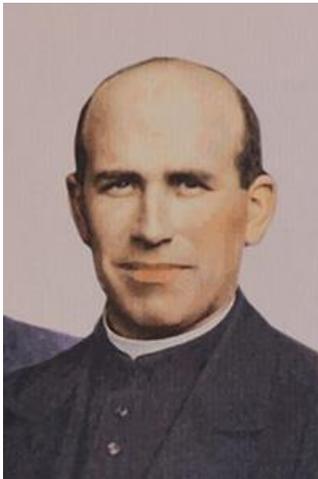


## Marianist Moment:

### *Padre Miguel Leibar, SM*



In an effort to provide information about four Marianist martyrs who died during the Spanish Civil War, Bro. Robert Wood compiled information for the book, *Four Marianist Martyrs, Madrid, 1936*. The subjects of the book are Florencio Arnaiz Cejudo, Sabino Ayastuy Errasti, Joaquin Ochoa Salazar and Miguel Leibar. This segment of the Marianist Moment will center on Fr. Miguel Leibar, who adopted this sentiment for his life: *"I want to be a little instrument in the hands of God."*

Born to Francisco Leibar and Juana Garay in a small village, one of many in northern Spain, Miguel was the third of their four children. Francisco was widowed with these four young children, remarried and had five more children. Miguel was a lively child who loved to read and took an interest in religion. He made friends with Carlos Eraña and Francisco Lasagabaster, two future Marianists.

The Marianists from France had been in Spain for six years. Miguel decided to join the Marianists in 1896 in Escoriaza, a mere 27 kilometers from his home town. The house of formation was established in a vacant spa resort in 1895, complete with a postulate and scholasticate. It was named Convent of Our Lady of the Pillar. Two years later, against his father's wishes, Miguel started on foot for Escoriaza.

During a home visit Miguel's father pleaded with him to remain, that his help was needed on the farm. Miguel responded with such conviction, asking his father not to lay any stumbling blocks in his way. He was so surprised at his son's strong conviction that he never interfered again.

In his community of seventy-seven religious, Miguel was recognized for his leadership, intelligence, devotion and stability. During the religious upheaval of 1903, the group walked to Escoriaza, where Fr Simler visited them. They expressed interest in foreign missions. After Miguel finished his studies, he was assigned to Colegio Santa Maria in Vitoria, where he was responsible for twenty-seven third grade children. He did well his first year and received positive remarks from the school inspector. The only caution was to be mindful of his sensitivity.

In 1907, among his family and friends, Miguel made his perpetual vows with five other religious in the chapel at Escoriaza. The following year he was assigned to the new Our Lady of the Pillar School in Madrid. There he was reunited with his childhood friend, Carlos Eraña. Fidel Fuidio joined them in 1910. In 1911, Fr. Charles Demangeon, who had known Fr. Chaminade, became his spiritual director. He preached a retreat and told of an incident when Fr. Chaminade placed his hand on the head of the serpent at the foot of Mary's image, prophesying that she would crush his head. Miguel was so moved by Fr. Chaminade's example that he wanted nothing more than to be faithful and imitate him in his priesthood. Miguel went to Fribourg to begin seminary studies and was ordained a deacon August 2, 1914. He was ordained one year later, and embraced by his father who had tears in his eyes.

His first assignment following ordination was to the Marianist school in Cadiz, as teacher and chaplain. One year later he moved to Jerez de la Frontera, where he served as director of the school and community for six years. Then he moved to Madrid to Our Lady of the Pillar School with an enrollment of over one thousand students. In 1923 he was assigned to Vitoria. In 1925 he was called to San Sebastian in the capital of the Province of Guipuzcoa, which included his native village. Here is where he earned the moniker "Phantom" because he seemed to be everywhere at once. He was well received by students and parents at all of his placements.

Miguel found himself in a little trouble with the provincial administration when he pursued a project to convert an area under the chapel into an auditorium or theatre. While he had a good rapport with the new, and first Spaniard, Secretary General, Don Miguel Garcia, he forgot to consult the treasurer. Though the project had not cost him anything, due to parent and alumni help, it caused quite a stir. Anticipating his possible removal from the school, he wrote to his superiors that he would be willing to serve there one more year. In his letter he wrote the quote noted at the beginning of this article, "I want to be a little instrument in the hands of God."

Miguel returned to Madrid. In his tenure, he established the Federation of Friends of Teaching, which brought together all the schools, religious and lay people interested in Catholic education. The political arena was beginning to fall apart. The burning of religious buildings spiked in 1931. A new Constitution prohibiting religious from any business, commerce or teaching was approved. But it met with swift action by the Republicans who dissolved the Society of Jesus in January 1932. Religious were given 10 days to leave Spain. Schools found a way to remain open, led by lay directors and staffed by religious who were contracted to teach as seculars.

Despite continuous upheaval, Our Lady of the Pillar School remained open, only to be attacked by an armed group that searched the school for weapons. Finding none, they left. No one was killed and students were allowed to leave. Classes continued as usual, but the threat lingered. Miguel wrote: "from a religious point of view, we are ahead: we pray more and better."

After school ended that year, Miguel made three trips with youth groups to the hill of the angels, south of Madrid for retreat. His nephew Martin was among those he saw just before he left for Escoriaza where he would make his perpetual vows. It would also be the last time they would see each other.

In the midst of the military uprising, Miguel arrived in Segovia, where he preached a retreat encouraging the young men to remain strong in faith and be willing to sacrifice their lives. The provincial informed those on retreat that arrangements had been made should they be forced to abandon their community life. On July 16, Miguel, Carlos Eraña, and Fr Jeronimo Castillo returned to Madrid, with Miguel in charge. As the fighting worsened, Miguel informed community members that they were free to go to the prearranged safe houses or to relatives or friends. In an effort to escape the mayhem, four Marianists tried to go to Ciudad Real but were held up at the train station. They were interrogated and released. They made a mistake sending a telegram announcing their late arrival. The telegram was intercepted and their destination revealed. The four walked into martyrdom.

Armed groups searched buildings, including a three story one in which the provincial administration occupied the top floor. The invaders claimed that they had been shot at and conducted a search of the first floor. The brothers were afraid that the invaders would find the hosts in their makeshift tabernacle, so two of them consumed the hosts. However, finding no one on the first floor, the invaders moved on. But the government ordered lights to be left on at night which left them vulnerable since without curtains, it was possible to see the chapel.

Miguel, and a few others, stayed at the school, trying to take care of it. On July 24 three government representatives, some armed persons and assault guards informed him that they had come to take over the building. The republicans left and the communists argued over who was going to occupy the building. The government officials wanted it for a women's prison, which they soon realized would not work. Ultimately it was used as a military hospital. Because of that, the building was not destroyed and the beautiful stained glass windows were preserved.

On July 28, five people were in the Velasquez apartment, Miguel, don Silvino Palacios and his brother Hilario, a layman, Melitón Diaz, the school custodian, and Fabian, a poor, simple woman raising two orphan nephews. Silvio and Hilario went out on an errand. Shortly thereafter, a huge group of armed militia surrounded the house and proceeded up to the third floor. Unsuspecting, Miguel opened the door and the group burst in, saw a cassock and immediately searched the apartment. Finding religious objects, they tossed them out the window where they were set ablaze. They seized Miguel and the two others. Miguel tried unsuccessfully to get them to release the innocent Melitón and Fabian. They were thrown into a car and taken away. Fabian was removed from the car at Dehesa de Mortalaz and shot seventeen times. A distance later, Miguel and Melitón were taken away from the main road. Miguel gave Melitón absolution as they embraced. They too were shot.

Miguel Leibar was the first of 15 Spanish Marianists to give their lives for the faith. His remains were moved from the cemetery of Vallecas, where he was martyred, to a mausoleum at the Marianist scholasticate near Madrid, and finally, due to his beatification, to the chapel of Our Lady of the Pillar school in Madrid.

*It might be interesting to have a conversation with the people in your faith community on each person's response to: By what motto do you live your life?*