

Burning embers, witnesses to the Faith

6
June
2013

Letter of the
Superior
General

Marist Brothers

Dear Marists of Champagnat,

On the occasion of our Founder's feastday, in this year of 2013, I wish to include in the traditional message sent on this date the communication of the joyful news of **the imminent beatification of Brothers Crisanto, Aquilino, Cipriano José and 65 companions** (including two laymen), martyrs in Spain between 1936 and 1939.

Our group of martyrs forms part of a total of 524 persons, witnesses to the faith and martyrs in 20th century Spain, who will be beatified at Tarragona in Spain on Sunday 13 October 2013.

This celebration will coincide with the **closing of the Year of Faith**, inaugurated by Pope Benedict XVI in Rome, in October 2012, at the beginning of the Synod on the *New Evangelization*. It is precisely because of this that, as the Marist Institute, we want to underline this dimension of depth which inspired our martyrs, making them *witnesses to the faith*.

The word *martyr*, coming from Greek, means *witness* in that language even today. Is not that what each of them has been, the members of this diverse group of 68 martyrs? Aged from 19 to 63 (two thirds of them below the age of 40); of very different geographical and family origins (three of them French); of diverse qualities and abilities; brothers and laymen... What they had in common was a deep faith which gave meaning to their lives and, when the time came, also to their deaths.

Inspired by Mary, disciples of Champagnat, today they challenge us, we who live at the dawn of the XXI century. It is true that their memory remains distant in time, and that we do not perhaps understand too well the processes of beatification and canonisation, but in truth they surprise us with a message that is entirely relevant today.

Below you will find the list of those to be beatified. It gives the religious name (at that time, there was a change of name on the taking of the habit); the family name; the place of birth and the age at the time they were killed.

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Religious name	Family name	Place of birth	Age
Br Abdón	<i>Luis Iglesias Bañuelos</i>	Los Valcárceres (Burgos)	41
Br Adrián	<i>Manuel Llop Plana</i>	La Mata de Morella (Castellón)	40
Br Alipio José	<i>Maximiano Dronda Leoz</i>	Ustároz (Navarra)	20
Br Anacleto Luis	<i>Emiliano Busto Pérez</i>	Quintanilla de San García (Burgos)	23
Br Andrés José	<i>Francisco Donazar Goñi</i>	Iroz (Navarra)	43
Br Ángel Hipólito	<i>Aniceto Pablos Carvajal</i>	El Burgo Ranero (León)	33
Br Aquilino	<i>Baldomero Baró Riera</i>	Tiurana (Lleida)	33
Br Aureliano	<i>Pedro Ortigosa Oraá</i>	Torralba del Río (Navarra)	42
Br Benedicto Andrés	<i>Enrique Andrés Monfort</i>	Villafranca del Cid (Castellón)	37
Br Benedicto José	<i>Luis Galerón Parte</i>	Yudego (Burgos)	24
Br Benigno José	<i>José Valencia Janices</i>	Artajona (Navarra)	30
Br Berardo José	<i>José Pampliega Santiago</i>	Cañizar de Argaña (Burgos)	24
Br Bruno José	<i>Ángel Ayape Remón</i>	Cáseda (Navarra)	21
Br Camerino	<i>Braulio Álvarez Palacín</i>	Villamedianilla (Burgos)	36
Br Cipriano José	<i>Julián Iglesias Bañuelos</i>	Los Valcárceres (Burgos)	43
Br Colombanus Paul	<i>Henri Oza Motinot</i>	Lyon (France)	60
Br Crisanto	<i>Casimiro González García</i>	Torrelaguna (Madrid)	39
Br Domingo Ciriaco	<i>Dionisio Domínguez Martínez</i>	Villoria de Órbigo (León)	25
Br Eduardo María	<i>Francisco Alonso Fontaneda</i>	Valtierra de Albacastro (Burgos)	21
Br Egberto	<i>Leonardo Arce Ruiz</i>	Arcellares del Tozo (Burgos)	29
Br Eloy José	<i>Eloy Rodríguez Gutiérrez</i>	Torrepadre (Burgos)	37
Br Emiliano José	<i>Marcos Leyún Goñi</i>	Sansoáin (Navarra)	39
Br Euquerio	<i>Euquerio Llanillo García</i>	Solanas de Valdelucio (Burgos)	22
Br Evencio	<i>Florencio Pérez Moral</i>	Acedillo (Burgos)	37
Br Fabián	<i>Juan Pastor Marco</i>	Barcelona	60
Br Feliciano	<i>Severino Ruiz Bascónes</i>	Fuencaliente de Lucio (Burgos)	52
Br Felipe Neri	<i>Fermín Zabaleta Armendáriz</i>	Artajona (Navarra)	37
Br Félix Amancio	<i>Amancio Noriega Núñez</i>	Aguilar de Campoo (Palencia)	24
Br Félix Lorenzo	<i>Lorenzo Gutiérrez Rojo</i>	Las Hormazas (Burgos)	30
Br Fernando María	<i>Celedonio Martínez Infante</i>	Acedillo (Burgos)	41
Br Gaspar	<i>Pablo Martínez Esteban</i>	Los Balbases (Burgos)	38
Br Guzmán	<i>Perfecto Becerril Merino</i>	Grijalba (Burgos)	51
Br Herminio Pascual	<i>Saturnino Jaunsarás Zabaleta</i>	Irurzun (Navarra)	24
Br Javier Benito	<i>Jerónimo Alonso Fernández</i>	Villorejo (Burgos)	24
Br Jean-Marie	<i>Félix-Célestin Gombert Olympe</i>	Trets (France)	63

Religious name	Family name	Place of birth	Age
Br Jerónimo	<i>Trifón Tobar Calzada</i>	Susinos (Burgos)	60
Br Jorge Camilo	<i>Vidal García García</i>	Cuadros (León)	20
Br Jorge Luis	<i>Lorenzo Lizasoáin Lizaso</i>	Irañeta (Navarra)	50
Br José Ceferino	<i>Elías Garet Ventejo</i>	Centelles (Barcelona)	31
Br José de Arimatea	<i>Restituto Santiago Allende</i>	Bustillo del Monte (Cantabria)	34
Br José Teófilo	<i>José Mulet Velilla</i>	Mazaleón (Teruel)	19
Br Julián José	<i>Nemesio Cabria Andrés</i>	Susilla (Cantabria)	28
Br Julián Marcelino	<i>Marcelino Rebollar Campo</i>	Tresviso (Cantabria)	22
Br Julio Fermín	<i>Julio Múzquiz Erdozáin</i>	Aldaba (Navarra)	37
Br Justo Pastor	<i>Máximo Aranda Modrego</i>	Gallur (Zaragoza)	29
Br León Argimiro	<i>Argimiro García Sandoval</i>	Calzadilla de los Hermanillos (León)	23
Br Ligorio Pedro	<i>Hilario de Santiago Paredes</i>	Cisneros de Campos (Palencia)	24
Br Luciano	<i>Mauro Álvarez Renedo</i>	Albacastro (Burgos)	44
Br Luis Alfonso	<i>Luis Moreno Aliende</i>	Quintanilla San García (Burgos)	25
Br Luis Damián	<i>Joseph Sobraqués Glory</i>	Bouleternère (France)	45
Br Luis Daniel	<i>Juan Viñuela Flecha</i>	Navatejera (León)	26
Br Luis Fermín	<i>Luis Huerta Lara</i>	Torrecilla del Monte (Burgos)	31
Br Marino	<i>Pedro Alonso Ortega</i>	Amaya (Burgos)	35
Br Millán	<i>Esteban Llover Torrent</i>	Les Planes d'Hostoles (Girona)	51
Br Narciso	<i>Baldomero Arribas Arnáiz</i>	Santibáñez de Esgueva (Burgos)	60
Br Néstor Eugenio	<i>Tesifonte Ortega Villamudrio</i>	Arlanzón (Burgos)	25
Br Pablo Daniel	<i>Daniel Altabella Gracia</i>	Aguaviva (Teruel)	28
Br Pedro	<i>Jaime Cortasa Monclús</i>	Millà (Lleida)	54
Br Pedro Jerónimo	<i>José Félix Serret Inglés</i>	Ráfales (Teruel)	32
Br Roque	<i>Abilio Villarreal Abaza</i>	Arazuri (Navarra)	51
Br Severino	<i>Severino Ruiz Hidalgo</i>	Fuencaliente de Lucio (Burgos)	29
Br Teófilo Martín	<i>Martín Erro Ripa</i>	Viscarret (Navarra)	22
Br Teógenes	<i>Pedro Valls Piernau</i>	Vilamacolum (Girona)	51
Br Timoteo José	<i>Julián Lisbona Royo</i>	Torre de las Arcas (Teruel)	45
Br Valente José	<i>Jesús Delgado de la Fuente</i>	Mazuelo de Muñó (Burgos)	42
Br Victorico María	<i>Eugenio Artola Sorolla</i>	Cinctorres (Castellón)	42
	<i>Sr. Julián Aguilar Martín</i>	Berge (Teruel)	24
	<i>Sr. Ramón Emiliano Hortelano Gómez</i>	Cuenca	28

1. Burning embers

During my cycling sorties in Rome, I have often passed beside two little plaques in memory of someone who died at that spot long ago. They are situated beside a cycling path outside the city. On one of these plaques can be seen the photo of a young man, and that continues to raise for me numerous questions, always without an answer, on the cause of his death.

On the other plaque are engraved two beautiful verses:

*Si è spento il sole nei tuoi occhi,
 è scesa la notte nel mio cuore.*

That is to say:

*The sun has gone out in your eyes,
 and night has come down in my heart.*

In the twelve years that I have now been in Rome, this place has never lacked flowers. Sometimes I have seen little toys, placed there most likely by a child. I see this as a song to faithful love, which preserves the memory of the beloved beyond the strict limits of space and time. A love which is attached to the roots, so as not to forget its identity.

I would like to contemplate our 68 martyrs from a viewpoint similar to that of the person who, even today, lays flowers at the place the loved one died. And I would like to do it with the serenity the passing of time offers, with an affection marked by gratitude and the pride of knowing that we are members of the same family.

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We are part of a glorious tradition of martyrs who are for us like *burning embers* which keep alive the light of the faith. As one of the Church's numerous martyrs, Saint Thomas More, said: *tradition does not consist in keeping the ashes, but in passing on the flame*; such is the task that falls to us today: to pass on to future generations a flame which does not belong to us and which we have received, in our turn, as a gift.

With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us, we too, then, should throw off everything that hinders us, especially the sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race we have started. Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection,... Think of the way he stood such opposition from sinners, and then you will not give up for want of courage. In the fight against sin, you have not yet had to keep fighting to the point of death... (Heb. 12)

2. Burning embers, witnesses to the faith

Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness.

Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News.

(Paul VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi, 21)

WITNESSES OF THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

Happy are you because you have believed; this is how Elisabeth greets Mary when the latter visits her. This expression, according to the words of John-Paul II, is *in some way a key which gives us access to the intimate reality of Mary.* (Redemptoris Mater, 19)

Pilgrim of faith. Mary walks during her life a road of light and shadow, going so far as to feel sometimes *a particular heaviness of heart, linked with a sort of night of faith*-to use the words of St. John of the Cross-a kind of "veil" through which one has to draw near to the Invisible One and to live in intimacy with the mystery. (Redemptoris Mater, 17)

**Marcellin
Champagnat was a
man of faith**

Constitutions 81

We recognise that Marcellin Champagnat was also a *man of faith* (Cf. Marist Constitutions, 81). That is to say that he had an experience of God such that he was able to abandon himself in all confidence into his hands, and that his whole life was

filled with meaning and peace. To say that our Founder was a man of faith means that his life cannot be understood without this fundamental element.

Mary and Champagnat, witnesses of the experience of God, give us the key to the profound reasons which animated our martyrs. *These Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst?* (Evangelii Nuntiandi)

- Speaking in general about the witness of our Brothers, a former student who had known them stated: *To arrive at martyrdom, they had extraordinary virtues. I know that there were Brothers who at the first opportunity abandoned religious life and secularised themselves. But these ones stayed steadfast till the last moment in their religious state; that is why they achieved martyrdom.*

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- Br **Pablo Daniel**, of the Mataró community, who died at the age of 28, was an enthusiastic young man, dynamic and prayerful. He had a profound impact on his pupils, given his cultural training, his work, his pastoral activity and, above all, the quality of his life. His pupils saw in him a moulder of men and authentic Christians. In the cell in the prison ship where he was held, there were five other detainees. This cell quickly became a monastery: daily Mass, morning meditation, rosary, evening prayer and meditation; they organized retreats, and even the ceremonies of Holy Week. The priest celebrated the mass, but it was Br Pablo Daniel who conducted the prayers and gave the homelies. By reason of his great spirit of faith and his tact in giving comfort and encouragement, he was called the «the consoling angel». He quickly became the confidant of the prisoners of other cabins, desirous of letting themselves be touched by the brother's faith.

- Br **Crisanto** was in charge of 25 young men in formation at Les Avellanes. Faced with threats, these young men were accepted by various families of the little village of Tartareu. Crisanto visited and encouraged them: *I cannot separate myself from the young men who are under my care.* Summoned by the local Revolutionary Committee, he presented himself trustingly. He told the people of the village: *If I am killed, it will be only because I am a Marist religious and because I am doing my duty. If that is the case, I am happy! How could I abandon my dear children! As long as I live and with the help of the Blessed Virgin, I will take care of them.* At the moment of his murder, he appealed to his executioners: *For the love of God, don't kill me, let me look after my young men.* Crisanto was killed; the young men succeeded in crossing the French border. According to eyewitnesses, Br Crisanto went to his martyrdom smiling and tranquil, saying goodbye to the persons nearest to him.



- Br **Aquilino** was a formator of novices in Les Avellanes. With three other sick brothers he was led to the fronton court of the house. Aquilino said: *As a man, I forgive you; and as a Catholic man, I thank you, for you are placing in my hands the palm of martyrdom every Catholic should desire.* Then the executioners told him: *Now, turn around!* And Br Aquilino replied: *No, from the front!* The militiamen fired and the four Brothers collapsed.



- A person who lived close to the place of execution of Br **Jorge Luis**, of the community of Toledo, stated that he heard him pardon with his whole heart those who took part in his murder and that he held no anger against them. The same can be said of Br **Benedicto Andrés** who, before being killed at Albocàsser in Castellón, spoke to his executioners: *As a Spaniard, I pardon you, as a Marist religious, I thank you for the opportunity you give me to suffer martyrdom and give glory to God. I hope that, if in this world we have not been brothers because of our different ideas, we will be so in heaven.*



WITNESSES OF THE GIFT OF COMMUNITY

Community is a grace of the Holy Spirit. Brought together without having chosen our companions, we welcome one another as gifts of the Lord (Constitutions, 63). Before being a task, Christian community is a marvellous gift, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer recalled: *This grace of community, which the isolated person regards as an incredible privilege, is often disdained and trampled on by those who receive it every day... Thus, anyone to whom it has been given to experience this extraordinary grace of community life, should praise God with his whole heart, and on his knees thank him and confess that it is a grace, uniquely a grace!*

The table of La Valla reminds us, even today, that Father Champagnat made of the community of his first disciples a real family. Gathered around Mary in imitation of the apostles, united in the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, we recognize that our way of living the faith is to live it in community.

It is a gift, a task and **the first place where that universal love to which we have committed ourselves is expressed.** (Cf Constitutions 23)

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One cannot help but be affected by the community life and mutual affection of our martyrs:



- In the first place, it is interesting to note the number of times where the Brothers of a community faced martyrdom together. For example, the community of the juniorate of Vic, Barcelona, where four of its members, aged from 19 to 29, were martyred; or the community of Torrelaguna, Madrid, which numbered three Brothers; or the community of Chinchón, Madrid, the living place of three Brothers and a layman who would also share their martyrdom; or the community of the «Academia Nebrija», in Valencia, formed of four Brothers with a superior of French origin, Br **Luis Damián**, who, after being advised to apply to the French Consul, replied: *And who will then look after my Brothers?* And we could give the example of other communities, such as Toledo or Malaga...



- Today, when we so appreciate the international character of the Institute, it is moving to hear the accounts of the French Brothers who preferred to share the fate of their confrères rather than return to safety in France. Br **Jean-Marie** was a member of the Toledo community. When the French Consul paid him a visit and informed him that he had begun negotiations to get him out of prison and repatriate him, the Brother refused point-blank: *Never! I have lived with them, and with them I want to die.* Two other Brothers reacted in the same way: **Luis Damián**, whom we have already mentioned, and **Colombanus Paul**, martyred with another Brother of the community of Carrejo, Cantabria.





- Br **Guzmán**, director of the college of Málaga, could have escaped. The Italian consul was one of his friends. It was proposed to him to make contact with him, but the Brother replied: *The captain of the ship should be the last to be saved. As long as a single one is in danger, I will remain at the helm.* In prison, he said to a priest: *I could have escaped, but I did not want to abandon my men. As director, I have always thought that I should share the fate of the others and not leave Malaga without them.*

WITNESSES WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES

It is not easy to find the reasons for which our martyrs were killed, given the complexity of the historical period which was theirs. But it is extremely easy, on the other hand, to discover the reasons for which they generously gave their lives. Disciples of the Jesus who said: *No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own free will* (Jn 10:18), they gave their life well before it was taken from them. Their death was merely the consequence of a life generously offered day by day.

To our most bitter opponents we say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust law...but be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves... our victory will be a double victory. (Martin Luther King)

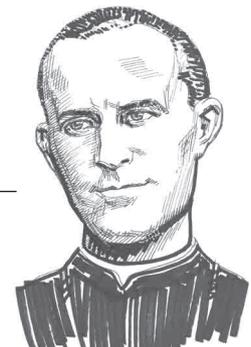
- One of those imprisoned with the brothers martyred in Torrelaguna has left us the following information: *The Brothers knew they were facing martyrdom. They accepted this trial, not with facile optimism or a sterile pessimism, but with great steadfastness. It was rather a holy realism that led them to accept martyrdom. Their courage was unshakeable; that is how I saw them walking towards death.*



- Br **Aquilino** wrote to his sister: *As for us, don't concern yourself; menaces and insults against religious, churches and convents are frequent, but don't forget that we are in God's hands and that we depend entirely on Him. He's the one who called and united us. He's the one who protects us.*



- Faced with the climate of violence which reigned, some brothers abandoned religious life. Br **Herminio Pascual**, aged 24, had doubts about following his vocation. Guided and accompanied by Br **Felipe Neri**, his gift to the Lord was reinforced. A man who gave him lodging in Chinchón found him a safe hiding place, but he preferred to stay with his brothers and share their fate. He would be shot with them.





- Br **Benedicto Andrés** was in process of doing his military service and it was rumoured that he had left religious life. Br Jerónimo Emiliano wrote him a stern letter. Benedicto replied: *Humanly speaking, I would have a whole number of reasons for leaving everything; but I thank God that this idea has not even occurred to me. I do not forget that I have made commitments. So you can tell anyone interested that Br Benedicto is still Br Benedicto.*

- Of Br **Pablo Daniel**, of the Mataró community, the witnesses tend to emphasize his courage and boldness. To the other detainees, he immediately declared his identity as a religious; he did the same with the militia and the judges. One of the latter, astonished by his intelligence, offered to pay for his studies as a lawyer, but Br Pablo was firmly rooted in his Marist vocation. One witness declared: *He was, above all, a great sower of Christian hope.*



3. Embers and ashes

On reading the witness of our Brother martyrs, some will perhaps ask themselves how they would have acted in their place. On this subject, Mgr Tonino Bello said ironically of himself: *If to be a Christian were a crime and I was brought before a tribunal accused of this crime, I would be absolved for lack of proof...*

How many of us would also subscribe to this hard affirmation! Perhaps because we form part of the *dormant Church*, an expression I came across not long ago in a magazine referring to that part of the Church formed of Christians who do not live their faith in depth or who neglect it. The blood of the martyrs challenges our consciences: What have I done with the gift of faith? What do my actions say?

Throughout the world an urgent need is felt to renew the Church by a return to the essence of the Gospel. Cardinal Martini expressed this desire magnificently – together with a certain frustration – in an interview accorded a little before his death: *Fr Karl Rahner used the image of the embers hidden under the ashes. I see in the Church of today so much ash over the embers that frequently I am overwhelmed with a sense of powerlessness...*

The arrival of Pope Francis has been like a breath of fresh air in the midst of this atmosphere of powerlessness and frustration. Many feel that a new ecclesial spring is possible, like that experienced at the time of the Second Vatican Council. In fact, the name chosen by the new pope reminds us of the experience of *San Damiano*: *Go, Francis, rebuild my half-ruined Church.*

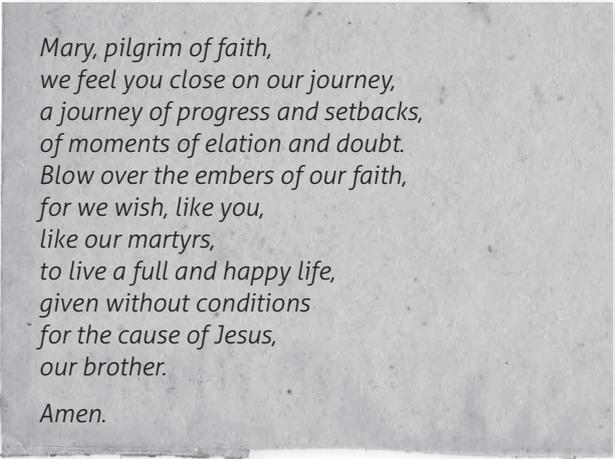
Marcellin Champagnat burned with that same desire to renew the Church, under the inspiration of Mary. And he committed himself to doing so, with his Marist companions, leaving his signature printed on the *Pledge of Fourvière*, at the feet of the Black Virgin.

As heirs of Champagnat, we are invited to participate fully in this movement of personal and institutional renewal, brushing aside the ashes which threaten to extinguish the embers and prevent them from spreading warmth and rekindling the fire. May our contact with the lives of these witnesses to the faith help us **awaken and revive the embers of that faith** which we received at baptism.

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Our martyrs paid a heavy price for being faithful to their commitment. They encourage us to *give our lives* and to *be witnesses of the experience of God* and of the marvellous *gift of community*. Humbly, discretely, we will contribute to moulding this Church with the Marian face of which we dream.

May each of us be able to say, taking up the words of Mgr Tonino Bello: *Pray for me, so that if being a Christian were truly a crime, so much proof of this would be found in me, that no lawyer would be prepared to defend me. And so, I would appear before the judges having pleaded guilty to the crime of following Christ, with the added aggravating circumstances of intending to repeat the offence. Thus I would obtain the condemnation longed for. Death. Or rather, life!*



Mary, pilgrim of faith,
we feel you close on our journey,
a journey of progress and setbacks,
of moments of elation and doubt.
Blow over the embers of our faith,
for we wish, like you,
like our martyrs,
to live a full and happy life,
given without conditions
for the cause of Jesus,
our brother.

Amen.

On this feast of Saint Marcellin Champagnat, in memory of our 68 martyrs, let us allow to resonate in our hearts the echo of the question they ask us by their lives: *What have you done with the gift of faith? What do your actions say?*

Faternally,

