

**MIGUEL FEBRES CORDERO,
TODAY**

Some may think that a saint from the last century is a museum piece or a useful instrument for maintaining an unjust and oppressive status quo. The holy Brother Miguel Febres Cordero has nothing in common with such a picturesque but misleading caricature.

From 1854 when he first saw the light in the Andean city of Cuenca, Ecuador, to 9th February, 1910, when his soul sought the peaceful abode of the Father of all men, one could say that, lovingly and tirelessly, he built up "a personality of extraordinary unity and coherence. This, in fact, is what characterises the saints more than anything else."

This unity is the antithesis of diversity. It forms a single texture, a vital synthesis. "How", asks Brother Miguel, "can you call 'Life' an existence without the love of God?" That is how he proposed to live and that is how he experienced the full human development which requires that we identify with people of flesh and blood. He expressed his thought clearly: "Jesus called himself the Son of Man and so identified himself with all humanity that He considered as done to himself the good or evil done to men. 'Whoever receives one such child in my Name receives Me'."

His life found its unity by centering itself on the existential love of God for mankind; the love of the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of the Amerindian. What is striking in Brother Miguel is his fundamental coherence: he lived what he believed and loved to do so. The living God, Father of all men, came to meet him. Miguel accepted the challenge:

"Since you want me for yourself alone
I give myself to you without reserve".

He lived the demanding experience of the God of nations and took mankind seriously. Nothing remained for him but to devote himself indefatigably to spreading the Kingdom among men. His intellectual interests, the appealing work of catechesis and the daily grind of teaching, even for an expert educator, all formed part of his religious sense of existence.

It cannot be denied that the strong personality of Miguel speaks to the Latin-American of today. He made a notable contribution to the strengthening of national sentiment in Ecuador. He was interested in the rich tradition of the people and played an effective role in developing our literary culture. He appreciated the value of certain forms of speech of our people and defended them on grounds of semantics and philology as well as by appeals to common sense. He wrote popular songs which contained plenty of sentiment but also expressed with impeccable style deep spiritual concepts.

The Latin-American Church has opted for the poor. Miguel was happy in the midst of children, many of whom were poor. It was the latter that he preferred. On the occasion of a First Communion ceremony he noted, "Many of the children are poor but on this day their hearts are of gold". His example spoke eloquently of his respect for the humble. It was a factor in mutual understanding and encouraged reciprocal service and a closing of the ranks against egotism. He zealously cultivated human solidarity.

As a plant seeks the light so Miguel sought the truth and defended it with firmness in spite of his natural reserve and childlike humility. In the face of danger this frail Brother showed none of the fear experienced by others and demonstrated the courage and sang froid of the man who has learned self control and has unshakeable confidence in God. This was the case in Quito during the Liberal Revolution of 1895 and during the tragic week in Barcelona in 1909.

Miguel lived and worked within a social, cultural and religious structure derived from the colonial system and the Council of Trent. One cannot, therefore, expect from him post-conciliary theories and attitudes. The Theology of Revolution and Liberation Theology had not yet appeared nor had jet planes and modern information systems. It is clear, nevertheless, that his critical mind and creative personality did not stick rigidly to the path of routine.

An insatiable desire for change and renewal drove him to strive for a total and permanent conversion which would liberate him from the idols and oppressive structures which are the consequences of sin. His intimate and private life reveals this much more than his community and social life, limited as it was by the conventions of the time in which he lived. The saints have all endured such limitations. In spite of them the basic orientation of his life is a constant invitation to surmount such limitations.

Far from allowing himself to become alienated, he never fled from reality whether in Quito or in Europe. With love he contributed his share of hard work and personal influence to the construction of a world less unjust and more human. He perfected the educational system, wrote school text books which were of real value and inspired by love of country and opened the way to new educational thinking amongst us.

He was an effective force in the cause of democratization and devoted himself with intelligence, wisdom and a sense of responsibility to the causes considered just in the context of his time. His love for his country led him to struggle day after day for its greatness and prosperity.

Son of America, he was by that very fact a son of Mary. Brother Miguel is no museum piece. For every Amerindian he is a living encouragement in the daily struggle for improvement.

His motto could well have been. "Excelsior! Always higher! Always farther! For God and for Mary in the midst of my people!"

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