THE MARTYRDOM OF THE THREE BULGARIAN ASSUMPTIONISTS

By Pierre Gallay
Assumptionist

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THIS ADVENTURE

A film

"The Balkans Crucified - The Bulgarian Church in the Storm", a 56-minute report by Claude SAUVAGEOT and Marie-Ange DONZÉ about the lives, trial and execution of the three Assumptionist religious and also about life in the prisons and death camps.
Video VHS/PAL

A DVD

15-minutes long. *"The film of the 1952 Communist trial against the Catholic priests."*
Footage filmed by the Bulgarian Communist authorities in Sofia in 1952 at the trial against the Catholic priests, where the President of the Tribunal pronounces the death sentences.

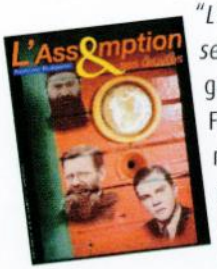
A book

"The Assumptionists : From past to present", by Lucien Guissard. 2002, 140 p., Bayard Publications Centurion.

An illustrated account

"Memory recovered" by Francis Keller, 2002, 40 p., Editions du Signe.

A quartely magazine



"L'Assomption et ses œuvres", a magazine of the French Province, regularly publishes news about all the religious families of the Assumption : Assumptionists, Oblate Sisters of the Assumption, Little Sisters of the Assumption, Orantes of the Assumption, Religious Sisters of the Assumption. (Requests for copies should be sent to Procure missionaire de l'Assomption, 79 avenue Denfert-Rochereau, 75014 Paris - FRANCE)

A web site

www.assumptio.org

Project Manager : Bernard Holzer
Photograph : Claude Sauvageot **Translation :** Richard Richards

Bayard Service Édition

CENTRE – ALPES - MÉDITERRANÉE Savoie Technolac 73375 Le Bourget-du-Lac France • Tél 04 79 26 16 60 • Fax 04 79 26 16 70
Editing : Laurence Jacquet **Layout designer :** Pascal Riner
Printing : Mâcon imprimerie 71 000 Mâcon - Dépôt légal : 2e trim. 2002

NOVEMBER 11, 1952, at 11:30 p.m., in the central prison of Sofia, capital of Bulgaria, three Bulgarian Assumptionists, Fathers Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov, were shot by a firing squad. At the same time, a Bulgarian bishop, a Passionist, Eugene Bossilkov, was also shot. All four had been condemned to death on October 3, during a trumped-up trial, accused of spying for the Vatican, plotting an uprising and being agents of capitalism.

Bishop Bossilkov was beatified by Pope John Paul II, but the canonization process of the three Assumptionists was not introduced at the same time because of the risk of aggravating the situation of another fifteen Assumptionists in Bulgaria who had themselves been in prison or were still exercising some ministry while being closely watched by the Bulgarian political police, as ordered by Moscow.

For many years, the date of their execution was unknown because the archives of the Bulgarian Ministry of the Interior could not be consulted until the collapse of Communism.

The bodies of the four martyrs were never found. They had been buried in a common grave.

Countless were the testimonials of the holiness and martyrdom of these men of God… On November 11, 2000 in Plovdiv, the alumni of St. Augustine College, the famous Assumptionist college there, with the help of the municipality, erected a statue to commemorate their martyrdom.

To understand today what happened in 1952, we must learn something about Bulgaria, about Bulgarian Christianity, about the Assumptionist presence in that country since 1863 and about the three Assumptionists who died for their faith during a November night in 1952.

INFORMATION ON BULGARIA

According to documents of the Middle Ages, the word "Bulgarian" is to be linked to the Volga river. Others suggest that it comes from the verb "boulg" which means to mix. Others maintain that the exact translation of "Bulgarian" is in fact "rebel".

Most people would not know where to find Bulgaria on the map, a mountainous country with large fertile valleys. It is in the Balkans, where Greeks, Bulgarians, Turks, and Yugoslavians have struggled for more than a century. One result of this struggle was the partition of Macedonia. Bulgaria has repeatedly lost this territory, so Bulgarians today hardly expect to recover it. Bulgaria has now about 8.2 million inhabitants in its 111,000 km^2, with a birth rate which is in free fall since 1990. The Bulgarian State was founded in 681 by Khan Asparouch. Ruler of the proto-Bulgarians, he forged a union with the Slavs. These two peoples intermixing with the Thracians, the oldest settlers on the territory, formed the Bulgarian nation.

At times during its history, Bulgaria was a great nation and had its czars, its "founding fathers" : Czar Boris who reigned from 852 until 889 and Czar Simeon, nicknamed the Bulgarian Charlemagne, who reigned from 893 until 927. It was under Czar Boris that Bulgaria became Christian.

Invention of the Cyrillic alphabet

It is one of the glories of Bulgaria that it introduced to Kiev, in the Ukraine, the Cyrillic alphabet, that is the Slav alphabet or Slavonic, invented by Saints Cyril and Methodius. As a result of vast migrations, the Bulgarians are part Slav and part Turk ; they had periods of splendor, to the point of breaking free from the power of Byzantium. In the 13th century Bulgaria stretched from the Black Sea to the Adriatic and the Aegean.

BULGARIA

But feudal anarchy dismembered the country, which came under Turkish rule. It must be said that the Christian faith is what helped Bulgarians preserve their identity for five centuries until 1878, when it became independent thanks to Russia which defeated the Turks. Bulgarians have always felt grateful to the Russians for this. But a strong minority of 1.2 million Muslims is still part of the country. Despite all the efforts of the Communist regime, which tried to change all the Turkish names into Bulgarian, the minority is still very much alive. Some of the great names of Bulgarian literature and culture deserve to be mentioned : I. Vazov (writer), H. Botev (poet), Z. Boyadjiev (painter), P. Yavorov (poet), Saints Cyril and Methodius and St. John of Rila.

A troubled history

Since its independence in 1878, Bulgaria's history has been one of upheaval : a Balkan war in 1812, the Treaty of Neuilly in 1919 by which it lost Macedonia, the alliance with Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1944, the occupation by Soviet forces from September 1944 to the end of 1947. Already in 1946, the Bulgarian Communist party came into power, calling itself a "popular democracy". The constitution was entirely based on that of the USSR, with all that that meant : "people's courts" which condemned 2,700 people to death, concentration camps (100,000 political prisoners) and purges within the Communist party itself (30% of its members), five-year plans and intense Russification.

Moreover, the Bulgarian secret police, as an armed branch of the Soviet KGB, was responsible for many despicable and intolerable actions. This recent history allows us to understand better how the Communist regime tried to destroy Bulgarian Christianity.

The Orthodox monastery of Rila.

A MILLENIUM OF CHRISTIANITY

It was from the hands of a Byzantine bishop that Boris and his whole people received baptism in 865. As a result, the Bulgarian church imitated the Byzantine church.

Links with Rome broke down after the schism between Rome and Constantinople in 1054. This church, however, did not like being led by the Greeks and from 1204 to 1393 created its own Patriarchate at Tirnovo. Under the Turkish occupation, which allowed conquered peoples to maintain their own religion, the Bulgarian church was again led by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The liturgy now used Greek rather than Slavonic. Still the Bulgarian monasteries such as that of Saint John of Rila kept the intellectual and artistic traditions of the Bulgarian people alive.

Bulgarian Christianity had to deal with the Bogomil movement, started in the tenth century by a priest of that name. Though condemned as a heresy by the Bulgarian Church in 1211, it nevertheless spread through the Balkans for five centuries. Inspired by Manicheism, it opposed light and darkness, good and evil. The faithful were divided into "the perfect" and the "auditors". The Cathari heresy of the French Albigensians originated with the Bogomils.

The Bulgarian church was of

The nationalistic awakening in the 1860's was at the origin of a Catholic group of the Byzantine-Slavonic rite.

Fathers Kamen Vitchev and Josaphat Chichkov, with the staff of St. Augustine College in Plovdiv, with Bishop Angelo Roncalli (Apostolic Delegate in Bulgaria), on the occasion of celebrating the 50th anniversary of the college, May 27, 1934

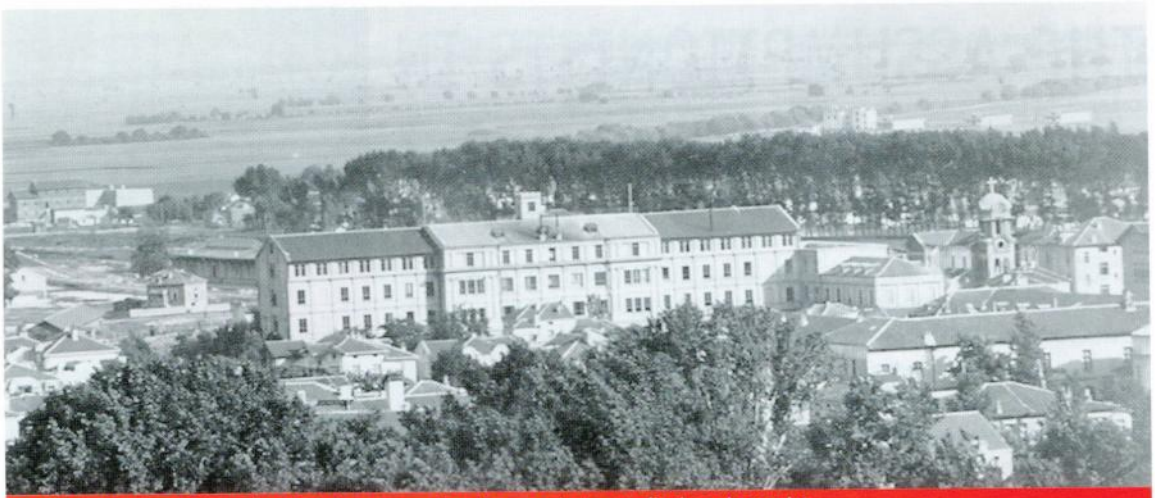
the Byzantine-Slavonic rite, but in the 13th century, merchants from Ragusa introduced the Latin rite. Later, copper workers from Saxony brought the Latin rite with them and in 1595 Pope Clement III named a Latin rite bishop, Peter Solinate.

Intolerance towards the Latin rite

But the Orthodox Bulgarians and the Turks had no tolerance for Latin rite Catholics. In 1688, the Turks killed all the Catholic priests and many of the faithful because they had called upon Western powers to start a crusade against the Ottoman Empire. A few villages remained Catholic, especially in Plovdiv in the South, and in the North along the Danube.

Then, much later, something important happened : a kind of nationalistic awakening in the 1860's gave rise to a Catholic group that was Byzantine-Slavonic rather than Latin. Two thousand Orthodox Bulgarians joined the Roman Catholic Church while keeping their own rite.

Their leader, Archbishop Joseph Sokolski, was ordained by Pope Pius IX in Rome on April 14, 1861. He was kidnapped by a Russian agent and imprisoned in an Orthodox monastery in



St. Augustine College in Plovdiv where the three priests studied and taught

Kiev, where he died twenty years later.

Bulgarian Catholics of both Byzantine-Slavonic and Latin rites were almost eliminated after the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and World War I (1914-1918). Bishop Roncalli, the future John XXIII, was sent to Bulgaria in 1925 by Pius XI to be their Apostolic Visitator and, later, Apostolic Delegate.

At the end of World War II, in 1945, Bulgarian Catholics numbered only 57,000, less than 1% of the population. About 6,000 were of the Byzantine-Slavonic rite, and the rest were of the Latin rite.

The new wing of the college, built in 1929, after the earthquake

THE ASSUMPTIONISTS IN BULGARIA

The history just given is important because it helps to explain why the Assumptionists came to Bulgaria in 1863.

Pope Pius XI, who himself had ordained Archbishop Sokolski, asked the founder of the Assumptionists, Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, to send some religious to Bulgaria to especially help those Bulgarian Orthodox who wished to enter the Catholic Church.

These converts which were called "Uniates", a term may sound pejorative today. Before the ecumenical movement of the 20th century, ecumenism from the Catholic point of view was seen as a return to Rome and not as a communion of sister churches as Vatican II acknowledged.

Father Victorin Galabert, a medical doctor and a doctor in Canon Law, became the founder of the Assumptionist mission in Bulgaria, which was then known as the "Mission in the East". To help his priests, Fr. d'Alzon founded a congregation of sisters, "the Oblates of the Assumption" who established schools at Sofia, Yambol, Varna and Sliven. In 1864, the Assumptionists had started a grammar school, St. Andrew's, at Philippopoli (Plovdiv) while awaiting to found St. Augustine College in 1884, which would rapidly become one the most prestigious schools in the Balkans, until the Communists closed it in 1948.

Father Emmanuel d'Alzon (1810-1880), founder of the Religious of the Assumption and of the Oblate Sisters of the Assumption.

Father Victorin Gallabert (1830-1885), founder of the Mission in Bulgaria

Re-inforced presence of the Assumptionists

The Assumptionists accepted responsibility for several parishes with both Latin and Byzantine rites within each. Several Assumptionists were ordained in the Byzantine rite. They had established three seminaries, at Adrianopolis, at Kum Kapu (European bank of Istanbul) and Kadikoy (Asian bank of Istanbul). We must remember that at that time, Bulgaria was not independent, but under Turkish domination. The Assumptionists eventually founded several residences in Turkey, missions in Rumania, Greece, Russia, Yugoslavia and Palestine. But Bulgaria was the start of this considerable Assumptionist presence in the Near East. Direct apostolate was complemented by an intellectual apostolate with the creation at Kadikoy, in 1897, of "*Echos d'Orient*", the journal of the Center for Byzantine Studies, by Bishop Louis Petit, future Latin Archbishop of Athens.

In Bulgaria itself, at the end of World War II, twenty Bulgarian Assumptionists exercised their apostolate at the Plovdiv College and various parishes. In 1948, the Communists expelled all non-Bulgarian religious, including non-Bulgarian Assumptionists. Everything was thus in place for the horror that would befall the Catholic minority of the country.

To the left of Bishop Kourtev, Father Kamen Vitchev, at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the St. Augustine College in Plovdiv (1934)

COMMUNIST TERROR

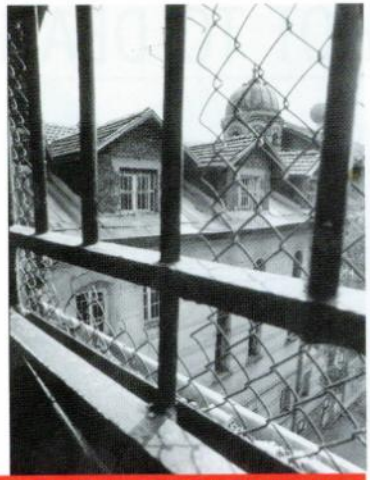
The Communist party attacked Christians, beginning in 1948. The Orthodox and the Protestants were the first targets. Then, in their turn, Catholics were persecuted. The outcome was a series of trials and arbitrary sentences.

Before attacking the small Catholic minority, which, with the Pope and the Vatican, was considered Communism's enemy number one, the Bulgarian Communist party (800,000 members, one in ten of all Bulgarians) attacked other Christians, the Orthodox and the Protestants.

A Communist party report, found in the Archives of the party, analyzed the activity of the Orthodox and Catholic clergy between January 1 and March 31, 1948. The report said that the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church was the "*the lurking place of reactionaries*". Agents were sent to spy on Orthodox priests and to report on their activities, speeches, and meetings. Soon they were made to toe the line. Catholic priests and Protestant ministers were closely watched and reports were made, in view of future trials.

Worship totally shackled

On February 16, 1949, a law on cults, inspired by Rumanian and Russian Communist legislation on the same subject, was passed. This law severely limited all exercise of religion. All kinds of controls were put in place : nothing could be published, no teaching was allowed, no hospitals or orphanages could be opened, goods were confiscated, etc. All "foreign" schools were expropriated, including nine French colleges and high schools and an American high school. From February 25 to March 9, 1949, fifteen Protestant ministers were tried. Four were given life sentences. The same thing was happening in the nearby so-called "popular democracies". These Churches became the "Church of Silence".



Central prison of Sofia : view from the cell of one of the tortured Assumptionist fathers.

In Yugoslavia, Bishop Stepinac was arrested on September 17, 1946. In Hungary, Cardinal Mindszenty was arrested on December 2, 1948 and on February 4 was given a life sentence.
In Czechoslovakia, on September 20, 1949, hundreds of priests and monks were arrested. Other arrests went on for months until a trial, on March 31, 1950, when Catholic religious were sentenced to hard labor and their monasteries closed as of May 7 of the same year. All together, 2,000 priests were jailed.
In Rumania, on May 10, 1950, the Greco-Catholic auxiliary bishop of Alba Julia, Bishop Aftenie, jailed since December 1948, died in prison, and on July 5 all Rumanian bishops and 600 priests were imprisoned. On October 4, 1950, two Ukrainian Catholic prelates died in Siberia where they had been deported.
December 11, 1950, Archbishop Beran of Prague was arrested as well as several hundred priests.
In Poland, Cardinal Wyszinski, Primate of Poland, was arrested on September 26, 1953.

The great persecution

These few reminders of the great persecution of Christians under the Communist terror are necessary to provide a better understanding of the trial that resulted in the death sentence for the three Bulgarian Assumptionists and a Passionist bishop. All these trials inspired by the USSR which, from 1917 to the 1980's, had assassinated hundreds of Orthodox bishops, tens of thousands of priests and millions of believers, had as their purpose the complete destruction of the Christian faith. It was to be replaced by Marxist/ Leninist doctrine.

Concentration camp of Belené.

THREE ASSUMPTIONISTS SHOT TO DEATH

Who were these three Bulgarian Assumptionists, innocent victims of the Communist terror ? Three Portraits.

Father Kamen Vitchev (1893-1952)

Kamen Vitchev (1893-1952)

Born May 23, 1893 at Srem in Bulgaria, Fr. Vitchev came from a peasant Christian family of which two of six boys became Assumptionist priests. His baptismal name was Peter, but he changed his name to Kamen when he entered the Assumptionists.

He began his novitiate at Gempe, in Belgium on September 18, 1910. Previously, he had taken courses at the minor seminary at Karagatch, near Adrianopolis and at Phanaraki, on the Asian bank of the Sea of Marmara. After his novitiate,

Byzantine church of the Ascension and Seminary of Plovdiv, where Fathers Kamen Vitchev and Pavel Djidjov were arrested on July 4, 1952

young Kamen, who was considered to be pious, serious and a hard worker, was sent to Louvain in Belgium to study philosophy and theology. His studies were interrupted by periods of teaching at St. Augustine College in Plovdiv and at the alumnate (minor seminary) at Kum Kapu (Turkey). He was ordained a priest at Constantinople on December 22, 1921, in the Oriental rite.

Having returned to Europe, he furthered his theological studies in Rome and in Strasbourg, where he obtained his doctorate in theology in 1929. Very knowledgeable in the history of the Bulgarian church, he published several articles in "*Echos d'Orient*". In 1930, he was appointed professor of philosophy and Dean of Studies at St. Augustine College in Plovdiv until the school was closed by the Communists on August 2, 1948.

An influential teacher

All his former students remember him with fondess, gratitude, and respect. This outstanding Assumptionist college had become the pride of the Bulgarian intelligentsia. It had accepted as students young Orthodox, Catholics, Armenians, Jews and Muslims. They lived peacefully together, each keeping his faith. It was an extraordinary ecumenical and interreligious success. An institution of this kind, which held French culture in the highest esteem, was bound to fall into the grinder of the Communist regime. The college having been closed, Father Kamen became Superior of the Seminary of Plovdiv with some fifteen religious, five theology students and fourteen seminarians. In 1948, all foreign religious were expelled from Bulgaria and Fr. Kamen was named Vicar-Provincial of the Bulgarian Assumptionists. They numbered twenty, and they staffed five Oriental rite parishes and four Latin rite parishes. Difficulties stated to increase. Everyone was closely watched by the police. Financial troubles got worse. An Assumptionist, Father Assen Tchonkov, was arrested in August, 1950.

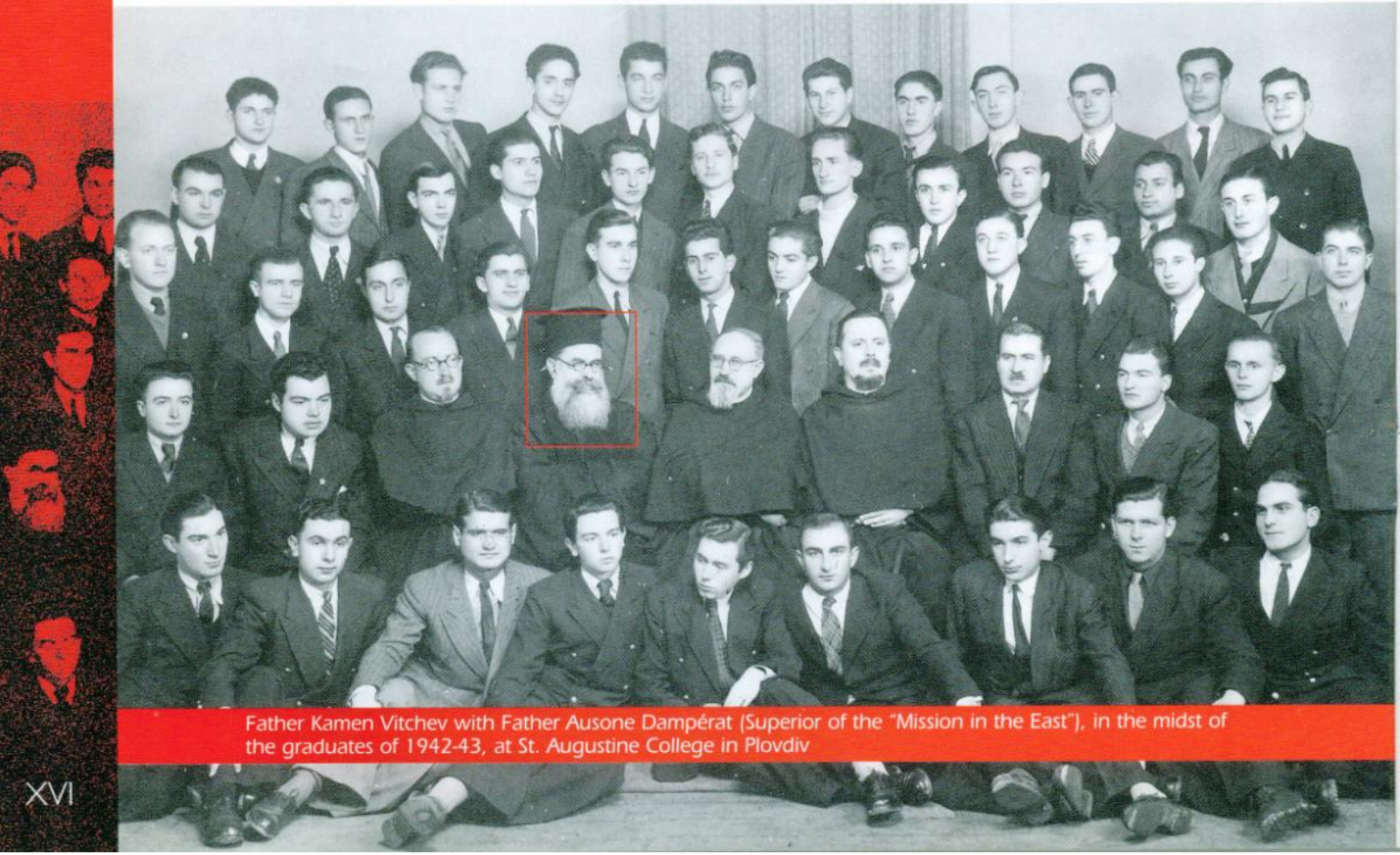
The man to eliminate

In a letter sent to Father Gervais Quénard, the Superior General of the Assumptionists, on November 24, 1949, Father Kamen Vitchev foresaw a horrible

The cell where one of the Assumptionist fathers was detained.

future : "*The Iron Curtain is becoming thicker and thicker. Without doubt, they are preparing dossiers on Catholic priests, who will be treated when the right time comes as were the Protestant ministers.*" He was arrested during the night of July 4, 1952, along with Father Pavel Djidjov.

Fr. Kamen was an Assumptionist with great faith, very fervent and faithful. As a teacher, he was esteemed and respected. He was eloquent, had a clear mind and was a fine educator of those with a priestly vocation. He cared for others and worked hard for the unity of the Church. He was such an important figure in the Bulgarian Church that the Communists had to eliminate him. Besides, during his trials,they tried to destroy everything about him, including his reputation.



Father Kamen Vitchev with Father Ausone Dampérat (Superior of the "Mission in the East"), in the midst of the graduates of 1942-43, at St. Augustine College in Plovdiv

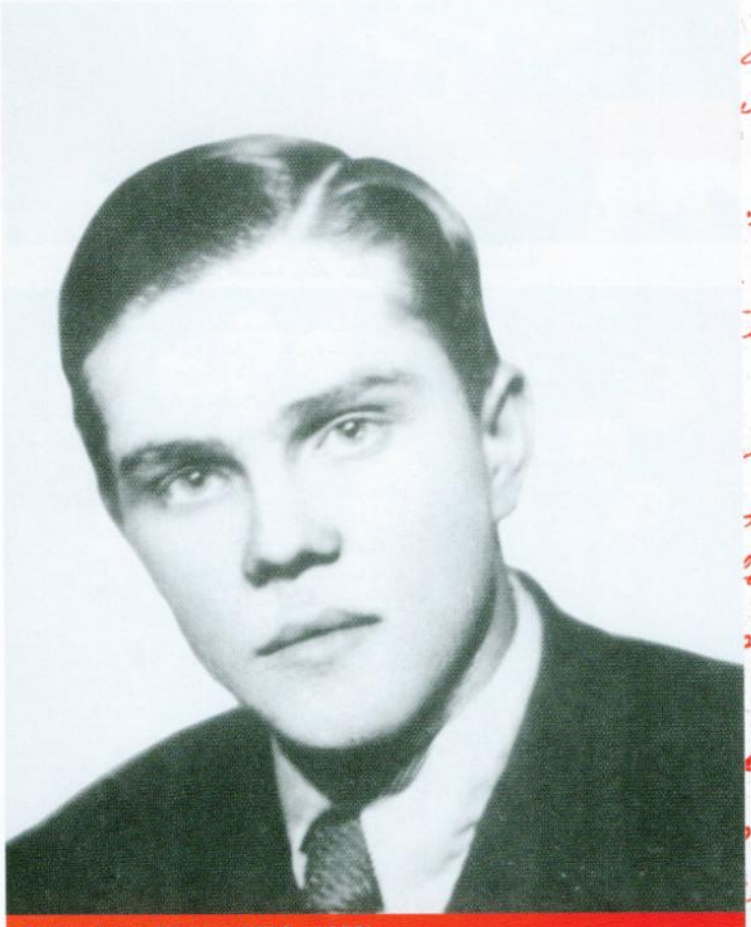
Pavel Djidjov (1919-1952)

Arrested at the same time as Fr. Kamen, on July 4, 1952, Pavel Djidjov was the youngest. He was only 33. Born July 19, 1919 at Plovdiv, in a Latin rite Catholic family, he was baptised on August 2 and given the name of Joseph. He took the name of Pavel (Paul) when he entered the Assumptionist novitiate of Nozeroy, in France, October 2, 1938.

From his youth, he had wanted to be a priest. He entered St. Augustine College in Plovdiv, where he was considered a good student, especially strong in mathematics. He was good in sports and was part of the team later known as the "Locomotive" in Plovdiv. After the novitiate, he studied theology at Lormoy, near Paris, during World War II. Life was hard and the students often went hungry. Pavel took the initiative of raising a few sheep in order to improve the menu.

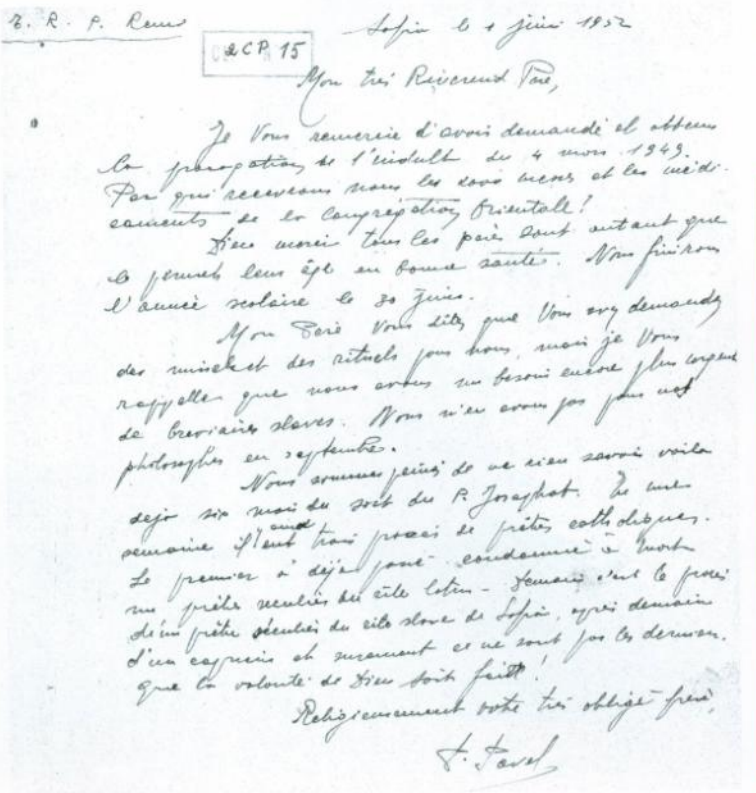
An intrepid young priest

Then for reasons of health, he returned to Bulgaria in 1942. He completed his theology courses and was ordained priest in the Latin rite on January 26, 1945, at Plovdiv. He continued studies in economics and social sciences and taught at the College of Varna. There he was closely watched by the secret police because he had a great deal of influence on the students. In 1945, he was named Treasurer of St. Augustine College and served there until



Father Pavel Djidjov (1919 - 1952)

St. Michael House in Varna where Fathers Josaphat Chichkov and Pavel Djidjov lived.



R. R. P. Remi

Sofia le 1 juin 1952

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Mon très Révérend Père,

Je Vous remercie d'avoir demandé et obtenu la prorogation de l'indult du 4 mars 1949. Par qui recevrons nous les deux messes et les médicaments de la Congrégation Orientale!

Dieu merci tous les pères sont autant que le permet leur âge en bonne santé. Nous finirons l'année scolaire le 30 juin.

Mon Père Vous dites que Vous avez demandé des missels et des rituels pour nous, mais je Vous rappelle que nous avons un besoin encore plus urgent de breviaires slaves. Nous n'en avons pas pour nos philosophes en septembre.

Nous sommes peinés de ne rien savoir voilà déjà six mois du sort du P. Josaphat. De une semaine il y eut trois procès de prêtres catholiques. Le premier a déjà passé condamné à mort un prêtre séculier du rite latin - Demain c'est le procès d'un prêtre séculier du rite slave de Sofia, après demain d'un capucin et sûrement ce ne sont pas les derniers. Que la volonté de Dieu soit faite!

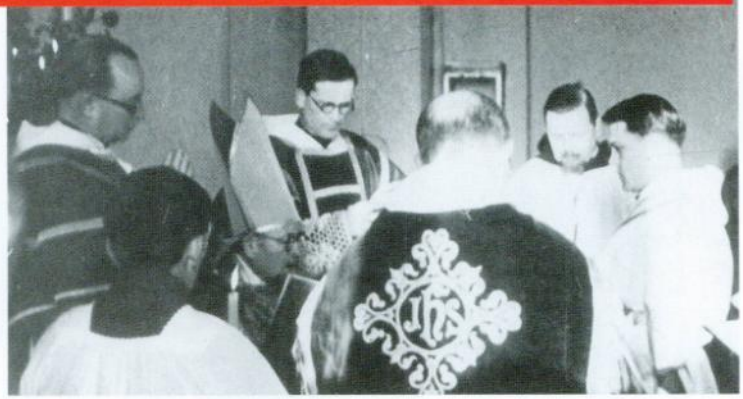
Religieusement votre très obligé frère,

P. Pavel

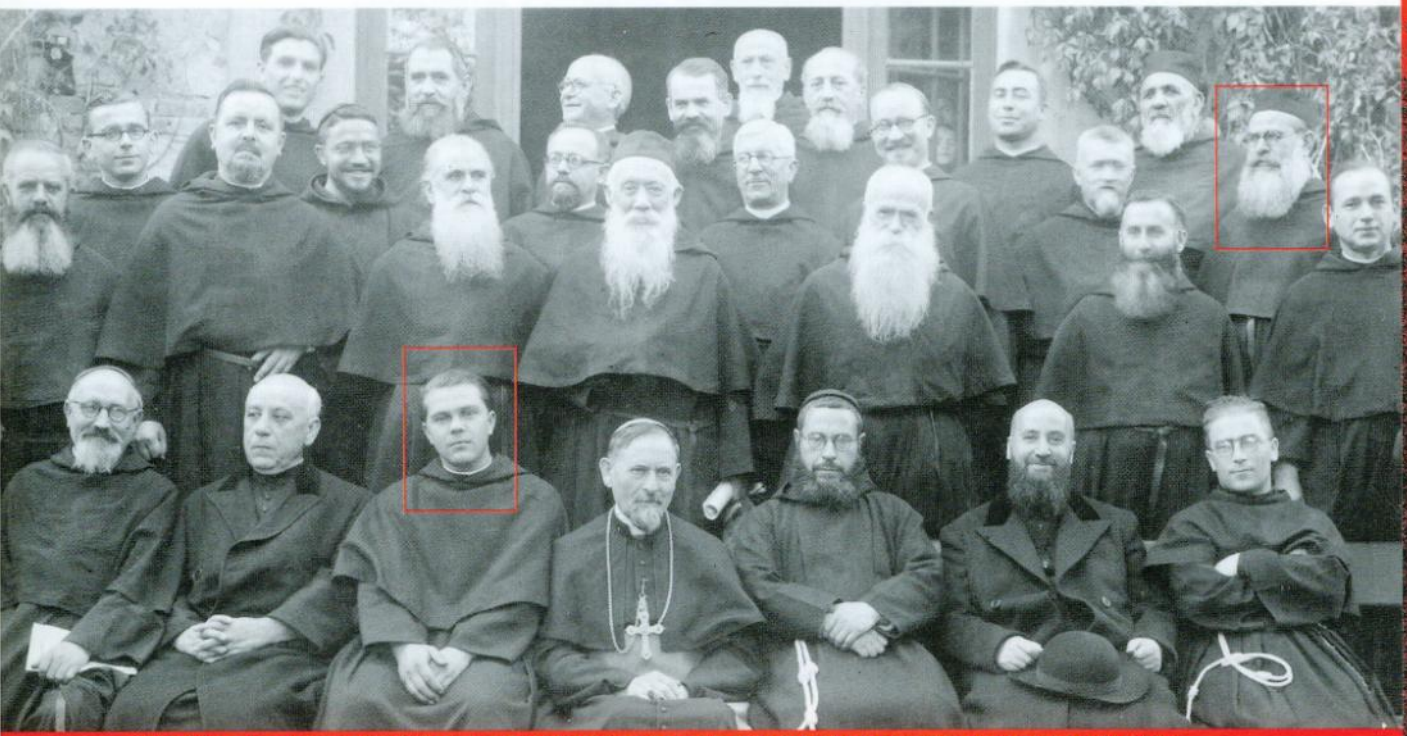
the College was closed by the Communists in 1948. As a result, the Bulgarian Assumptionists were totally without funds. The French Assumptionists tried to help them by sending money through the French delegation. In June, 1952, Fr. Pavel commented on the arrest and condemnation of several priests and wrote : "*May God's will be done. We await our turn*". He was arrested a month later. Everyone who knew him appreciated his piety, his sense of humor, his deep faith, his ecumenical spirit, his bravery

An excerpt from Father Pavel Djidjov's last letter to Father Rémi Kokel, Procurator in Rome, January 26, 1952 : *"We are distressed, having heard nothing of Father Josaphat for six months now. There will be three trials, within a week, against Catholic priests. The first one is already over : death penalty for a diocesan priest of the Latin rite. Tomorrow it will be the trial of a diocesan priest of the Slavonic rite, in Sofia ; the day after tomorrow, that of a Capuchin and these will not be the last ones, surely. May God's will be done ! Religiously, your most devoted brother, P. Pavel*

Father Pavel Djidjov's ordination by Bishop Ivan Romanov, January 26, 1945, in Plovdiv. On the back of the photo, a short handwritten word by that religious, sent a few weeks later to Father Herman Gisler, a former teacher of his : *"Souvenir of my ordination to the priesthood. A happy and holy Feast of Easter, Pavel"*



against the Communists. He never hesitated to confront the Communist authorities in order to defend the rights of the Church. For example, he visited his Assumptionist brother Assen Tchonkov in the Sofia prison and asked the guards to make life easier for him.



The Bulgarian Assumptionist community surrounding Father Pavel Djidjov on the day of his ordination to the priesthood (January 26, 1945). Father Kamen Vitchev is at the top, to the right

Josaphat Chichkov (1884-1952)

Of the three Assumptionist martyrs, Robert-Matthew Chichkov (who took the name Josaphat as an Assumptionist) was the oldest. He was born in Plovdiv, February 9, 1884. His family was a large one of fervent Latin rite Catholics. He entered the Assumptionist minor seminary at Adrianopolis when he was only nine. He did all of his grammar school and high school studies there. He was only sixteen when he entered the Assumptionist novitiate at Phanaraki, in Turkey, April 24, 1900. He was ordained a priest in the Latin rite July 11, 1909, at Malines in Belgium, after having studied philosophy and theology at Louvain.

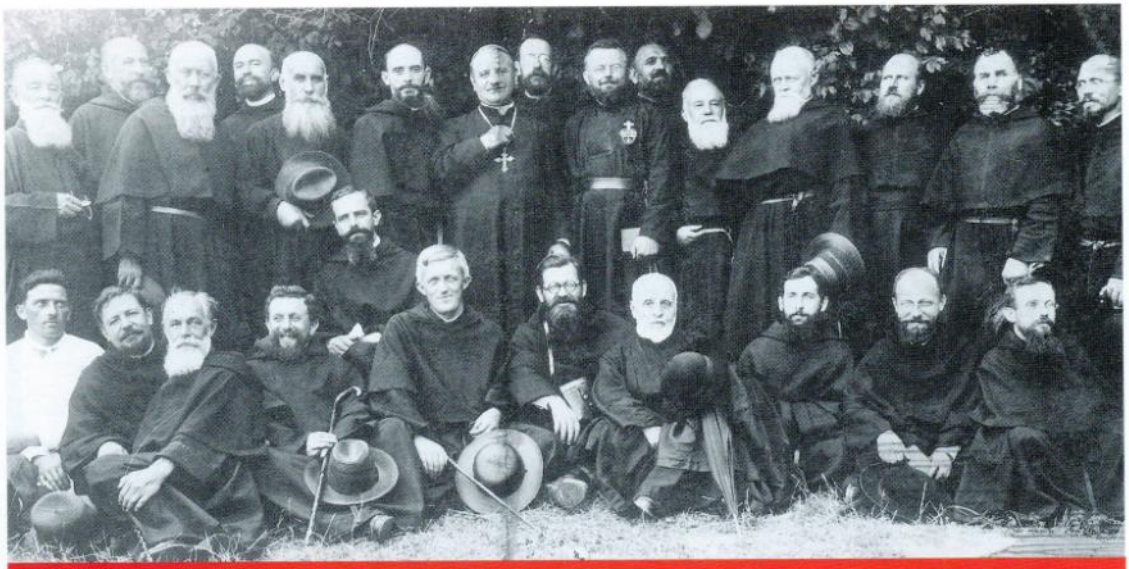
Father Josaphat Chichkov (1884 - 1952)

Bubbling over with activity

Back in Bulgaria, he taught at St. Augustine College in Plovdiv and at St. Michael College in Varna. He was also Superior of the minor seminary of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Yambol. He served as pastor of the Latin Parish in Yambol and was chaplain of the Oblate Sisters of the Assumption. Later he returned to Varna, as the Superior, in 1937, and served there until he was arrested in December 1951 by the Communist militia.

He was a man who bubbled over with activity and a man of enormous erudition, a fine musician, an eloquent preacher, a good educator, jovial and with a fine sense of humor. He expanded the Yambol seminary to accommodate thirty seminarians for both rites, Latin and Byzantine-Slav, celebrating the liturgy one

Father Josaphat Chichkov with Bishop Angelo Roncalli, the Oblate Sisters of the Assumption and their pupils, in Yambol, June 3, 1934



Father Josaphat Chichkov sitting at the feet of Bishop Angelo Roncalli, at the end of the spiritual retreat at St. Michael College in Varna, in 1928

week in Slavonic and the next in Latin. In order to cope with the financial needs of the house he organized fund-raising campaigns and taught French to teachers, civil servants and officers of the Bulgarian Army. Attentive to progress, he had a radio receiver and a movie projector installed at the Yambol seminary, to show the popular "Pathé-Baby" films. A very fatherly educator, he was also a true storyteller. He dazzled his young friends with stories, making them sing, teaching them to pray.

At Varna, he launched a Franco-Bulgarian club that had more than 150 members, most of them students of Advanced Business Studies, the town being a port on the Black Sea. He was often the host of Bishop Roncalli (future Pope John XXIII), then Apostolic Visitator in Bulgaria, who liked to drop by to a rest. In 1949, Bishop Eugene Bossilkov appointed him to the Latin parish of Varna. He worked hard to run the parish, while actively writing for the "Poklonnick", a little magazine for Catholic Bulgarians.

His life could be summarized in two short sentences taken from a letter he wrote in 1930 : "*We seek to do as well as we can what is expected of us in order to sanctify ourselves without putting on airs* " ; and another of 1942 : "*I can assure you, dear and Reverend Father, that we do not forget to live as good religious even though we are constantly involved with young people taken up with this world ; for, in the end, the essential is to attain God by living for Him ; the rest is incidental*".

THE TIME OF THE GREAT TRIAL

The Bulgarian Communist government showed some restraint toward the Catholic Church while consolidating its position. But everything changed in 1949, when it began a violent press campaign against religion and especially against the Catholic Church and the Vatican.

After the law on cults of February 16, 1949, the apostolic delegation of the Holy See in Sofia was closed and diplomatic relations with the Vatican were broken. The Bulgarian Foreign Affairs Minister declared : *"the Vatican does not hide its purpose. It is the sworn enemy of the Soviet Union, of Popular Democracies and of Communism."* A party newspaper "Varnenski Novini" (Varna News) called Pius XII *"the Vaticanesque mercenary of Wall Street"*, *"an obscurantist"* and *"a dying jackal."*

ДА ПРЕБЪДЕ НАВЕКИ БЪЛГАРО-СЪВЕТСКАТА ДРУЖБА!

Тежкото стопанско положение на страните от Западна Европа

Facsimile of the first page of the newspaper *"Rabotchnesko Delo"* of September 21, 1952 publishing the *"Act accusing the Catholic organization of plotting and spying in Bulgaria during the trial"*.

1

Insulting caricatures illustrated Communist papers. All church goods and real estate were confiscated. Priests were arrested and were sentenced to prison.

A mock trial

Already in December 1951, Father Josaphat Chichkov was arrested. At four a.m., July 4, 1952, four or five members of the secret police entered the Plovdiv seminary and arrested Fathers Kamen Vitchev and Pavel Djidjov. They proceeded to search the house from top to bottom. All was now in place for a mock trial. The act of accusation appeared in the newspaper of September 16. The trial began on September 29. The sentences were given October 3, at 9 p.m. Among the accused, four were condemned to death : Bishop Bossilkov and three Assumptionists from Nicopoli : Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov. It is only after the fall of the Berlin wall (November 1989) that it was discovered that they had been shot on November 11, 1952, at 11:30 p.m., in the central prison of Sofia.

2

Two caricatures in the newspaper «Rabotchnesko Delo» of September 25 and 27, 1952.
(1) Legend : *"The altar of the hypocritical spying organization of the 'Holy-Fathers'"*.
(2) On the belt of the Pope : "Pope Pius XI" ; on the page of the paper : *"Act of accusation for spying, sabotage and disturbance"*.

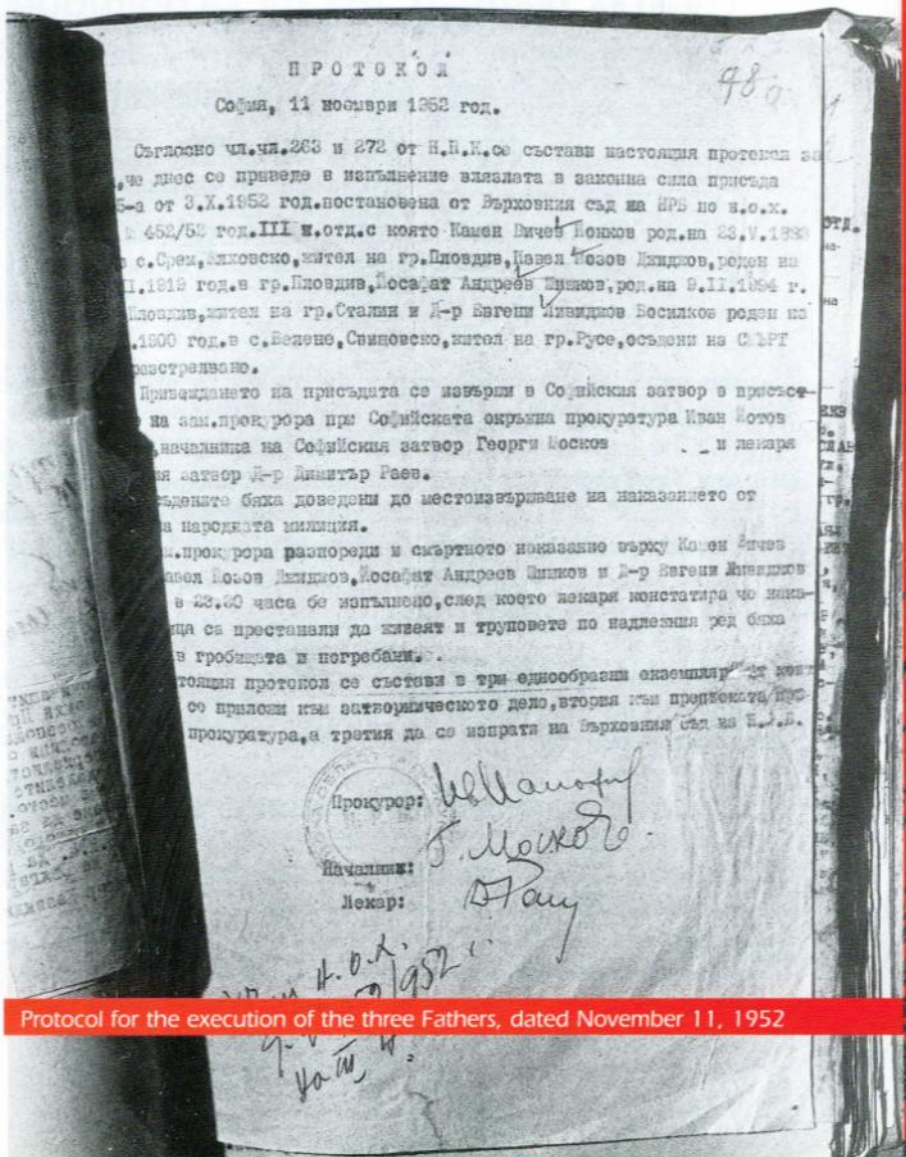
Tortured, humiliated, condemned

They were condemned as "*spies and conspirators, seeking to foment an imperialist war against the USSR, Bulgaria and Popular Democracies.*"

Evidence of this was completely fabricated. Physically tortured, humiliated, in horrible hygienic conditions, deprived of sleep and of food, obliged to remain standing in their cell for 12 or 13 hours in a row, exhausted, terrified, in overcrowded cells, interrogated endlessly, the accused were reduced to a pathetic state. They seemed like zombies and would have signed whatever was asked of them.

And the texts that they were forced to sign were in the pure style of the Stalinist trials, which were their models.

Their personalities were destroyed, piece-by-piece. In the end, they pronounced themselves guilty, broke into tears, asked forgiveness. Then, in one last burst, they reacted, retracted their statements before the judges and denied everything they had been accused of. Thus, Father Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov, according to a report from a eyewitness, sent by the French ambassador in Sofia to Mr. Robert Schuman, then Minister of Foreign Affairs of France : "*They retracted during the trial.*" And when they were confronted with the false avowals they had been physically forced to sign, they affirmed that at the time they had been beaten, hands and feet tied, and tortured, as Father Djidjov managed to say. A woman who had sat in on



ПРОТОКОЛ

София, 11 ноември 1952 год.

Съглосно чл.чл.263 и 272 от Н.П.К.се съставы настоящия протокол за
,че днес се приведе в изпълнение влязлата в законна сила присъда
5-а от 3.X.1952 год.постановена от Върховния съд на НРБ по н.о.х.
452/52 год.III н.отд.с която Камен Вичев Йонков род.на 23.V.1888
с.Срем,Алховско,жител на гр.Пловдив,Павел Йозов Джиджов,роден на
.1919 год.в гр.Пловдив,Йосафат Андреев Шишков,род.на 9.II.1894 г.
Пловдив,жител на гр.Сталин и Д-р Евгени Ливиджов Босилков роден на
.1900 год.в с.Белене,Свищовско,жител на гр.Русе,осъдени на СМЪРТ
разстрелване.

Привеждането на присъдата се извърши в Софийския затвор в присъст-
на зам.прокурора при Софийската окръжна прокуратура Иван Йотов
,началника на Софийския затвор Георги Москов и лекаря
ия затвор Д-р Димитър Раев.

съдените бяха доведени до местоизвършване на наказанието от
а народната милиция.

м.прокурора разпореди и смъртното наказание върху Камен Вичев
авел Йозов Джиджов,Йосафат Андреев Шишков и Д-р Евгени Ливиджов
в 23.30 часа бе изпълнено,след което лекаря констатира че нака-
ца са престанали да живеят и труповете по надлежния ред бяха
в гробищата и погребани.

тоящия протокол се съставы в три еднообразни екземпляр от кои
се приложи към затворническото дело,втория към преписката про
прокуратура,а третия да се изпрати на Върховния съд на Н.Р.Б.

Прокурор:

Началник:

Лекар:

Protocol for the execution of the three Fathers, dated November 11, 1952

79e ANNÉE — N° 21 188 MERCREDI 8 OCTOBRE 1952

LA CROIX

QUOTIDIEN 15 francs

Condamnés à être fusillés

par Émile GABEL

La reprise des travaux parlementaires

C'est sur sa politique économique et financière que le gouvernement Pinay doit être jugé

Vendredi débat de politique étrangère

Pour une meilleure répartition du revenu national

this public spectacle of a trial heard Fr. Pavel deny everything that he had been forced to sign. Then she said ," *they took him out. When he returned he started to admit everything. He would repeat all they told him and admitted everything he was accused of.*"

Once condemned to death, the four victims were tied up and placed in separate cells 25, 26, 27, 28 of the central prison of Sofia. Another Assumptionist prisoner, Father Goradz Kourtev, whose cell was in the same corridor as the four victims, had this to say : "By a ruse, *I managed to discover that Father Pavel was in one of the cells of the corridor. He asked me to give him absolution through the door. This I did, while continuing to wash the floor of the corridor near his cell with a rag. That was the last contact I had with him.*"

Hatred to the death

It was hatred of the faith and the Catholic Church that caused the persecution and the trumped-up trial.

The free world was not fooled. Immediately the press declared that the men condemned were martyrs for the faith. When the trial was first announced, the Vatican daily "Osservatore Romano" of September 25 emphasized its anti-religious nature. Vatican Radio denounced the "shameful slander" of Sofia. This trial, choreographed from afar by Moscow and prepared for a long time, clearly demonstrated the savage hatred for the Catholic Church and the Communist will to annihilate it.

During the long years of silence, when no one knew whether the condemned had been executed, Bulgarian faithful and Catholics in many lands always considered Bishop Bossilkov and the three Assumptionist priests to be true martyrs. Many testimonials prove this so. When on March 26, 1994, John Paul II promulgated the decree of martyrdom of the servant of God, Eugene Bossilkov, "executed because of hatred of the faith during the night of November 11/12, 1952", the Pope added that at the same time were executed three "religious of the Congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption". On June 1, 1992, John Paul II, receiving the bishops of Bulgaria, did not hesitate to "evoke the pastors who, martyrs of the faith, were condemned to death and executed : Eugene Bossilkov and three Assumptionist priests, Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov".

THE ASSUMPTIONISTS

Founded in 1850 by Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, Vicar General of the diocese of Nîmes and Director of Assumption College there (hence the name Assumptionists), the Religious of the Assumption, also known as Augustinians of the Assumption, number nearly 1,000, present in 27 countries of Europe, North and South America, Africa, Asia and Oceania.

Disciples of St. Augustine, they live out their faith, prayer and apostolate in community. Some of them are teachers, engineers, cabinetmakers, journalists; others are missionaries, pilgrimage organizers, hospital or prison chaplains, parish priests. Whatever their activities, the Assumptionists think of themselves as men of thought and action, builders of bridges between cultures and between religions, between Christians as well.

In France, they direct the largest Catholic media enterprise, "*Bayard Press*", which publishes a daily newspaper "*La Croix*", as well as the "*Pèlerin*" magazine, "*Prions en Eglise*" and a number of magazines for the young and elderly. Bayard now has established branches in some ten countries from the USA to Hong Kong. In Canada, they direct Novalis publishing house and in the US, they own "*Twenty-Third Publications*" and The "*Catholic Digest*". They also organized the first large-scale modern pilgrimages to the Holy Land and Lourdes, beginning in 1873. And they have operated, and still do, a number of schools and colleges, one of which is Assumption College in Worcester, MA, in the United States, a university with 3,000 students.

After the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe, where they once were very numerous but later decimated by persecution, they are now reopening communities in Moscow, Romania and Bulgaria.

1. England
2. Belgium
3. Netherlands
4. France
5. Germany
6. Spain
7. Italy
8. Romania
9. Bulgaria
10. Greece
11. Turkey
12. Israel
13. Russia
14. The Democratic Republic of Congo
15. Kenya
16. Tanzania
17. Madagascar
18. Korea
19. New Zealand
20. Canada
21. United States
22. Mexico
23. Colombia
24. Ecuador
25. Brazil
26. Chile
27. Argentina

These three Bulgarian Assumptionists, men of their time, educators and peacemakers for the unity of the churches and the different rites of the Catholic church were executed during the night of November 11/12, 1952 in the prison of Sofia (Bulgaria) because of hatred of their faith and of their popularity.

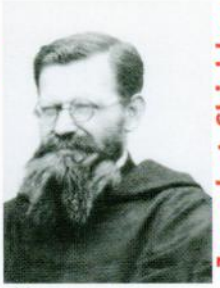
They were declared martyrs of the faith on April 23, 2002 and beatified by Pope John Paul II on May 26, 2002 in Plovdiv (Bulgaria).

Kamen Vitchev

Камен Вичев

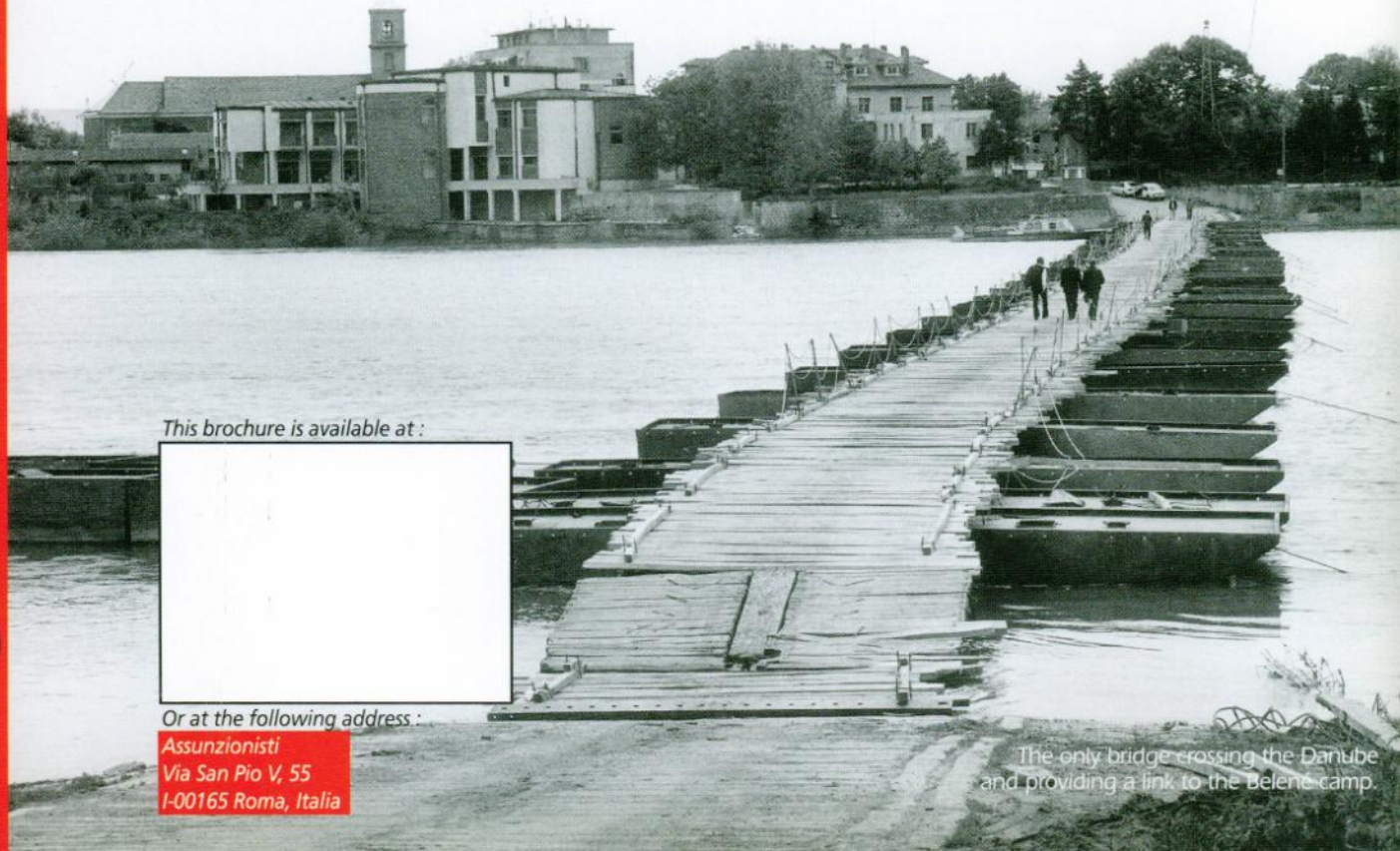
Pavel Djidjov

Павел Джиджов



Josaphat Chichkov

Йосафат Шишков



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