that it was stable and would not easily move around. The other materials were then loaded, and a parting prayer was said by Sanchito for a safe journey, we set out for the tomb of Miguel Pro.

A ritual of love and care

On arrival at the cemetery, there was a group of about twenty persons standing around not far from where we parked the car. We were given once more various items to hold, until everything was unloaded by Sanchito, who then led the way to the tomb. As we made our way, I realised that the persons waiting were also devotees of Miguel Pro and had come to visit his tomb. The tomb was in a fairly large crypt which could easily accommodate about fifteen persons. After Sanchito had arranged everything he had unloaded from the car, the waiting persons were invited to step down into the crypt. A short Bible service was conducted by Sanchito, assisted by the driver and me. He

reminded the gathering of the love and courage of Blessed Miguel, which resulted in his martyrdom. He then promised that the following Sunday there would be Mass at 10.30am, so the persons there were asked to pass the word around. Then began the ritual of selling the small bottles of oil which, I discovered later on, were blessed with a relic of Fr Pro. Most of the bottles were sold that day. Sanchito later explained to me that the oil was used to anoint the sick, while invoking the help of Fr Pro. Everything was so smooth and peaceful that I forgot that I was standing in a crypt in which the remains of Blessed Miguel Pro were resting. After the persons had purchased their bottle or bottles of oil, they left and Br Sanchito brought the proceedings to a peaceful finish with a prayer and an invocation to Miguel. As we left the cemetery, I realised how much Blessed Miguel Pro was loved by the ordinary people. In fact, after visiting the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe on her feast day, 12th December, sharing in the Eucharist and witnessing the devotion to her of the poor and indigenous people, I began to understand the love and devotion shown to Miguel Pro, who himself had a love for *La Guadalupana*. I returned that following Sunday to the crypt, but this time the number of persons who turned up was closer to 40/45, so that the majority were standing outside, around the entrance to the crypt. As we left the cemetery, I experienced a deep feeling of respect and love for Brother Sanchito who, at his age, continued the humble task of caring for the tomb of his fellow Jesuit Miguel Pro, and I thanked God for leading me to Mexico for my theological studies and sharing the devotion to Miguel Pro.

God's jester

I cannot remember all the stories about Miguel that I was told by Sanchito, but one got the impression that Miguel very often got himself into difficult situations from which he then rather jovially extracted himself. For example, he turned up at a house to administer the last rite to a dying man, only to realise that he had the wrong address, and so began referring to 'us salesmen' and laughing off the intrusion. On another occasion, while returning to Mexico from the USA at a crowded border crossing, he inadvertently handed over the wrong passport to the guard, which he then quickly retrieved, while making some ludicrous remarks accompanied with laughter. I cannot recall the country from which the other passport originated, but

it could have been a Vatican passport, which would have prompted immediate arrest. Among all the stories, one thing was quite clear: that Miguel was carrying out his pastoral work, ministering to the Catholic faithful. In this way, he reminded me of the sixteenth century English martyr, Saint [Edmund Campion](#), who also died for professing the Catholic faith. Historical time and place separate them, but their devotion and commitment were exemplary and won them the martyr's crown.

Sanchito's last days

When Hermano Sanchez celebrated his 99th birthday, during my second year of theological studies, we asked him what he would particularly like to have as a gift. His reply was a visit to Rome to meet Rev. Father General, [Pedro Arrupe](#). Most of us thought this was a good request, but **who would look after Miguel Pro's tomb?** Sanchito made it clear that he was not visiting Rome, but Fr Arrupe, and so he would not be away for many days. This clearly meant that Miguel's tomb would be covered as the trip would occur between the two Sundays. However, as the plan for the visit developed, Sanchito himself began to grow quite feeble, and the plan had to be altered. Rev. Fr General was invited to visit Hermano Sanchito and he accepted the invitation to visit him on his 100th birthday. As the time went by, Sanchito grew more feeble and had to give up his apostolic work of caring for the tomb of Miguel Pro, but a Mass was celebrated each month at the tomb by one of the priests from Cristo Rey theologate. The birthday dinner was celebrated in the dining hall with Sanchito on Fr Pedro Arrupe's right and the Provincial on his left. Sanchito was clearly so happy that I suspected he prayed his *nunc dimittis*, no doubt looking forward to meeting his friend Blessed Miguel Pro.

I returned to Mexico in 1984, ten years after leaving, and had planned to make a pilgrimage to the tomb of Miguel Pro, only to learn that his remains had been transferred to the Church of Saint Ignatius in Colonia Roma, which was close to where my tutor in Spanish lived and so the visit was a walk down memory lane. When I entered the church and made my way to where the remains were interred, I joined at least ten persons who were deep in prayer. I prayed for my many Mexican friends and of course a special prayer for Hermano Sanchez, the faithful companion of Blessed Miguel Pro SJ. This short essay is a record of my personal encounter with someone who knew Blessed Miguel Pro and who radiated a joy in his work of caring for his tomb. Their lives remain wonderful examples of what it is to be a Jesuit, a man for others.

Malcolm Rodrigues SJ

A note on the title of this essay: Sanchito is a term of endearment in Spanish, and literally means 'young Sanchez', similarly Padrecito means 'young Father', but the youthfulness is not about their age, but rather their disposition of joy in their way of proceeding with others.

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