

75th Anniversary of Our Martyred Brothers of Spain

ON OCCASION OF THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF OUR MARTYRED BROTHERS OF SPAIN (1936-2011)



When Asian, African or Latin American Claretians visit Barbastro, Cervera or other places where many of our brothers were killed during the sad and terrible Spanish Civil War of 1936, they are surprised and asked about why so much killing and hatred.

The testimony of faithfulness of our martyred brothers to the values that were the foundation of their lives touches the heart of any Claretian who visits these places of martyrdom. This testimony inspires the vocation of everyone who recalls the generous gesture of these men who sacrificed all for their fidelity to Christ and to the vocation they had received. But the question about why continues to vex the intelligence of those who want to understand a situation that seems inexplicable.

All martyrs have their context: religious, social, political. This is true even for the martyrdom of Jesus. Obviously, this was also the case for the martyrdom of many bishops, priests, religious and the many lay people killed during the Spanish Civil War. Social inequalities, the lust for power by the various political groups, the growing social disorder present at that time, the identification--often without foundation--of the Church with one of the groups vying for power at the time, the manipulation of public opinion by the dominant ideologies, the lack of a deeper evangelization among the people, especially for those living in marginal situations and so on, give us some clues to explain the why of so much hatred and violence particularly against everything that might be related to the Church. The military uprising just flamed a fire that was dormant for some time. After 75 years of that sad moment in the history of Spain, we can once again do analysis and gather insights that reinforce the hope that something similar does not happen ever again.

Our brothers knew the situation and chose to follow Jesus because they wanted to evangelize this people and others who were present on the missionary horizon of the Congregation. They knew that

the Word of God transforms the hearts of people and gives them the strength needed to truly transform society. For this they offered their lives to God and were determined to stay true to their promise.

The greatness of a martyr is precisely in being faithful to the values that Jesus offers us in the gospel and to the vocation that the Lord has given to live them and in being of service to others. To know that one is in the hands and the heart of the Father and to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness above all else is what sustains the martyr in his witness. The martyrs are a precious heritage of religious families. They are icons that remind us of the meaning of our lives, the reason for our existence. “Consecrated to Christ and to the service of his Kingdom, their witness in following him, has brought them to the point of the cross. Though circumstances might differ and situations might vary the cause of martyrdom is always the same—fidelity to the Lord and to his Gospel: “since it is not the pain which makes the martyr but rather the cause”. (Starting Afresh from Christ, n.9)

These days we are remembering the martyrdom of many of our brothers. We celebrate the 75th anniversary of those events that filled the whole Congregation with anguish and left us with a profound testimony of martyrdom in the history of our Institute. I have been reading, during these days, the minutes of the meetings of the General Government of that time and the testimonies both written and oral that arrived in Rome from various parts of the Congregation in Spain, especially from the province of Catalonia, which bore the brunt of the persecution. Both the minutes and the testimonials reflect, on the one hand, the concern and anguish at the in-coming news: deaths, looting, brothers who were unaccounted for, and more. This was accompanied by a feeling of helplessness in the face of what was happening and anxiety about what to do. There was a diversity of views, positions and strategies. But, on the other hand, they reflect very clearly the unanimous awareness that we were in a time of martyrdom that was being lived out with generosity and extraordinary courage. The writings of our martyrs and the testimony of many people who shared this time with them in jail or received them in their homes at the risk of their lives, speak eloquently of the spiritual maturity of our brothers.

It is good to remember the words and feelings that appear most strongly in their writings and in the testimony of those who shared with them moments that left an indelible mark on their lives. They cried out: Long Live Christ the King!, expressing the ideal that inspired their lives. They felt called to forgive those who were to be the executioners of unjust sentences handed down only because of hatred or prejudice. They remembered their "beloved Congregation" and expressed the hope that the blood they shed would bring forth life for her and, through her, for many people around the world. They thought about their families and desired to send a word of consolation and hope to their parents, especially for their mothers, who would receive with sorrow the news of their death, inviting them to be participants in their gift of martyrdom. They felt nostalgia for the mission that some had served with great generosity and which had filled the hearts of younger members with enthusiasm; they knew that now they were being asked for a different but equally significant testimony. They lived their experience of community with courage and even those who had to face martyrdom alone knew that they were accompanied by the remembrance and prayers of their brothers. They dreamed of a world

without hate where the teachings of the Gospel –the values of the Kingdom, we would say today—help to find those ways of peace and brotherhood which are rooted deep in the human heart. They lived with a profound depth the experience of Mary's love and felt her presence at a time when, more than ever, they needed a tender gesture.

During this difficult time in their lives, in addition to the mutual support that the martyrs of Barbastro and others who came to martyrdom in community experienced, or in spite of the loneliness that others had to face in that moment of their lives, they found in the Eucharist, in the meditation on the Word of God, and in prayer, a force that enabled them to keep saying "yes" without hesitation, when this word was taking on a concreteness never previously envisioned.

The witness of our brothers continues to question and motivate us. The dimension of martyrdom is always present in the missionary vocation. This was true in the life of the Founder and has been so in the history of our congregation. Our Founder integrated this dimension in his definition of a missionary and which he himself lived at various stages of his life. "... Nothing daunts him; he delights in privations, welcomes work, embraces sacrifices, smiles at slander, rejoices in all the torments and sorrows he suffers, and glories in the cross of Jesus Christ. His only concern is how he may follow Christ and imitate him in praying, working, enduring and striving constantly and solely for the greater glory of God and the salvation of humankind"(CC. 9). Our martyred brothers, like all Claretians had these words engraved on his minds and hearts. They knew them from memory and many times had meditated upon them. However, this does not erase weakness from one's life. Surely they were weighed down by some of the hardships; they felt weak before the sacrifices that were being asked of them and experienced fear of the torments they thought they might have to endure. The definition of a missionary is not the description of "strong men", but of persons who are able to look to Jesus in their hearts and to embrace his gaze. Contemplation about Jesus, communion with his passion for the Father and the Father's plan, with his love for every one of his brothers and sisters--expressed beautifully in the last sentence of the definition--is what makes possible to live the demands of the first part of the definition of a missionary. The martyrs have been able to fix their eyes on Jesus and have managed to embrace his gaze full of the tenderness and mercy of the Master who transformed the heart of that Peter who had denied knowing the Lord but then was able to spend his life confessing his faith in Him. The confession of faith in Jesus unto death is the result of a deep friendship with the Master. And such friendship is a gift that must be cultivated carefully. To build our lives around Jesus, responding to the invitation he has given us, is our way of self-realization. It is the way that prepares us to "give our life" every day and even for martyrdom if necessary.

I know that in many provinces and delegations, in many communities and activities of the Congregation, several events have been scheduled to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the martyrdom of our brothers. May these celebrations allow us to feel the gaze of Jesus upon us, to help us hear again the call and prepare us to give a radical and generous response. The Congregation and each one of us must be prepared to be witnesses for the Kingdom under any circumstances and context.

May we not lack the spiritual strength that allowed our brothers to live their lives with a joyful fidelity during a most difficult time in the history of Spain. It is a glorious page of congregational history, which we must not only remember but continue to build upon. (cf. VC 110)

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