
**MIGUEL
SABINO
JOAQUÍN
FLORENCIO**



MIGUEL LÉIBAR AND COMPANIONS
MARIANISTS AND MARTYRS
FOUR GOOD MEN

Editor's Note: On October 28, 2007, four Marianist martyrs were named blessed by Pope Benedict XVI in Rome – Padre Miguel Léibar Garay, Don Florencio Arnáiz Cejudo, Don Sabino Ayastuy Herrasti and Don Joaquin Ochoa Salazar. They will be beatified with 494 others who were martyred during the Spanish Civil War at the end of the 1930s. This booklet is the English translation of Fr. José María Salaverri's short biography of our new Blessed.



Don Florencio
Arnáiz Cejudo, S.M.

Don Joaquín
Ochoa
Salazar, S.M.

Padre Miguel Léibar
Garay, S.M.

Don Sabino Ayastuy
Herrasti, S.M.

MIGUEL LÉIBAR AND COMPANIONS

MARIANISTS AND MARTYRS FOUR GOOD MEN

July 28, 1936

Miguel Léibar Garay, Marianist, 51 years of age, is executed by firing squad, at 6 in the afternoon, on the Madrid to Valencia highway, kilometer 7. With him are Melitón and Fabiana, workers at the Colegio del Pilar. His crime: being a religious and priest. Their crime: being with him.

September 14, 1936

Marianists Florencio Arnáiz Cejudo, 27 years old, Joaquín Ochoa Salazar, 26 years old, Sabino Ayastuy Errasti, 25 years old, are executed by firing squad early in the morning, at kilometer 7 on the highway from Madrid to El Pardo. With them are two Dominicans: Father Manuel Álvarez and Brother Teófilo Montes. Like them, a total of 15 Marianists are shot. Like them, another 6,870 priests, religious men and women are executed. Like them, hundreds of lay Catholics perish for the mere crime of being Catholic. In the religious persecution which swept Spain between 1931 and 1939, these people died for their faith with a spirit of simplicity and forgiveness... These were truly good people.

FOUR STELLAR MARIANISTS

From early on, these four Marianists felt the call of Jesus to follow Him in the Society of Mary. And they responded with generosity.

MIGUEL LÉIBAR GARAY



Born February 17, 1885 in Aozaraza-Arechavaleta (Guipúzcoa in the Basque Region). He's a sharp kid, happy, a prankster, yet a good student and godly. Not far from his village in Escoriaza is the Marianist Postulate of Nuestra Señora del Pilar.

“Dad, I want to be like them.”

“No way, son! - a boy as mischievous as you could never be a religious. And what's more, our village always needs many strong arms and you need to help out as well!”

“But I'll help you out in another way...”

Miguel made his first vows on March 24, 1903. He took his perpetual vows in 1907. Armed with a licentiate

in philosophy from the Central University of Madrid, he went on to study theology at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. There he is ordained a priest on August 1, 1915.

And what an enthusiastic embrace he received from his father on the occasion of his first Mass in his village of Aozaraza!

FLORENCIO ARNÁIZ CEJUDO



The youngest of four brothers. Born on May 10, 1909, in Espinosa de Cerrata (province of Palencia). His parents are farmers. He's a good child, docile, cheerful, quiet and pious. An excellent teacher in the town makes him his assistant; this way he can help teach the younger students. Florencio loves this. He also helps the pastor as server and he loves this too... One day, his friend Agapito Alonso tells him: "I'm going to Escoriaza to be a religious."

And Florencio asks "and can't I go along as well?"

Florencio takes first vows on September 5, 1926. He studies education and loves to be with kids,

especially the young ones. He graduates in primary education and makes his perpetual vows in 1934. He wants to do higher studies in the French language, when...

JOAQUÍN OCHOA SALAZAR



His family lives in Berantevilla, but he is born on April 16, 1910, in the home of his maternal grandmother in Villanueva de Valdegovía (Álava). There are six children in the family: four girls and two boys. They are a very close family. The father works for the local government of the province of Álava and is stationed with his family in Peñacerrada. One fine day, Father Gregorio Lasagabáster passes through to talk about the Marianists. Three kids sign up: the two brothers Ochoa and a friend, Agustín Alonso. Later, in the words of Father Gregorio:

“It was a miraculous catch...”

Indeed, two of them would become excellent religious, good educators and school principals. Joaquín “has a fine disposition; he is good and responsible, conscientious, a hard worker and pious.”

He makes his first vows on September 5, 1928, and his perpetual vows in 1935. Having completed his bachelor's degree in Segovia, he is studying for his licentiate in history, when...

SABINO AYASTUY ERRASTI



He is born on December 29, 1911, in Aozaraza, just like Miguel Léibar. He's the sixth of seven children but soon his father dies. He is also set on entering the nearby Marianist community at Nuestra Señora del Pilar. He's a young man with a rich and sensitive personality with deep feelings. One day he is sent out with the house donkey to do some errands. He doesn't return and soon they find him on the way, like a Franciscan, urging his donkey forward:

“Eat, you little creature, eat, so you can continue to move on and carry me there!”

He has another side though: difficult, rebellious, yet he is of immense good will. His tremendous bursts of anger are soon followed by a remarkably humble repentance. And, as is usual for him, God is all. He takes his first vows with Joaquín Ochoa on September

5, 1928. He feels called to the priesthood and his superiors agree to this. He was working on his licentiate at the University of Madrid, when...

FOUR WHO ARE IN LOVE WITH EDUCATION

Father Miguel Léibar begins his priestly ministry in Cádiz. Then he is made principal of the Colegio San Juan Bautista in Jerez for six years (1916-1922). He becomes chaplain in Vitoria, then, once again becomes principal - this time at the Colegio Católico de Santa María in San Sebastián (1925-1930). Director of the community, he is a true father to his fellow brothers, fostering their spiritual life and attending to them with tenderness, when they are ill. He is loved by all.

In 1930, he is sent as chaplain to the Colegio Nuestra Señora del Pilar in Madrid, headed by the Servant of God Father Domingo Lázaro. They become close friends.

He is a first-rate educator – dynamic, enthusiastic and present to everyone and everything at the school. He knows how to reach his students, to be demanding and yet remain close to them. He is their spiritual director and confessor, and he would express his ideal in these words: “The great wish of my life is to guide souls on the path to heaven.”

A Marianist superior would say of him:

“The kids love him. He is an essentially dedicated soul, who knows how to bend to circumstances, to people and to the unforeseen

situation. As a teacher he has a special knack of attracting students and dealing with them. He makes them like to work...”

Florencio Arnáiz flexes his first wings as an educator in September 1928 at the Colegio in Jerez. There he gives himself totally to the youngest students who came to worship him... not to mention being worshipped by their mothers as well. Always concerned with improving his teaching, he likes to keep up with the latest in pedagogy and pastoral ministry. In September 1933 he is sent to the Colegio del Pilar in Madrid, where again he leaves his unique mark upon his little madrileños.

Sabino Ayastuy begins his education ministry in September 1931 with the young Marianist aspirants in his homeland of Escoriaza. He remains there until September 1935 with only one brief period away for course work in San Sebastián. For those whom he helps to discern their call, he leaves an unforgettable remembrance. One of them writes:

“I can still see him with his kind smile, his affectionate demeanor, how he used to enter through the back door of the study and walk toward us without the slightest noise, in order to help us with our course work. And he would whisper in our ear: ‘Filioli carissimi... [My dear children...]’ He truly liked us and we could see his attempts to reign in his anger and ill-tempered disposition... An intense interior life of faith shone through whatever he taught. He would so often repeat to us those words of St. Paul: ‘Haec es

voluntas Dei: sanctificatio vestra.’ (This is God’s will: that you become saints.) As you can see, he loved Latin.”

Joaquín Ochoa, who had begun his education ministry with Sabino in Escoriaza, is sent the next year to the Colegio del Pilar in Madrid. There, from 1932-1936, he is put in charge of the 8 to 10 year olds. He dedicates himself wholeheartedly to them. So note his superiors:

“Excellent religious. Fulfills all his duties faithfully. Upright judgment, prudent, responsible, very tractable. Very dedicated. Wholly in love with his profession as a religious and educator.”

FOUR FAITHFUL “INSTRUMENTS” OF MARY

The Founder of the Marianists, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, used to say:

“We have embraced the religious state in order to dedicate ourselves completely to Mary, to make her known, loved and served. We are her instruments... We want to serve her faithfully until the end of our life, promptly doing whatever She tells us.”

Our four future martyrs certainly felt this deeply. In the life of all four, Mary is a meaningful presence.

From the time he was a young religious, Father Léibar wants to be a missionary of Mary:

“Here am I, then, ready for anything...I don’t specifically ask to go to America; I don’t want to name any country. Send me wherever you all want, whether it be to China or Japan or America...it’s all the same to me. With the grace of God, and above all with the protection of His Mother, I will face up to all challenges.” (1904)

“Above all else I try to please God and Mary. And I shall tell you something I have experienced: the more I enjoy visiting the Blessed Sacrament, the more my devotion to Mary grows and becomes stronger.” (1907)

In 1935, he writes to Brother Miguel García, a Marianist friend, who resides in Belgium:

“You ask about the political situation? There are snares, dangers, even black jealousies and ambitions, etc. etc. Yet neither the soul of Don Quixote nor the holiness of St. Teresa and others seems to diminish... Our youth is animated even more than before... The cause which we defend is Religion and Fatherland... Let hell burn and Satan roar... There stands El Pilar and the Hill of Angels.”

It is precisely during those difficult times that the young religious have to decide whether to commit themselves completely to the Lord and to Mary by their perpetual vows. They don’t seem to have any doubt:

“The intention of serving Mary all the days of my life energizes me to overcome all difficulties.”
Florencio Arnáiz

“I want to enlist forever under the banner of Mary, to work for her honor until the hour comes for me to die in her service.” Joaquín Ochoa

“At each moment, I experience a greater happiness and consolation in knowing that I belong to the Society of Mary. And the greatest desire of my life is to be a part of the Family of Mary through my perpetual profession. My supreme ambition in this life is summed up in this one sentence: ‘Ad pedes piissimae Matris meae vivere volo et mori cupio.’ [At the feet of my most Blessed Mother I wish to live and desire to die.]” Sabino Ayastuy

FOUR ON THE ROAD TO MARTYRDOM

On April 14, 1931, the Republic is proclaimed in Spain. That very month, churches and convents begin to burn. In December, the Cortes [parliament] works out a constitution whose preamble states that “Spain is a republic of workers of all classes...” Yet in its Article 26, it holds that there exists one category of Spaniard – the religious – which cannot “work in industry, commerce or in education.” On January 23, 1932, the Cortes dissolves the Society of Jesus, confiscates its holdings and sends its members into exile. It seems that the other religious orders would suffer the same fate.

The Marianists – their fervor renewed – prepare themselves for the above eventuality. The victory of the Rightist parties in 1934 seems to hold things back a bit. However, in October 1934, the revolution in Asturias is unleashed, with more than thirty religious, priests and

seminarians murdered: the possibility of exile and even martyrdom looms once again. Father Miguel is doing much work with our alumni, members of the Marian Sodality and Catholic Action. In 1935, he writes:

“The passionate environment created by these ardent youth always produces a comforting effect. Above all, it is their enthusiastic adherence to the hard teachings of suffering and of sacrifice, which is simply sublime. The seed of these teachings has not been sown in vain.”

In February 1936, with the triumph of the Popular Front, violent attacks are unleashed against churches, monasteries, convents, schools...and their personnel are maltreated. Throughout all of this, the Marianists keep up their serenity and their generosity of spirit. In March of that same year, 27 young Marianists, very conscious of what could happen to them, request that they might make their perpetual vows. They seem to share the feelings of Sabino Ayastuy:

“The present situation has brought me to the conviction that what is necessary above all else is a greater sanctity - one that will make me every day more worthy of the lovely vocation to which the Blessed Virgin has called me. The persecutions don't daunt me. For it is God who permits them and who gives me the grace to come out of it all for the good of my soul.”

Father Miguel goes even further. Writing to his friend Brother Miguel García and asking of him the strictest confidence, he tells him that he has offered his

life to the Lord:

“Before having to see Spain sunken in dishonor, I shall offer my life as a holocaust. For God and for Spain!”

This total abandonment into the hands of the Lord will give him a serenity and a peace before all tribulation. At the end of the school year, he travels with some of the older students to the Cerro de los Ángeles. During the last days of June and the beginning of July, he preaches two retreats to the Marianists. He tells them that they must prepare to give their lives for Christ. Among those listening to him, twelve will eventually shed their blood for being religious.

July 28, 1936

On June 18, fourteen Marianists remain at the Colegio del Pilar; Father Miguel Léibar is their superior. On July 24, a commission from the Republican Government and a contingent of militiamen come to Castelló No.50 (Colegio del Pilar). They have come to seize the school building. While some of the militiamen hold the religious at gunpoint, others go about searching the school for weapons. Obviously they find none. So they take the religious to the police station. The policeman in charge takes their data, then lets them go, advising them to disperse. Each of the religious then goes to the place assigned to him earlier.

Father Miguel lives together with another Marianist, Brother Silvino Palacios, in the Provincial Administration apartment on Calle Velázquez No.21, 3rd

floor. The Provincial Superiors are in Jerez presiding at the annual retreat. On July 28, at table for a meal, are the two Marianist religious, a layman, brother to Brother Silvino, and two workers from the school: Melitón Díaz de Guereñu and Fabiana Rentero, a lady who was in charge of housekeeping for the younger students, and who had come to the Provincial house to cook and to clean. At 3 p.m., Brother Silvino and his brother leave the flat to run an errand.

At around 3:30 p.m., a crowd of militiamen arrive in several cars. They order the concierge:

“Show us where the third on the left is – where those priests and pastors live!”

They climb the stairs, ring the doorbell, and Father Miguel Léibar goes out to meet them, in secular garb. However, they spot a cassock hanging on a rack. This angers and emboldens them. They search the house and find many religious articles, ornaments, paintings, files... All of these objects they throw out the window into the street, where the other militiamen have a wild time with them – laughing, blaspheming, making fun of them, then gathering them into a pyre.

From the balcony of a nearby house, some students from the Colegio del Pilar and brothers witness the scene:

“From the balcony of the house we could see how they threw out into street cassocks, Mass vessels, chasubles, albs, stoles and a chalice. I saw a militiaman put on a chasuble, fill the chalice with

wine, then guzzle it down amid the uproar and derision of his companions. Male and female militia were putting on the sacred vestments and, to the beat of their mocking, began to dance around the fire...”

The militiamen then leave the flat, taking Father Miguel, Fabiana and Melitón with them. Fr. Miguel begs them, in vain, to leave the other two in peace: they are only servants and have nothing to do with the situation. His protests are useless. They don't want to hear any of it... Oh those priests and pastors! Father Miguel keeps serene. He realizes that the offering he made of his life to the Lord is about to be carried out. He knows that he is being held for being a priest, and because of hate for all that is Christian. And he ponders how these poor souls who insult him really “do not know what they are doing...”

The militiamen take the three captives out into the street. Roughly they shove the two men, Miguel and Melitón into a car; the woman they push into another. Both cars head toward Vallecas. In the campground of Moratalaz, they shoot Fabiana. Her body was found there later. The other car heads toward the kilometer 7 marker on the highway to Valencia. There they stop near some low-lying houses belonging to workers from a brick factory called Casa Vázquez. At this time, the workers have been on strike since July 18. They are now at the doorway of their homes together with their families... They witness the spectacle. Father Miguel gives absolution to his companion, then they embrace, and finally they die riddled with bullets.

Back at the Provincial flat, this is what the concierge Segundo Garay had to say (and let it be known that he was probably hiding a Capuchin Franciscan in his home):

“After an hour, the militiamen all returned to the flat where some of their colleagues had remained to continue their plunder of the place. One of them who was part of the firing squad told me: ‘Now you can rest easy, because those guys won’t be pains in the neck for you anymore!’ When I asked him, what did you do with them? He answered that they had killed the woman in an encampment and, as to the two men, they put them together and shot them, one next to the other, at the Puente de Vallecas. I then tried to tell him who that poor woman was, how she was raising two orphaned nephews with her work and that the other man was a poor laborer who, after freezing in his bed all night, tried to eke out a living doing odd jobs during the day. I told him that Father Léibar did only good to the poor. The militiaman seemed deeply moved and, throwing his rifle down the staircase, he told me: ‘I won’t be part of a firing squad anymore to kill anyone!’ ”

In the morning of July 29, the municipal judge of Puente de Vallecas writes up a death certificate: “An unidentified male...”

September 14, 1936

On Sunday, July 19, Florencio, Joaquín and

Sabino take refuge in the home of two spinster sisters Bazán, good and pious people. Their home on Calle Castelló 40, 3rd floor, is not far from the Colegio. These brothers had already stayed there in previous times of danger. They bring little with them except the textbooks they need to study for the September exams at the University. Around noon, a Dominican, Father Manuel Álvarez, arrives. He is confessor to the two sisters. He comes to seek refuge as well, since a mob had just stormed his church, Holy Rosary, during Mass and had begun to torch it. Two days later, another Dominican shows up, Brother Teófilo Montes. The Bazán sisters' house now turns into a fervent community: with common prayer, spiritual reading, study, and daily Mass and rosary... The Brothers then learn of the violent death of Father Léibar and his companions... Time marches on. It is September 12 and they celebrate the Holy Name of Mary, Patronal Feast of the Society of Mary. Unfortunately, the concierge of the premises is not to be trusted. He has recognized Father Manuel...

On September 13, around 4 p.m. the doorbell rings. Four armed militiamen break into the flat: "Up with your hands!" They search the whole place. Again they are looking for weapons which they do not find. However, there are plenty of books and religious articles.

"This whole place reeks of priests..."

One of the sisters overhears what was being said. One of the militiamen, standing right in the face of Father Manuel, and pointing to a picture of Christ, tells him:

“You’re going to have to s--t on this!”

“I? No! Never!” was Father Manuel’s answer, plain and simple.

Another of the militiamen, seeing religious paintings hanging on the wall, starts to pick on one of the sisters:

“What’s all that doing here?”

Without flinching she answers him:

“I’m sure even your mother wore a medal of the Virgin around her neck!”

And the man said not another word.

The militiamen complete their search. “Follow us!” they order. In vain are the protests of the two good ladies. With obscenities and rough shoving, they push the five down the stairs. At the bottom are three other militiamen and the concierge. Sabino, in one of his typical acts of generosity, goes to the concierge, thanks him and gives him an embrace.

They are then taken to a secret police prison known as “Radio Comunista del Oeste” [Communist Radio of the West] on Calle San Bernardo No. 72, and what a surprise it must have been for Sabino. The place was none other than the convent of the New Salesians – the place where he had visited on several occasions his cousin Dionisia, a Salesian sister! So now it’s a secret prison. They take them up an indoor staircase to the third floor, where they imprison them, incommunicado,

each to a cell formerly belonging to the nuns.

What kind of trial did they get? Probably a most casual one. They were religious and that was that! And that particular “crime” was punishable by death. The secret prison was not to be a jail for them but merely a holding tank. There were attempts to root out of them the names and addresses of “other enemies of the People” for the purpose of further “cleansing.” Instrumental in these interrogations was a professional boxer, a “specialist” in obtaining confessions; his methods proved to be quite forceful. But he managed to get little out of the three young Marianists...

Around 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, they are taken to the highway of El Pardo. There are all shot... It is September 14, the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross. A few hours later, in a ditch by kilometer 7, agents from the General Directorate of Security find five corpses, all riddled through with bullets. The bodies are then photographed: some of their faces show clear signs of violence. The town undertaker describes the bodies, makes a list of what they have on them – crosses, medals, a Baptismal certificate, then buries them in a common grave with fourteen others. At the end of the Civil War, a former student of the Marianists discovers a photo filed at the General Directorate of Security. It is a photo of Sabino...

FOUR WITNESSES FOR CHRIST WHO CHALLENGE US

A martyr is a Christian, a witness to Christ, one who is faithful to Him even unto death. And who

forgives...just like the Lord does.

They died for simply being religious. They never engaged in politics. They could have apostasized...what a triumph for their persecutors had they done so. But they didn't! They went to their deaths with serenity and forgiveness.

The winds of insanity had overtaken Spain in those fateful years. Their executors were men and women whose heads were filled with a continuing barrage of perverse propaganda. "Religion is the opium of the people" they were told; "Catholics are evil and dangerous, enemies of the People!"

On July 26, 1936, the newspaper CNT stated:

"Not a single church or convent stands, but barely two percent of the priests and nuns have been taken out of circulation. The hydra of religion is not yet dead! This needs to be taken into consideration and never lost sight of, even if for ulterior motives."

And so they set out, like fierce beasts, to "cleanse" Spain of such a "plague." Did they really know what they were about? Most probably the majority, as Jesus said about his torturers, "did not know what they were doing." Hopefully the Lord has pardoned them.

Yet their victims, like Miguel, Florencio, Joaquín, Sabino, indeed knew what they were doing and what they were dying for ... they were dying out of love for their Lord and out of love for those same people who had

killed them! For them, martyrdom was not a mere accident but a grace, a gift from God.

They have now been beatified: proposed to the faithful as models of faithfulness and courage. They have now been beatified to serve as a wake-up call to all Christians of today who find themselves too comfortable. Their example serves to challenge us. It is as if they were telling us: “Today no one threatens you with death. Why are you so negligent and forgetful of the One who loves you so, Jesus the Lord?”

For a complete biography

To know our martyrs better, we recommend the following book, which has an interesting and enlightening preface on the theology of martyrdom today by Enrique Torres Rojas, SM.

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José Maria Salaverri, SM

Translated from the Spanish by Daniel Triulzi, SM

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