

J.M.J.

**CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM**

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In preparation for the beatification of the four Marianist martyrs of Madrid (Blessed Miguel, Florencio, Joaquin, and Sabino) on October 28, 2007, in Rome, Father José María Salaverri, S.M. (former Superior General of the Society of Mary), researched and wrote a collective biography of these martyrs, *Madrid, Verano 1936*. The book was published in Madrid in 2007 prior to the beatification.

Father Enrique Torres, S.M. (former Postulator General of the S.M.), contributed an enlightening preface on the meaning of martyrdom. This prologue is a superb theological reflection on martyrdom. In it he shares his experience of twenty years in Rome as postulator of the Marianist causes for beatification and canonization. He treats various aspects of the process, the theological bases and the juridical proceedings, and some personal experiences.

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Brother John Samaha, S.M., Editor  
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Feast of the Marianist Martyrs of Madrid





## **CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM**

### **Martyrdom: theological concept and juridical proof**

Let us begin with some consideration of martyrdom. A study of a contemporary martyr presents some special difficulties which require great caution when beginning the proceedings. A Christian martyr is a witness of Christ who has embraced the following of the Master even to the point of giving up life for Him. The concept of Christian martyrdom, therefore, has a Christological perspective, for Christ was the first to give his life as proof of his love for the Father and for his brothers and sisters. It is that same Christ who gives the martyr the strength to follow his example. There is also an ecclesial dimension in martyrdom, for martyrdom forms part of the life of the community (the Church has martyrs, and the martyrs have the Church). It always requires a voluntary commitment of a life based on a conviction of faith and also on an aggression from the outside. It involves a public witnessing to the Risen Christ. Martyrdom always has a certain element of the "spectacle," even when it does not take place in a public square or in a coliseum.

In these four aspects there are clearly objective elements, in particular the fact of a violent death. There are also subjective components; for example, the intent of the persecutor or the dispositions of the victim. All this must be meticulously analyzed to arrive at a moral certitude founded on "proven acts," that is, constructed on trustworthy witnesses and controlled documentation.

## **The study of a martyrdom**

Since the moment of death is the culmination of a martyr's life we might say that it would be enough for a declaration of martyrdom to study that final moment in its two-fold aspect of the objective and the subjective. The previous life of the martyr would be only a preparation. At the moment of martyrdom, God gives the persecuted an extraordinary grace that opens up the gates of paradise as happened with the "good thief." Christ is present in this final struggle and gives the martyr a fortitude that identifies the victim with his Savior. In fact, the Church has recognized as martyrs many Christians whose life is known only in its final apotheosis.

Yet a study of the entire life of a martyr has its importance, for it allows us to see, in the majority of cases, how the grace of martyrdom is the culminating point of a faith-filled life. The martyr has learned how to be faithful in the great event through faithfulness in the small ones. God, usually, prepares the martyr for this final struggle through a period of preparation. It is, then, necessary to analyze the antecedents of martyrdom: the remote dispositions of the martyr and his/her personal acceptance of death, as well as the ambience of the persecution and its repercussions in a specific ecclesial community.

## **The work of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints**

A study of the case of a martyr requires, in addition, a clear knowledge of the ambience in which the religious persecution has taken place. I have been able to do an extensive study of the socio-political and ecclesial climate of two religious persecutions of the last century: the Spanish one of the thirties, and the national-socialist (Nazi) one of the early forties. Making this study in Rome is a guarantee of objectivity. The international nature of the Roman Curia greatly favors the impartiality of such studies. In the case of the Spanish martyrs I worked with three members of the

Congregation, an Italian, a Canadian, and a Spaniard. In the case of an Austrian martyr, I worked with a German member. Our work, gathered in what is called a *Positio*, was judged in successive dicasteral bodies (Assembly of the Theological Consultors, Assembly of the Cardinals and Bishops) by persons of many diverse nationalities. I believe this is all truly a positive approach and perhaps not sufficiently understood.

It is also important to take note of another detail which often is overlooked. The procedural formula for a case of martyrdom, called the *dubium*, is stated as follows: Is it clear that the martyrdom (of N.N.) and its cause is the case and the purpose which is before us? The Church studies not only the fact of the martyr-murder, but also its cause. St. Augustine's statement when commenting on Psalm 34 is classic: "It is not the pain suffered which makes a martyr, but the cause." By cause here is meant the motive for which the executioner carries out his action of killing, and the motive for which the martyr accepts his death. All this is considered, not in general, but in a specific case. Moreover, there is no question of drawing historical conclusions on the responsibility of the persecutor or on the possibility of having been able to avoid the persecution. Judgment is passed also on the consequences of a declaration of martyrdom. There is question only of judging whether the death of a person bears the nature of martyrdom or not, with the consequence of declaring the person "saint" or "beatified." That is, with the consequence of proposing the person as a model and as an intercessor of the Christian community.

The Church, directing these procedures, does not seek to pronounce judgment on all the historical aspects of a persecution. Subjects as complicated as the French Revolution and its causes, the former Japanese religiosity with its opposition to Christianity, the Catholic martyrs of Anglican England, or the Republic of 1931 and the causes of the Spanish civil war, are not the objects of study in a process of canonization "concerning martyrs." These are only a few examples. Nor is it a matter of attempting an analysis of the failures of Christians in each of these historical moments. This focus to "study only this case and the consequences of a declaration of martyrdom" is ignored by many detractors of modern martyrs, for

almost none of them has read the process documentation of the Congregation of the Causes of Saints. That can be a real disadvantage, for its rigorous historical work should contribute light for whoever engages in other types of consideration.

### **Modern martyrs, occasion for polemics**

Many times I have been asked why these declarations of martyrdom have aroused so much controversy in the countries where the process of martyrdom is taking place. And why there is so much political reading of something so theological. This is true not only in our house in Spain, but in many other places as well. In both Austria and Germany there are well-intentioned people who cannot understand why we do not leave the dead in peace, or why we seek to arouse controversy on their account. The same takes place in almost all situations: with the African martyrs, the Asian ones, the martyrs of the Communist persecution, the martyrs of Mexico, and others.

In fact, the remembrance of martyrs upsets some, as though the Church, by defining their martyrdom, wants to interfere in political issues or does not take into consideration the sensitivities of other persons, Catholic or not. Or they accuse the Church of beatifying through opportunism, against specific governments, or against specific parties or ideologies. In this respect it must be repeated that the prudence of the Apostolic See has been exquisite, both in the decrees of approbation of martyrdom and in the homilies of the popes, especially John Paul II.

Besides, let us not forget that martyrdom is, above all, a gift, a special grace of identification with Christ, which no one merits. Let us set aside, then, questions of “why this?” and set aside, also, our human comparisons as to who might have been more worthy. Entering into such questions means not understanding the profound meaning of martyrdom.

## **John Paul II and his interest in the martyrs**

I have also given much thought to the great interest that John Paul II had in keeping the local churches from losing the memory of their martyrs. This was one of the recurring themes of the jubilee of the year 2000, combined with the call to all to purify historical memory. This same pope, who asked pardon in the name of the Church for the errors of the past, organized in the Roman Coliseum an ecumenical celebration of the witnesses to the faith of the twentieth century. He was interested, too, fulfilling a recommendation of Vatican II, in enlarging the “geography” of holiness so as to recognize the martyrdom of many Catholics of the twentieth century in Catholic communities throughout the five continents. There are many books on the martyrs of the past century, with such truly extraordinary examples as those of Maximilian Kolbe, Edith Stein, the Claretian community of Barbastro, or the Passionist community of Daimiel, to mention a few of those already recognized by the Church. I ask the reader to add to that list a preferred contemporary martyr if you have one. I could add the Marianist martyrs whose cause I have had the privilege of promoting.

## **New theology concerning martyrdom**

All this means that the theology of martyrdom has experienced new vigor beginning with the classical work of Hans Urs von Balthasar in the seventies, on the martyr Cordula. The thesis of this author is well-known: the martyr is one who lives faith “with seriousness” even to its ultimate consequences. A Christianity which does not have martyrdom as a lively horizon is a deficient Christianity. Since that time much study has been given to martyrdom within the context of so-called “fundamental theology” (the older apologetics). There are excellent articles on martyrdom in modern Catholic encyclopedias. There has also been much study devoted to martyrdom in patristic theology. Biblicists also have helped us much to shape a theology of martyrdom based on the Old and the New Testaments. Think, for example, of the excellent

contemporary commentaries on the book of Revelation. However, for what is here my concern, this theme has not gained much interest in Spain, except for the cases of witnessing to the faith in Latin America.

Let us try, now, to apply these ideas to the case of the Spanish martyrs of the twentieth century.

### **Martyrs of the twentieth century Spanish persecution**

Let us begin by saying that we must make a great effort to clarify our vocabulary. We are used to saying: “martyrs of the civil war.” First of all, a war, or, better, a field of combat, is not a site for finding martyrs, for God gives the grace of martyrdom only to the unarmed. There is a Marianist, perhaps forgotten, Agustín de Prada, who led an exemplary life and death as a soldier in 1937 on the Cordova front. He died carrying out a civic duty imposed upon him, but it never occurred to anyone to call him a martyr. We may wish to honor the memory of this young Marianist religious who died prematurely; someone might decide to write something about him. But he cannot be called a martyr.

Martyrs are the product of a religious persecution, and it is in this context that they should be placed. Moreover, talk of a “civil war” should include identifying the contesting parties in the least polemical manner. Nor should such designations be extended to persecutors or persecuted. I cite only a few examples: seditionists, fascists, nationalists, rebels, reds, Marxists, nationalists, republicans. A writer who claims to be neutral and wants to avoid offending anyone will meet with difficulties by using such terms indiscriminately.

In a study of the twentieth century Spanish martyrs, it is most important to limit ourselves to what happened in the religious persecution at a certain locality. I received this advice from the first relator with whom I had to deal, the wise Carmelite Father Valentino Macca, now deceased. He told me very simply: “explain in a few words, for those who are new to the subject, the general situation in Spain and study in depth what happened in Ciudad Real.” I

believe this is a golden rule, for in Spain there was not a uniform religious persecution. Rather there existed situations quite diverse depending on the localities, even in the different towns of the same province; even according to the month and year of the persecution.

As to a study of martyrdom itself, caution must be taken to exclude all possible presuppositions and to arrive at a moral certitude that the presumed martyr was not assassinated for directly political reasons, nor out of personal enmity, but simply for being a Christian (or a religious or a priest). There must be an effort to reconstruct the final moments of his/her life, something that is especially difficult in the case of these Spaniards. In almost all these Spanish cases, the so-called “executions” or “walks” took place at night and in the absence of any other witnesses and, curiously, on week-ends (when the so-called “militias” carried out their usual work).

In these cases, great attention must be given to the details. Finding, among the remains of a martyr a crucifix, a rosary, or a medal, indicate a clear manifestation of faith given the risk taken by having on one’s person such objects. Also important is the serenity of soul which the presumed martyr maintained, admitting he was a religious or priest, or the desire he manifested that no others be held because of him. In order to understand the martyr’s dispositions, it is very important to pay attention to his gestures or words of pardon for his executioners. It is important to consider carefully the dispositions of the persecutors, through their comments before or after the execution. The so-called “hatred of the faith” may also be manifested by the so-called “martyrdom of things,” that is, the burning or destroying of sacred objects or the cursing and blasphemies uttered. This happened very often in Spain, in contrast to persecutions in other countries. The closest comparison to our situation is the persecution in Mexico, before ours. It inspired many of our martyrs, above all in invoking Christ the King while dying.

### **Father Miguel Léibar: details of his martyrdom**

To proceed more quickly in this preface, already too long, I would like to present to the reader both the portrait of Father Miguel Léibar Garay and that of his younger companions, applying the above reflections to this specific case of martyrdom.

We have reconstructed the life of Miguel Léibar through an abundance of documentation (both written and oral). In summary, we may say that he was a Marianist religious of the first Spanish generation and that he received an excellent formation from our founding French religious. Exercising special influence on him, I believe, were the Superior of the Marianist Seminary at Fribourg, Switzerland, the noted Mariologist, Father Emile Neubert; the General Assistant, Father Henri Lebon; then Father Domingo Lázaro, first as Provincial and then as his Superior at the *Colegio del Pilar* of Madrid after 1930.

An important fact: Miguel Léibar was confessor for Domingo Lázaro and charged, in the external forum, with “imposing” rest on his superior in his critical illness. This relationship, which we know only from the outside, was without doubt decisive in the life of our martyr. He lived at close proximity through the saintly death of Father Domingo in 1935, a year and a half before his own martyrdom. Besides, we must add that he was an exemplary Marianist priest, carrying out the many tasks of teacher and chaplain of the *Colegio*, and always performing extra-scholastic work with the students and their families. He was, moreover, a sacrificing and generous director of the school and of the community for a total of eleven years, passing there some very difficult times. He spent the last six years of his life as chaplain of the *Colegio del Pilar* in Madrid. Those years coincided with the declaration of the Republic and the beginning of the religious persecution.

Let us move on to those last six years. They were the remote and proximate preparation for martyrdom. Miguel Léibar was 45

years old when he went to the *Colegio del Pilar* in Madrid. He had overcome his illness and was recovering from the toll of two difficult directorships. He was weighed down with work, but he felt himself useful, beloved by the students and their families. He was highly esteemed in the Marianist community and was confessor to almost all the members of his community; he was one of the councilors of the superior. In May of 1931 he passed some difficult days with fires at some of the churches and religious houses. It was the beginning of some menaces which increased little by little: laws prohibiting the religious from teaching, expulsion of the Jesuits, hostile attitude of the press, and extreme tension in political life.

In 1934 there followed the revolution of Asturias with the first immolations of priests and religious. Religious fervor increased in his community, and the superiors encouraged faithfulness “come what may.” These were the final words of Father Domingo Lázaro in February, 1935; they are a spiritual testament which becomes the sustaining element of the community. The Provincial Chapters of those years sought to give serenity to the religious, asking that they not engage in politics.

During the school year 1935-36, Miguel Léibar worked constantly. His name appears frequently in the house annals which record the apostolic activities with the sodalists. With them he regularly attended the *Cerro de los Angeles*. In the spring he volunteered to take charge of the community and to guard the *Colegio*, and to preach two sessions of retreats for the religious, at the end of June in Madrid and later in Segovia. On both occasions he alluded to perseverance unto death and to the necessity of being prepared for whatever might happen.

The martyrdom of Miguel Léibar is recounted in this work in all detail. Here I wish only to allude to some specifics. To Father Miguel belongs the honor of being the protomartyr of the Society of Mary, the first of a notable list of religious which, for the moment, remains open. He is also one of the first martyrs of Madrid of 1936. This shows, in my view that the Marianist house of Velázquez was already under suspicion. If the militias found Father Miguel there, it was because he chose not to abandon the ship until he saw that all

the Brothers were safe. Here, again, martyrdom of faith meets martyrdom of charity.

In his martyrdom there are other notable features: the incomprehensible death of two servants of the *Colegio* who at that moment were in the building -- indication of the mental excitement and lack of discipline of the militias in those first moments. Melitón Díaz de Guereñu and Fabiana Rentero deserve a place of honor in Marianist history as innocent victims of those horrible years. And the burning of sacred images at the corner of Velázquez and Jorge Juan Boulevards give this martyrdom not only a greater proof of "hatred for faith," but also an image of the darkness worthy of the paintings of de Goya or of the grotesque images of the Valle-Inclán. And another detail: considering this martyrdom today we see in it a clear prophetic sign. The militias of Vallecas took Father Miguel from his house and his neighborhood to kill him somewhere else. In that same Vallecas, the successors of Miguel Léibar would later inscribe a beautiful page of ecclesial and Marianist presence, still open to the future

### **Our younger martyrs**

Brothers Sabino Ayastuy, Joaquín Ochoa, and Florencio Arnáiz were immolated, respectively, at the ages of 24, 26, and 27. Sabino and Florencio had made perpetual profession in 1934 and Joaquín in 1935. Their letters asking for vows exhibit a great love for the Virgin Mary and a firm intention to serve her until the end in a Society which bears her name. Joaquín is ready to "work in honor of Mary until the hour that I die in her service." Thanks to the regular reports of the superiors on their canonical visitations, we have been able to reconstruct with adequate precision the personal evolution of each one of them. We can also present the details of each one's temperament and character.

We know that Sabino was pursuing studies for a licentiate in history and was destined for the priesthood. Joaquín was preparing a licentiate in history, with a view to secondary education. Florencio, a national master and bachelor, had specialized in education of the youngest and had permission to study some

foreign languages. After some years of teaching in various Marianist schools, the three met at the *Colegio del Pilar* at the beginning of the 1935-1936 year. They received orders to go to Madrid in the summer of 1936: Sabino and Joaquín to prepare themselves for official programs of study; Florencio, to give some make-up classes for slower students and to improve his French.

On July 19 our three future martyrs arrived at the *Colegio del Pilar* to take residence on the same street, a few houses farther down, in the home of the distinguished Bazán sisters. This was their residence arranged for them by their superiors. Later, two Dominicans, Father Manuel, 65 years old, and Brother Teófilo, 27, take up residence in this same boarding house. They lived there six weeks, forming a small community of prayer and support as has been related to us by numerous witnesses referred to in this book by Father Salaverri. This period was their remote preparation for martyrdom.

On their proximate preparation at the moment of the immolation we have fewer testimonies, though enough to form a convincing proof of their martyrdom. There is a series of apparently unrelated elements.

The “hatred of the faith” of the militias of *Radio Oeste* is clear from the intent to force Father Manuel Álvarez, O.P., to blaspheme at the very moment of detention. Brother Sabino Ayastuy’s gesture of “giving a fond farewell” to the porter, knowing that he had betrayed them, shows clearly his desire to pardon, a characteristic trait of a Christian martyr. Their removal to the communist holding cell on San Bernardo Street, signified for each of them isolation, interrogation, and torture, all reflected in the photos of their cadavers made by the agents of the Director General of Security. It was a truly terrifying night. Of the eight Marianists whose martyrdom has been canonically verified these three young men were the only ones to have been tortured.

The gravedigger of El Pardo noted in his book other very

important details: on the cadavers were found crucifixes, medals, and a baptismal certificate. These are a striking proof of their desire to profess their faith up to the end despite the risk incurred by having these objects on their persons. These combined details make of this martyrdom one of the most sublime facts of Marianist history in Madrid, worthy to be remembered in the entire Marianist family. The youth of these religious and their enthusiasm for their religious and Marianist vocation are especially eloquent in the church of this new millennium, so infected with secularization and so many post-modern “isms.”

### **Examination of conscience in the light of the martyrs**

Let us conclude with two texts. The first is from John Paul II spoken in Germany, on the occasion of the beatification of a martyr: “Through martyrdom, which represents the experience of our century, the Church has gained greater understanding of herself and of her mission in the world.” The second is from Benedict XVI, taken from his encyclical *Deus caritas est*: “The life of the saint consists not only of his earthly biography, but also of his life and activity in God after death” (no. 42).

May the reading of these pages help us understand better the mystery of the Church and the urgency of her mission. May it also help us sense that these “saints,” who have lived in our very own locales, continue to live and to act in God in our favor.

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