

Beatification of Fr. John (Anasztasius) Brenner Approved

Nov 9, 2017

On Nov. 8, 2017, Pope Francis received in audience Cardinal Angelo Amato and ordered the publication of eight decrees. One of them declares the martyrdom of Fr. John Brenner, a Hungarian priest and clandestine member in simple vows of the Cistercian Abbey of Zirc., „mudered, while carrying and defending the Holy Eucharist” on December 15, 1957.



The Life of John Brenner



John was born on Dec 27, 1931, the second of three boys in a Catholic family in Szombathely, Hungary. His family moved to Pécs, where in 1941 John enrolled to the Cistercian Prep School.

When the Cistercian School was expropriated by the government, he joined the „minor seminary” organized in Zirc for high school students, graduating in 1950. In July of that year, he took the white habit of the novices receiving the name Anastasius, but in September the monastery of Zirc was suppressed. With the rest of the novices and the novice master Fr. Lawrence 'Sigmund, he moved to Budapest and finished the program of the novitiate, taking first vows in 1951. While participating in the hidden life of the novitiate, he attended the Central Theological Academy of Budapest. In the fall, at the advice of his novice master, he joined the seminarians of his home city of Szombathely, but that seminary was also soon suppressed. He then continued studies in the School of Theology of the Diocese of Győr. It was in Győr that he received ordination to the priesthood on June 19, 1955.

His bishop assigned him as assistant pastor in Rábakethely, a few miles from the Austrian border. In spite of the heavy oppression of the church, his short ministry won instant success. One of his parishioners described him in this way: „There was a certain power radiating from his presence that words cannot describe. People loved him, and sought to be in his presence and to hear him speak. There was a magnetism coming from him that attracted people. This was his only „sin” that prompted leading officials to hate him. Many people returned to the faith and Church under his influence. He did not pass anyone without greeting and addressing them with at least a few words. There was a radiant smile on his face at all times. He was a serious preacher, always witnessing to his faith. It was good to go to confession with him: he gave spiritual food to every penitent.”

The communists were critical of all he did, especially his success with young people. He joined his altarboys and students on the playground and participated in their games and sports. The county inspector for „church affairs” contacted the bishop, and demanded that he be moved elsewhere. Brenner simply replied: „I am not afraid. I’d rather stay.” The bishop decided not to move him. The official replied: „You’ll be responsible for the consequences.”



One late evening in the fall of 1957, he was returning from a local church on his motorcycle. Riding along the town’s outskirts, he was hit by a barrage of branches and rocks thrown at him, but he sped up and was not harmed.

It is still not fully clear what happened in another incident, on the night of December 14 to 15 in 1957.



The bloody surplice Fr. John was wearing when he was murdered

According to eyewitnesses, the night of December 14 was full of police activities in Szentgotthard, the county seat and place where John lived in the rectory while serving at his parish. The members of the County Council celebrated with a grand party, and the Police Association scheduled its winter ball. Fr. John's pastor had left to celebrate Mass and preach in a neighboring village. He stayed there overnight because he was to say Mass there in the following morning.

Around midnight a young man about 17 years old awoke Fr. John in his rectory and requested that he go to his uncle to anoint him and bring him the Eucharist. John went to the Church, took the sacrament from the tabernacle and placed it in a burse which he wore around his neck. He walked into the night, following this young man. Because of the late hour and the alleged urgency of the call, they cut through some woods in pitch darkness. The incident began in the woods, but John, an athletic young man, tried to outrun his assailants. Finally, near the house to which he was supposedly called, he was knocked to the ground. Clinging to the Eucharist he held to his breast, he was killed by 32 stab wounds from a number of different knives and, according to reconstructions of the event, by several different hands. As later revealed by the autopsy, his assailants stepped on his neck and broke it, leaving footprints and dirt on his body.

A sham investigation followed . Initially, a large number of people were under investigation, including the pastor, the leading parishioners, and a number of women. The local population as a whole reacted courageously in indignation. In quick succession the police accused a man who had no alibi and was sentenced to death, but was then quickly declared innocent. Later, the young man who called John to bring the sacrament to his supposed „uncle” was sentenced to life imprisonment, but was later quietly released from jail.



The motto Fr. John took at his ordination: „All things work together for good for those those who love God” (Rom 8:28).

The investigation ended with significant signs pointing to an officially condoned, possibly organized, Communist plot by drunken policemen and county leaders. At the end of the investigation one man had the courage to remark: „Thanks, you just concluded the process for the beatification of John Brenner.”

John’s two bothers both became priests, the older one Tobias László Brenner was also a Cistercian. He was a friend and novice mate of Fr. David Balas, a member of Our Lady of Dallas Cistercian Abbey. This older brother died several years ago. The younger brother, Joseph Brenner, is still alive and lives as a retired diocesan priest in Szombathely, Hungary.

(Translated from the Official Hungarian Website of the Hungarian Bishop Conference [http://uj.katolikus.hu/adattar.php?h=24] by Abbot Densi Farkasfalvy, O. Cist.)

