

Claretian Martyrs of Barbastro

by Gabriel Campo Villegas

Introduction

Fifty one martyrs? But who cares? It all happened more than 75 years ago, worlds apart from you and from me, running faster and faster into the 21st century. Furthermore, they died in the Spanish civil war (1936 - 39)... and who wants to remember those confused and bloody years? All this is true and yet...

There are certain qualities in the friends of God that transcend time and historical circumstances, making them our contemporaries, our fellow travellers. With their lives and especially with their death they conquered the future, placing themselves right into the frontiers of our dreams.

Among the friends of God, they stand in a place all by themselves. Today, as martyrs, they project a strange appeal to our society. Bishop Romero, Martin Luther King and a few others have found a permanent niche in our collective memory. Are we living, then, in a new era of martyrs and heroes? Not quite. These solitary figures we so venerate and cherish, make the landscape of martyrdom seem even more empty. Radicalism and martyrdom certainly do not belong to the pattern of behaviour of our contemporary society. On the contrary, the crumbling of ideologies, beliefs and certainties hold an answer for this mediocrity in which we all became comfortable, including those of us of the Christian community. And yet, in striking contrast with the pervading values of our society of self-gratification and self-indulgence, to which we all fully belong, our religious literature on the following of Christ, is today as never before spelled out and articulated in such radical terms than the gap between the style of our daily lives, and the projection of our dreams borders on the comical. The documents of our bishops conferences, the new constitutions of all religious families, our sermons and sharings are full of extreme challenges and pronouncements, a far cry from the measured tones of only a few decades ago. Is it that we feel nostalgic of the times gone by when radicalism and martyrdom, as the most radical way of following Christ, was the daily bread of the Christian community? Is it that the sanctity of Christian heroes make us indulge in substitutes, or a projection of our needs, into a heroic Christian literature? After all, the flourishing of such Christian literature has taken place in the church in times of "want". Who cared to theologise about inter-religious dialogue when that dialogue was a fact of life? Or to put up a beautiful theology on the mission of the Church when the whole Christian community was a missionary community? Are not the avalanche of books about religious life, one more radical than the other, a sure sign that the religious life is in deep crisis? Are we self-hypnotizing ourselves into the belief that we really are what we are supposed to be? Or worse, are we exorcising our Christian compromises into the realm of utopia, embellishing them but making them powerless?

Whatever the explanation, it is a fact that our society and our Christian community, in particular, are fascinated by and in need of martyrs. We need to be told by men and women like us that martyrdom of any kind, with or without blood, is not a luxury or a fiction of our Christian imagination but a reality, a vocation which is possible by the power of the one who called us all. They are the incarnation of our longings, the flesh and bones of our dreams.

In the little booklet that we are presenting you, you will find a rare study on preparation for martyrdom. Most of our 51 martyrs were young seminarians in their twenties. For a full month

they knew clearly what their destiny could be and they prepared themselves for it with the full determination and joy of their youth. They left behind a treasure of written testimonies of their last days and hours on pieces of paper, chairs, benches... in any place they could write, a very unique case in the history of martyrdom.

The fascinating appeal of these 51 seminarians is that they were just that, ordinary seminarians, people like many others at that time, like many others today, in their formative years dealing with books, classes, schedules, struggling with their prayer-life, their missionary dreams, their shortcomings, their community problems, the formation of their characters, etc. But when God offered them the supreme choice, they answered with full generosity. It is this triumph of God's power and grace the ultimate message of the martyrs, a power and a grace which is at our disposal too. You can forget about the historical circumstances of their death. They were killed in the first weeks of the Spanish civil war, when the political confusion and human passions were at their highest, when crimes and atrocities were committed on both sides. The martyrdom, then, of our 51 young seminarians is not to be considered as a moral or political judgment on the right or wrong of any of those who militated on either side of the conflict. They were killed quite simply because they were religious seminarians, because they did not want to betray the vocation they received from God. Their sacrifice transcends the past and makes them our fellow-companions.

HISTORICAL FACTS

The testimonies concerning the missionary martyrs of Barbastro (Spain) are impressive. There is an abundance of first-hand documentation: eyewitnesses, both men and women, who were there, whose declarations were given under oath, saw the missionaries and heard their words of forgiveness for their enemies; witnessed their slow Calvary and the temptations they were subjected to in order to break down their morals and their morale, and also their contagious joy and the enthusiasm with which they heard their own name in the roll-call for the firing squad.

Several of those who witnessed their execution in the early hours of those days in August 1936 are still living. Anyone who wants to can talk with them and ask them to tell how the Missionaries of the Heart of Mary - most of them young men from 20 to 24 years old - were killed in groups of twenty along the road that runs from Barbastro to Berbegal and Sarinena.

"They were martyrs," all of them repeat. "They were never mixed up in politics. They were priests, brothers and seminarians, and they shot them because they were churchmen, and because they would not renege on their Catholic faith".

"Those brothers of ours lived their sacrifice as a supreme religious and Christian experience, feeling that they were closely united with Christ and His cross, the efficacious sign of salvation. To see for ourselves the high degree of spirituality with which our brothers stood up to death, I recommend that we browse through the fleeting writings and messages that many of them left us. They clearly reveal a missionary spirituality which, built on deep-rooted intimacy with Christ, led them to view the handing over of their own lives as a final act of obedience to mission".(Letter of the Very Rev. Gustavo Alonso, C.M.F., Claretian Superior General)

—But is it true that they went off singing in the truck that was carrying them to their death?

"They were all singing. All Barbastro could hear them. And they were innocent as angels. They did nothing but pray, suffer and forgive. The same as the bishop."

—Even their executioners commented on it later, in amazement:

"What men! Even in the moment they were being shot in the head they were commending themselves to God. You should have seen the way those folks died! They seemed to be happy to die for their Christ."

What integrity those missionaries and that bishop showed! One of those who were with them recalled Origen's fiery words to his own lukewarm Christians: "Ah, there were Christians back then, when candidates were prepared at one and the same time for baptism and martyrdom."

ARREST

On July 20, 1936, some 60 anarchists or "minute men" broke into the gate house of the missionaries. They wanted to search the big house to see if there were any arms hidden there. They were headed by a "moderate," Eugenio Sopena, who was much admired among the anarchists. The suspicions that led them to search the house and permanently detain the religious who live there were based on slanders that were circulating about the moral hypocrisy of the clergy and the danger they posed. Word went around that the convents were veritable fortresses with mysterious ins and outs, sinister pits, large trapdoors that would break into a thousand pieces or collapse under all their enemies. The whole thing was sheer propaganda.

During the search, the Father Superior, Felipe de Jesús Munárriz, ordered the whole community to go down to the "luneta," and inner courtyard where they used to play the Basque game of pelota during recreation times or take walks. There were 60 religious, of whom 39 (including two Argentineans) were finishing their theological studies, 9 were priests and 12 were brothers. Only three of them were missing: one seminarian, Jaime Falgarona, who was in bed with a high fever, the ailing 84 year old brother Joaquin Munoz, who was almost unable to walk downstairs, and Brother Ramón Vall, who kept him company and, given the troubled circumstances thereabouts, was dressed as a peasant.

Two riflemen, under orders from the revolutionary "Committee," rounded everyone up and had them stand in ranks. The whole house was searched several times: the roofs, the church, even the casing of an old wall clock. Nothing. That community was peaceful, studious, austere, "poor," and endowed with a Christian idealism that could stand up to any test. Its motto, like that of Saint Benedict, was "Oraetlabora - work and pray." They worked, they studied even during summertime, and they prayed. The anarchists were disconcerted.

"They've got to have weapons. Everyone has some. Where are they hiding them?"

"There are no arms and no politics here," the superior told them. "We are religious and we are forbidden by our Constitutions to belong to any party."

But as so often happens, a short time after the "guards" or "minute men" left, a curious and aggressive crowd started roaming through the house, invading the cloisters and the church, and calling for the immediate killing of all those "blackbirds." A malicious woman hid a large knife among the sacred vessels that had already been "requisitioned," so that later on she could accuse

the religious of hiding it. One of the militiamen who was on to her ruse threatened to do her in with two shots.

Eugenio Sopena and the moderates of the "Committee" found themselves between a rock and a hard place. The way things looked, the anarchists had only thought of arresting the people they held to be in charge: the superior, the prefect, Father Juan Diaz, and the administrator, Father Leoncio Pérez. And in fact, after the lengthy search, they did so. Before leaving, Father Munárriz ordered Father Nicasio Sierra to try to take the sick and the very elderly to the Little Sisters. The moment he finally had to leave, his face was pale as he bade farewell to everyone. "Goodbye, little brothers." One seminarian asked whether they ought to dress in civilian clothes or in cassocks. Father Munárriz gave his last, energetic order: "In cassocks!" All of them would have to live and die wearing the cassock.

A band led the three superiors away, guarded by "riflemen," through the main streets of Barbastro to the municipal jail, located to the left of the town hall, on the same square where the Piarists lived.

The remaining Claretians suffered so many insults and threats that one seminarian, Atanasio Vidaureta, fainted. The reaction of part of the crowd was brutal: "Kill him now, on the spot!"

**"The death of these 51 Claretian Missionaries was a witnessing death, a true martyrdom".
"Nowadays, people are looking for explanation: but in those days it was all much simpler:
they were Catholics, they were religious, they were 'curates' and they had to die".**
(Bishop Damian Iguacen)

SAVE THE EUCHARIST

At this point Eugenio Sopena put his foot down: "We can't allow any carnage around here!" He promised the crowd that if they dispersed in an orderly way, "justice would be done," in case the missionaries were found guilty of anything. He ordered that all the religious be taken to the auditorium of the Piarist house on the main square. There was even talk of issuing them passports to their own home and of dissolving their community, as had already been done with the Poor Clares and the Capuchin Nuns of Barbastro.

One of the priests, Father Luis Masferrer, took advantage of these moments of wavering to save the Eucharist from the community chapel. All of them hastily received Communion right there in the "luneta." Any extra consecrated Hosts, as well as those in the church, were hidden in a little suitcase (the "valise" that the Argentinean student, Hall, refers to in his "reports"), with instructions that they should later be brought to the auditorium-prison by Fathers Nicasio Sierra and Pedro Cunill, who were allowed to remain behind with some seminarians to help take the two sick seminarians - Vidaurreta, the one who had fainted, and Falgarona, who had the high fever - along with the feeble old Brother Munoz, to the hospital. Father Cunill was able to hide a small sum of money, enough to cover any immediate contingencies.

The rest left the community in "threes," under the watch of some armed guards who were stationed along the sides and corners of Monzon Street. It looked like a procession heading from Conde Street to the town square. As one witness remarked, "They were walking along, as recollected as if they were coming back from Communion." From the windows and balconies,

silent and tear-filled eyes looked down on the improvised liturgy. A rather simple fellow happened to come upon the scene, and seeing the black-robed company, took off his hat, somewhat flustered at being surprised by what looked like a Corpus Christi procession. Some of the bystanders later commented in hushed voices, "They were walking along like meek and humble lambs."

IN THE AUDITORIUM

From this day until the day of their execution, they would be living in the lecture hall of the Piarists. When Father Cunill noticed that the doorkeeper, Brother Simon Sánchez, was complaining of chest pains, he asked that he be taken to the asylum of the Little Sisters, on the same town square across from the auditorium. They were thus able to survive the slaughter.

The auditorium, which was the most notable thing of its kind in Barbastro, was a room some twenty five meters long and six meters wide. At one end it had a high wooden stage with curtains, and at the other end a rising tier of seats for the young public who attended the festivities of the college. The hall itself was - and still is - lower than the square itself, almost a basement. Five large windows opened at street level on the square, thus leaving the prisoners at the mercy of the stares and insults of the mob outside.

The Piarists extended whatever fraternal care they could to the Claretians who were being detained in their house. The Rector, Father Eusebio Ferrer, encouraged them. He even joked with them and offered them something to drink, a first supper and whatever he could lay hold of for the weakest of them: two beds, nine mattresses, eleven pillows, two bedspreads and some cotton bed sheets for the night.

But above all, he took charge of the suitcase containing the Eucharist and hid it in the physics laboratory, inside a film projector that was thus transformed into the chapel and tabernacle for that makeshift catacomb.

BROTHER VALL

One curious item was the good treatment meted out to Brother Ramón Vall, the community cook. The "militiamen" would not believe that he was one of the "curates." At the time the house had been searched, he was dressed like a peasant. His hands were callused and his clothes smelled of food and cooking oil. As far as they were concerned, he was an unenlightened proletarian, one of the "exploited" victims of the religious, a poor labourer who was working at a miserable job to get enough to eat.

He assured them that he was a "religious" and a "missionary" but one "of another class."

"You mean a servant."

"No, no."

As things turned out, nobody paid any attention to him and he was not detained.

FROM PRISON TO DEATH

The three "superiors" had already spent the night in a cell of the municipal jail, along with several cathedral canons and some Catholic laymen. Up to 21 prisoners were crammed into that squalid, 15x15 cell, with a single high-set, barred window, in the suffocating heat of midsummer.

The three "missionaries" were - according to the surviving witnesses - truly exemplary. They never complained. On the contrary, they cheered their companions and followed the rigorous timetable of their rule: intense prayer, breviary, rosary, silence, confessions... When the other prisoners offered to let them take a turn standing near the narrow high window to catch a breath of something like fresh air, they declined the offer.

The three of them were interrogated one by one. After making his declaration, father Leoncio Pérez, the administrator of the house, returned in good humour.

"What did they ask you?"

"Where we had hidden our weapons. I took out my rosary and told them: I don't have or want any other weapon but this."

One of the harshest of the anarchist leaders, a certain Aniceto Fantova, nicknamed "el Trucho," had already reproached him: "But you people have done a lot of bad things." Father Pérez replied, "Well, each of us will have to give a reckoning for whatever he has done. My own conscience is at peace."

On July 25th, with the arrival of the so-called "Catalan Columns" from Barcelona - who had left behind them a trail of mass executions, assaults on political prisons and convent-burnings along the highways and byways of Catalonia and Aragon, from Barcelona to Lerida and Monzon - the three missionaries, together with 350 other prisoners, were moved to the old convent of the Capuchin Nuns which, like that of the Poor Clares, had been dissolved by orders of the local revolutionary committee.

From there, they were taken out directly for execution in the wee hours of August 2nd, together with 17 other detainees. The Committee of Barbastro had issued an "O.K. for 20," and included in this first quota were the three Claretian priests. "They were priests, and the order of the day was not to leave behind so much as a shred of a priest."

They had been given no sort of trial - which would not, at any rate, have shown them guilty of anything - except of the awesome responsibility of belonging to the Catholic clergy.

Around two o'clock in the morning, the three missionaries awoke with a start. They had to get up at once. Father Díaz dressed rather slowly, reciting his prayers and recalling the theme for morning prayer, as he always did, in keeping with his missionary rule. The jailer grew impatient:

"Hurry up, hurry up! They're waiting for you!"

"But surely I can put my cassock on."

"Where you're going, you won't be needing it."

Around three in the morning, a nurse from Angües saw the prisoners tied together two by two and surrounded by an armed guard, and she watched them as they stumbled along the roadway from Huesca and crossed over behind the old hospital toward the cemetery.

At the same time another group of priests and laity also marched into the cemetery. Among the laymen was a likeable Gypsy, Ceferino Jiménez Malla, nicknamed "el Pelé", who had been arrested a few days earlier for trying to defend a priest who was being attacked in the middle of the street in broad daylight, and also for carrying a rosary.

There, against the cold walls, the bullet-riddled bodies of all of the condemned men fell - all, that is, except one, a civil guard, Camilo Sabater Toll, from the guardhouse of Albalate de Cinca. He was only wounded in the hand, and after the firing squad had done its work, as soon as he saw his chance, he scurried like a spider over the cemetery wall and vanished into the night. Later on, he was one of those who bore witness to the great slaughter at Barbastro.

Back in the Piarists' house and in their auditorium, the shots could be heard. And in the neighbouring hospital, people could hear the groans and death throes of the victims who were left bleeding to death to the right of the entrance to the cemetery.

That was the implacable chain of events forged by a cold note of "authorization" from the revolutionary committee. Thus fell the three "superiors" in a common heap of prisoners on August 2, 1936.

BAD OMENS

Meanwhile, the fifty Claretians remaining in the auditorium had been the object of taunts and brutal harassment because of their religious state, and because of their cassock, which they never removed, even to sleep. During those moments, the cassock was their symbol of fidelity, their badge of courage.

Many priests, in order to avoid risks and pass by without being spotted, had doffed their cassocks: but not the missionaries of Barbastro. The cassock was particularly galling to the most radical members of the mob. Through the auditorium windows they would yell at the seminarians:

"We'll kill you with your cassocks on, and we'll bury those rags along with the other rags you're wearing."

"We don't hate you personally; we hate your profession, your black habit, your cassock, that disgusting rag."

As one survivor noted: "From our first day in jail we were preparing ourselves for death, and from one day to the next we were waiting for them to carry out the threats they were constantly hurling at us from the town square, but especially during the night."

THE SECRET OF THEIR STRENGTH

"We attributed it to a special providence from God that they didn't take away our religious articles, so that up to the very end, those who were being led out to the firing squad died with their rosaries, medals and crucifixes, and those who were obliged to say the Divine Office were able to recite it every day."

Despite the psychological burden of knowing that their "key" priests had been imprisoned elsewhere, their religious instinct led them to insure their spiritual life before all else. "Regular observance" and "community life" were a daily reality during those bitter days in prison, preparing them inwardly for the final struggle.

And first on their list of priorities was Communion. They received Communion from the very first day, as often as they could. The Piarists used to bring Communion down to them for one day or a few days at a time.

"They managed to hand us some Hosts which we distributed when we could, because it was especially forbidden to receive Communion during the morning, and the Reds were watching all our movements carefully, to see if someone was bringing us Communion."

"They divided the Hosts among us, to make it easier for us to consume them in case they were in danger of being profaned, but also so that we might receive Communion during the coming days."

The Eucharist constituted the centre of their life as long as it lasted, which was until the 25th day of imprisonment in the auditorium. Some of them had the joy of keeping the Eucharist on their persons: they were like walking tabernacles. Hall, one of the two Argentinean seminarians, later told how the other seminarians and brothers would overtly approach him, with a kind of spiritual envy, in order to be near their Lord.

One morning Father Ferrer brought them several "consecrated species" in the basket containing the bread and chocolate they were given for breakfast. Father Sierra, who was taking the Superior's place, was in charge of distributing the bread, and he would slip a "Host" between the sliced roll of those he knew had not been able to receive Communion that morning. Those who did so would take the Host out in the twinkling of an eye and consume it before they ate anything else, because they were still bound by the strict laws of the Eucharistic fast of those times.

With the arrival of the "Catalan Columns," made up of ex-prisoners, prostitutes and communist-anarchists, the situation changed radically. Upstairs, the Piarists were no longer able to say Mass in the community chapel. In a "report" he made later on, one of the Piarists, Father Mompel, assures us that even they, when they saw the number of Hosts diminishing at an alarming rate, had to divide them into eight or ten parts, so that they were able to keep on receiving Communion down to the last day.

LACK OF SANITATION

It is not hard to imagine the dreadful kind of life they had to live during those hottest months of summer. And it was only made worse by the fact that they were provided with a miserable ration of water.

They had to do without even the most basic hygienic facilities during those monotonous and seemingly endless days. Because it was practically impossible for them to change their clothes, the ovenlike heat only aggravated the build-up of sweat and dirt. Forty-eight vigorous organisms living in a furnace-like room during the greater part of the day were bound to sweat, and they had to stand in line to attend to their most elementary needs. They were unable to wash themselves, except by dampening their handkerchiefs in bottles or the water jar, which only meant that they would have less to drink. This led not just to a stifling stench, but to true human misery. As it built up day by day, the sweat clung to their clammy skin, irritating their foreheads and their eyes. Their underwear became a hair shirt, chafing and even cutting wounds into their skin. A Benedictine from Pueyo, who came to cut their hair, found lice in it.

When the room was emptied out on August 15th, it was carefully disinfected, "because it really needed it."

They had a little water to drink, but the "militiamen" would not give them any to wash with. "They didn't want to become housekeepers for these 'parsons'."

When one spiteful woman overheard the militiamen forwarding a request for water for the prisoners in the auditorium, she snarled, "Are you going to give them water? Why give them anything at all? Better to give them some lye, to make them hurry up!"

A certain militiaman called Eugenio Fernández, when he saw how thirsty, dehydrated and dirty they were, had pity on them, and like a Good Samaritan, brought them some water on the sly.

MORAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUFFERINGS

Their guards often amused themselves at prisoners' expense, subjecting them to games of terror. They would make them stand in a row, as if they would summarily execute them, "because the order had come at last." At such times the missionaries would confess their sins or receive a short general absolution, waiting for the bullets to riddle their bodies.

"More than four times," wrote Parussini, "we received absolution, believing that death was upon us. One day we stood still for about an hour, waiting for them to fire at us at any moment. How awful it was! That was when we suffered the most: each minute seemed interminable and we hoped they'd get it over with once and for all, so as not to prolong an agony that only ended with a blasphemous remark or the sarcastic laughter of those fierce guards. "They kept Father Sierra standing against the wall for five hours, until he fainted.

One of the seminarians had to leave the room to go to the bathroom. As he was crossing the patio to the college, several of the guards, with pistol in hand, stopped him and made him mark time. Under threat and with growing physio-logical discomfort, he had to turn right, left and about face, do a slow or quick military step, as he ran the gauntlet of the guards, who howled with laughter or buffeted him.

THE TRIAL OF THE FLESH

The day the first women showed up to tempt them, the missionaries realized that this was "something new," something worse than threats and cruelty. This was not something to face head-on; what was needed was prudence and steely silence, and both personal and community discipline.

Almost all we can say is that the handful of young men consecrated to the Lord were "well prepared." They were now living their vowed commitment from within, as they had always done, with no concessions or hesitations. Temptation would not catch them off guard. It was all the better that these women faced them brazenly and shamelessly, and not under any pretext of affection. They were being called, not to take some subtly 'christened' way out, but quite simply to abandon their vocation.

STREET WALKERS

The most reliable witnesses are very discreet in giving details about the introduction of women - some of whom were simply prostitutes, others of whom were specially trained female soldiers - into the auditorium of the Piarists. They came during siestas or during those hot July nights, for just one purpose: to arouse most basic passions of that group of pious young men, most of them between 21 and 25 years of age.

The modesty of the times led witnesses to gloss over some of the crudest facts. Nevertheless they all agreed, as Hall, one of the survivors, states that:

"They also allowed women, many of them streetwalkers, to make fun of us and insult us."

"They would come up to us insinuatingly, tugging at our cassocks to get our attention. When they went away, they 'forgetfully' left behind various instruments of sin."

"One wretched woman was so love-crazed for one of the seminarians that she spent hours at the window on the square, trying to get a look at him or engage him in conversation."

The witnesses are also unanimous in stating that "not one of them fell for this."

"The girls would leave in ill humour, since they were unable to seduce anyone."

"Through their life and their death, these heroic Christians are still calling us to a Christianity that challenges our weaknesses and cowardice." Why are we in such a hurry to forget our martyrs or minimize their heroic deed? Is it because their enthusiasm, their aspirations and their commitment constitute a powerful accusation against our pessimism, our lack of vibrancy or ideals?" (Bishop Damian Iguacen)

TRINI, LA PALLARESA

One of the Piarists, Father Ferrer, stated that "one of the worst, a woman of ill-fame called Trini, 'la Pallaresa,' was also the boldest of them. She even went to the extreme of stepping over them as they were asleep on the stage.

"This Trini was obsessed with one of the young missionaries, because of his physical resemblance to Valentino, the movie star."

Father Ferrer testified that "Trine herself told me about her infatuation."

The seminarian in question was Esteban Casadevall. Trini 'la Pallaresa' openly stated, even in front of the other imprisoned religious, that it was a 'real pity' to see that such a good looking seminarian, 'such a handsome young kid' should have been led astray like this, and that she would try to free him from death if she could talk to him alone. She vowed that she would be on the watch for him whenever he left the auditorium.

Casadevall, who was exemplary for his modesty and was seemingly unaware of all this, came and went "without paying the least attention to her or even batting an eye at the flattering words and gestures she directed toward him."

quot;We," says Hall, "told Mr. Casadevall that if those women came back, he should hide himself and not allow himself to be seen."

And that is just what he did. It was the simplest method of all.

THE METTLE OF MARTYRS

The execution of the Bishop of Barbastro came as a heavy blow to the young "missionaries" in the auditorium.

On the 10th, when they could clearly foresee the catastrophe toward which they were heading, Ramón Illa wrote a precious letter worthy of any martyr of the heroic years of the early Church:

"Dearest Mother, Grandmother and Well-remembered Brothers:

"I am writing to you with deep joy of soul, and the Lord knows I'm not lying. I say it before heaven and earth. I'd never rest without letting you know by these lines that the Lord has seen fit to place the palm of martyrdom in my hands. By these lines, too, I'm sending you my only will and testament, namely, that when you receive them you will sing to the Lord for the great and signal gift of martyrdom that He has deigned to grant me."

"We've been in this jail since July 20th. The whole community is here: 60 just individuals. Eight days ago they shot out reverend Father Superior and some other Fathers. Happy they, and happy we who will follow them. I wouldn't exchange my jail for the gift of working miracles, nor my martyrdom for the apostolate, which has been my life's dream."

"I'm going to be shot for being a religious and a member of the clergy, or if you will, for following the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church."

"Thanks be to the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

Ramón Illa, C.M.F. Barbastro, 8/10/1936

"Note: I don't know what day we're going to be shot; it seems it will be on one day of the week that's beginning today."

On the reverse side of the page he says: "We're sleeping on the floor, but resting very well."

Ramón Illa was only 22 years old, but was very learned for his age. He had mastered Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and was studying English and German. He remembered everything he read. He wrote poetry in Castilian, Latin and Catalan, and was so enamoured of the liturgy that, even though he was not obliged to do so, he recited the whole breviary.

Already in 1934, when he was studying philosophy in Cervera, there was an atrocious revolutionary outbreak in Asturias. While many others were shuddering at the events, he remarked to his sister: "What a pity! To think that I was within a hair's breadth of being a martyr!"

A TEMPTING OFFER

All of them were offered their liberty on innumerable occasions, if only they would throw away their cassock and become "revolutionaries." But one of them was offered a really golden opportunity.

One day a guard approached Salvador Pigem and asked him;

"Is your name Salvador Pigem?"

Surprised Salvador asked: "Why do you ask?"

"Because when I was cook in the Hotel 'Centro' in Gerona, the owners had a nephew who wanted to be a priest. I remember him. He looked a lot like you."

Salvador Pigem was from Vilovi d'Onar, and in fact, he had relatives in Gerona.

"I'm the one."

"Look. If you want to, I can get you out of here."

"And what about my companions? Can you get them out, too?"

"No, just you."

"Then I can't accept; I'd rather stay and be a martyr with them."

AUGUST 12TH: THE SIX "OLDEST"

At three-thirty in the morning of Wednesday August 12th, "some fifteen well-armed revolutionaries" burst into the auditorium.

They were carrying thick manacles of bloodstained cords. Their bearing, the crash of their boots on the hardwood floor and their loud yells resounded like cannon fire. The prisoners awoke with a start. One of the leaders ordered more lights to be lit and asked harshly:

"Let's see: Where is the Superior?"

"They separated Father Superior from us before they took us away from our community."

"Well, then. Let the seven oldest ones step down here!"

Meekly, without resistance or protest, the following came down from the stage: Fathers Nicasio Sierra, 46 years old; José Pavon, 35; Sebastian Calvo and Pedro Cunill, both 33; Brother Gregorio Chirivas, 56 and Subdeacon Wenceslao Claris, 29.

Brother Chirivas had been sick for several days, but he was feeling better now. When he heard them call his name, "he left all his things on the bench where he had been sleeping - they had broken his dentures" - and stepped down as naturally as if he had been going to a community exercise, to stand alongside his brethren.

The guards tied the prisoners' hands behind their back, one by one, and then bound them together at the elbow, two by two.

Father Pavon looked around at the priests still remaining in the auditorium. Father Ortega, who was paralysed, was on the stage. He discreetly lifted up his hand over them and pronounced the sacramental formula: "I absolve you from all your sins..."

Father Pavon ran his glance over all the rest and then serenely, with a smile on his lips, bade them farewell.

When they were almost finished tying them up, Father Cunill asked permission to say a few words. A guard told him:

"There's no time for anything. What do you want?"

"Since we don't know where you're taking us, couldn't you let us take along a book to pass the time?"

"Where you're going," he answered, "you won't need anything. You'll have everything."

They were joined by another companion, a diocesan priest, Don Marcelino de Abajo, sacristan of the cathedral and a member of the household of the recently executed bishop. They tied him up with father Sebastian Calvo.

They took them from the hall and made them cross the town square, escorted by "riflemen." Through the hall windows, the missionaries could still see them. They crossed like shadows under the trees of the town hall and were led to a truck that was waiting for them with its headlights on.

The guards put out all the lights in the hall and ordered the rest of go back to sleep. "But we," says Parussini, "were so deeply affected by the scene that we couldn't go to sleep. I was praying

with a small group in one corner of the stage. We were preparing ourselves for the sacrifice of our life."

A short time later - at 3:53, says Hall - a strong volley of shots announced that the glorious tragedy had just ended. They believed that sound had come from the cemetery of Barbastro, but it was later learned that it came from about three kilometres away, in one of the many bends in the winding road that leads from Barbastro to Berbegal and Sarinena. Before the firing started, the martyrs had been offered one last chance to apostatise. Afterwards they received the coup de grace in the temple. Then they were left there to bleed to death, so as not to soil the truck or the roadway with blood.

The executioners went off to drink some wine at one of the nearby "torres," farmsteads where harvesters were busily working against the clock. Then they went back to load the already-stiffening, bound and cassocked corpses into the truck and brought them to the cemetery, where they dumped them into a big ditch. "They threw quicklime and dirt over them ... some 40 or 50 buckets of water and quicklime, each time."

FAREWELLS

That August 12th was a day of purification for the missionaries who were still alive. These future martyrs already knew their time had come: it was a privilege. They considered themselves both unworthy and fortunate. Several of them, including Casadevall, Ruiz, NoVic and Amorós, recalled that once when they were out for a walk during their novitiate, they had recited an "Our Father" asking the Lord "that all of them would someday be martyrs." They were now on the point of seeing that prophecy fulfilled.

Of that day, we still have the direct testimony of Hall and Parussini who, because they were foreigners, were exempted from the slaughter. It is hard to resist the suspicion that they were preserved in order to become on-scene witnesses of the last words and deeds of the martyrs.

"When they led away the six prisoners on August 12th, they put us foreigners aside and guaranteed us that they would not do anything to us. I could hardly believe this, since just a few days earlier the Committee of Barbastro had sent two lay foreigners before the firing squad because they were outstanding members of Catholic associations..."

At seven in the morning, less than three hours after the executions, a member of the Committee, together with several "gunmen" showed up in the auditorium and took down the names of everyone there. "It was the 'black list,'" says Parussini: the list of those martyrs who, according to age, were going to be called out night after night.

From that moment on, they began to prepare themselves "proximately and fervently" for death.

"We all went to confession for the last time, and you could say that we spent the whole day praying and meditating. All of us were resigned to God's will and content to be suffering something for the cause of God."

Many asked one another's pardon for their faults, kissed their feet and exchanged an embrace of peace.

They all stated that "they pardoned their killers" and promised to pray for them in heaven.

"We have spent the day in religious silence," wrote Faustino Pérez, "preparing for our death on the morrow. Only the holy murmur of prayers can be heard in this room, a witness to our deep anguish. When we talk, it is to encourage one another to die as martyrs. When we pray, it is for the forgiveness of our enemies. Save them, Lord, because they don't know what they're doing!"

For the Congregation of Missionaries of the Heart of Mary, to which they belonged, they saved their last kiss. Hall asked them for a memento that he could take to the Father General, and through him to the whole Congregation. The future martyrs resisted at first, because they feared even the slightest shadow of vanity, until they were guaranteed that it would only be treated as a family "souvenir."

Then they took out a handkerchief that had belonged to Father Nicasio Sierra, who had been shot a few hours earlier out of hatred for the faith. One by one they kissed it and touched it to their forehead, like tired and suffering labourers, saying:

"Let this be my farewell kiss to the Congregation, which I love so much, for having the joy of dying in its arms."

"I feel obliged to state," says Hall, "that those I asked for a memento would give me one only on condition that it either be kept as a souvenir of classmates and jail-mates, or sent to their families to console them... Even so, many would not give us anything at all." Others, in contrast, parted with any object that had belonged to the last six who had been shot by the firing squad. They said:

"If they set you free, and you're able to do so, see to it that you take this token, which belonged to Father so and so, who was shot this morning. In time it may serve as a relic, should Holy Mother Church recognise them as martyrs some day. For before God, we believe that that is what they are."

On the evening of that day, the 12th, two students, José Amorós from Jativa, the son of railway workers, and Esteban Casadevall, who had been subjected to the most temptations against chastity, made their perpetual profession. Father Secundino Ortega received their profession and made a record of it, which was signed by several witnesses.

Rafael Briega, who had been studying Chinese, told Hall:

"Get word to Father José Fogued that I won't be able to go to China, as I had always wanted to do. I gladly offer my blood for those missions and from heaven I will be looking down and praying for them."

Ramón NoVic, José Amorós, Javier Luis Bandrés, Miguel Masip and a few others told him:

"Since we won't be able to exercise the sacred ministry on earth, working for the conversion of sinners, we'll do so like little Saint Therese: we'll spend our heaven doing good on earth."

Faustino Pérez assured him that he "would ask to say a word in the cemetery to address his killers and others who were present there." And he added: "Tell Father General that I will be the captain of the last expedition, and that I will keep encouraging all as I go on. We will travel the whole way singing and shouting 'Vivas!'"

ACTS OF THE MARTYRS

Lacking the stationery, and knowing that the moment of their sacrifice was now imminent, they wrote in and on whatever writing materials they could find: breviaries and prayer books, scraps of paper, chocolate wrappers, stage props, stair steps and even on the walls:

"I.H.S. Long live Christ the King! If God wants my life I gladly give it to Him. For the Congregation and for Spain. I die in peace, after receiving all the Holy Sacraments. I die innocently. I do not belong to any political party, since our Holy Constitutions forbid it. We respect every lawfully constituted authority. As God and my conscience witness, I ask pardon of all whom I may have in any way grieved or offended. I forgive all my enemies. I bid farewell to my father and my brothers, and if God should be pleased to lead me to heaven, I will meet my mother there."(José Brengaret, C.M.F.)

Rafael Briega wrote in Latin on the fly leaf of his breviary:

"Gaude Congregatio dilecta, quia 58 filii tui intrant in caelestem Congregationem, candidi ut lilia et flagrantes charitate Dei et delectatione Immaculati Cordis M.V." (R.B.,C.M.F.)

On another leaf of the same sort, worn by use and prayer, the energetic hand of Miguel Massip wrote the first verse of the Song of the Missionary, forcefully underlining the words "ever... until I die," and rounding it out with a "Long live the Heart of Mary."

They kept singing this song, all the way through, as they went off in the death-wagon, even though they were being beaten for doing so:

**Jesus, you know that I
your soldier will abide,
fighting ever at your side:
One banner, one ideal held high,
marching on - until I die.
"And what ideal hold you so high?"
For you, my King, my Pride,
to shed my blood and die!...**

They were S.O.S. messages, messages of gratitude and pardon, which they tried to preserve for the Congregation and for their families. "If God so pleases, we hope they will be found one day, since I believe we have hidden them well."

Many of them were lost. Others, a handful, have survived. They constitute a monument of incalculable value for the Spanish and Catholic Martyrology of all times. Wall, benches and stage props were almost covered, "as far as the hand could reach," with white-hot expressions of spirituality. Unfortunately, almost all of them disappeared, whitewashed or painted over by the militiamen, who turned the place into a popular eatery. Santiago Mompel who read them, deeply laments their disappearance, because among them were some "very fine jewels recalling the Gospel message in which Jesus tells his disciples not to be concerned over what they are to say when they are brought before the courts, because the Spirit will be speaking through them."

Nevertheless, the March 30, 1938 issue of the Heraldo de Aragon of Zaragoza wrote that when the national troops entered Barbastro, "on the walls of a large hall of the college, one could see

the following writing, traced out with a firm hand: "We forgive our enemies," The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians' and "To those who are going to be our executioners, we send our pardon."

Among the items found during the last identification-check of the martyrs' remains, was a small calendar stuck to the inside pocket of the cassock of Salvador Pigem. In it we read:

"They are killing us out of hatred for religion. Domine, dimitte illis! (Father, forgive them!). In our house, we offered no resistance. In jail, our conduct was above reproach. Long live the Immaculate Heart of Mary! They are going to shoot us only for being religious. No ploreu per mi. Soc martir de Jesucrist (Don't cry for me, I am a martyr of Jesus Christ)." (Salvador Pigem, C.M.F.)

And on a small piece of paper glued to the back of this calendar, there were some more words addressed to his mother. Written in Catalan, we offer the following translation:

"Mama, don't cry. Jesus is asking me for my blood; I am going to shed it out of love for Him. I will be a martyr. I'm going to heaven. I will be waiting for you there. Salvador 8/12/36.

THE PIANO STOOL

One item that was saved was a stool that stood in front of the piano in the auditorium. It is almost 13 inches square, and smells of mahogany. On its underside - which is of unpainted natural-grained wood and could hence take handwriting - we find the serene and enthusiastic note of seven of the candidates for death. They are written in Castilian, Latin and Catalan. On one edge of the vertical sides one can make out, though just barely, the following motto, done in pencil, in capital letters:

**"CHRISTE, MORITURI TE SALUTANT"
(Christ, we who are about to die, salute Thee)**

On the other borders there are some words that are thus far illegible. On the four corners there are sufficiently clear drawings of Christian symbols of martyrdom: palms, crowns...

The underside proper - all across the wood and in all directions, following the natural lines and knots of the wood, some of which are marked with crosses and dashes to fill in any spaces - is covered with several writings, also in pencil, signed by each of the writers. The date is fundamental:

"Barbastro, 12 August 1936. My heart overflowing with holy joy, I confidently await the crowning moment of my life, my martyrdom, which I offer for the poor who are going to breathe their last on the day I shed my blood for remaining faithful and loyal to my divine captain, Christ Jesus. With all my heart I forgive all who have wittingly or unwittingly offended me. I die content. Farewell, until heaven." Juan Sánchez Munárriz.

Others:

"Barbastro, 12 August 1936. As Jesus on the cross died forgiving his enemies, I die a martyr, forgiving my enemies with all my heart and promising to pray especially for them and for their families. Farewell." Tomás Capdevila Miró, C.M.F.

"We have not been found to be involved in any political cause. And although we have not been given any kind of trial, we are all content to die for Christ, for His Church and for the faith of Spain. For the martyrs." Manuel Martínez, C.M.F.

"The 12th. We spent the day in religious silence, preparing for our death tomorrow. Only the holy murmur of prayers can be heard in this room, a witness to our anguish. When we speak, it is to encourage one another to die as martyrs. When we pray, it is for the forgiveness of our enemies. Save them Lord, for they know not what they do! Navarre. Mr. Faustino Pérez. Through Estella. Barindano is the family's address."

"Domine, dimitte illis, nesciunt quid faciunt (Lord forgive them, for they know not what they do). Verge moreneta, salveu Catalunya I sa fe (Dear, dark little Virgin - Our Lady of Montserrat - save Catalonia and its faith)." A. Sorribes.

"12th. Dear parents: I die a martyr for Christ and for the Church. I die at peace, fulfilling my sacred duty. Goodbye, until heaven." Luis Lladó. Viladesens, Gerona.

"I would like to be a priest and a missionary. I offer the sacrifice of my life for souls. May the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary reign! I die a martyr." Luis Javier Bandrés.

The piano stool is kept as a prized memento in the museum of the Claretian Martyrs of Barbastro.

THE "LAST OFFERING TO THE CONGREGATION"

The forty missionaries drew up their official farewell and signed it, one by one, so that the Argentinean students Hall and Parussini - if they really were going to be saved - could deliver it to the Congregation. The handwriting is that of the indomitable Faustino Pérez, who was the first to sign it and the last to add his farewell. They used the front and back of a modest chocolate wrapper to write on. It would be well worthwhile to have a handwriting analyst study the writing of each of the signers, to tell us something about the state of mind of those condemned young men a few hours before their execution.

"August 12, 1936. In Barbastro. Six of our companions are already martyrs. Soon we hope to be so ourselves. But before this happens, we want to make it clear that we die forgiving those who are going to take our life, which we offer for the Christian order of the workers' world, for the final reign of the Catholic Church, for our beloved Congregation and for our dear families. Our last offering to the Congregation, from its martyred sons!"

**"Long live Christ the King!
Long live the martyred Congregation!"
Faustino Pérez, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the social reign of Jesus Christ
the Worker!"
T. Capdevila Miró, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Catholic Spain!"
José María Ormo, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Our Lady of the Pillar,
Patroness of my land!"
Juan Sánchez Munárriz, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Heart of Mary!"
Rafael Briega, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Heart of Mary!"
Juan Codinachs, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Blessed Father Claret!"
Alfonso Sorribes, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the martyrs!"
Luis Escalé, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Jesus Christ the King!"
Manuel Torras, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Christ the King!"
Eusebio Codina, C.M.F.**

**"I forgive my enemies."
José Figuera, C.M.F.**

**"Domine, dimitte illis."
Agustín Viela, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Christ the King and the Heart
of Mary!"
Eduardo Ripoll, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Catholic Barbastro!"
Manuel Buil, C.M.F.**

**"I offer my blood for the salvation of
souls."
Javier Luis Bandrés, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Catholic Workers!"
José María Ros, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Blessed Father Claret, Apostle
and Worker!"
Luis Lladó, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Catholic Religion!"
Manuel Martínez, C.M.F.**

**"For God, to struggle unto death."
Miguel Massip, C.M.F.**

**"Thanks and glory to god for all things."
Ramón Illa, C.M.F.**

**"My blood for you, my Jesus, and for
souls."
Antolín María Calvo, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Imm. Heart of Mary!"
Esteban Casadevall, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Heart of Jesus!"
José M. Amorós, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Christ the Redeemer! Long
live the Heart of Mary!"
José Brengaret Pujol, C.M.F.**

**"May Thy kingdom come to us."
T. Ruiz de Larrinaga, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and
Mary!"
Juan Baixeras, C.M.F.**

**"Lord, may your divine will be done in all
things."
Antonio Dalmau, C.M.F.**

**"I die for the Congregation and for
souls!"
José M. Blasco, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and
Mary!"
José M. Badía, C.M.F.**

**"Long live Catholic Catalonia!"
Francisco M. Roura, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Imm. Heart of Mary!"
Hilario María Llorente, C.M.F.**

**"Long live the Imm. Heart of Mary!"
Sebastian Riera, C.M.F.**

**"Offero libenter meum sanguinem
innocentem pro Ecclesia et**

congregatione."
Johannes Echarri, C.M.F.

"I want to spend my heaven doing good
for the workers!"
R. NoVic Rubionet, C.M.F.

"Long live God! I never thought I would
be worthy of so wonderful a grace!"
F. Castán M., C.M.F.

"Long live the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and
Mary!"
Pedro García Bernal, C.M.F.

"And what ideal? For you, my Queen, to
shed my blood."
Salvador Pigem, C.M.F.

"Long live the Congregation!"
Alfonso Miquel, C.M.F.

HARVEST OF MARTYRS, AUGUST 13TH

The cathedral clock struck twelve. Suddenly the doors of the auditorium burst open to admit some twenty armed men, provided with a great stock of ropes, "still stained with the blood of other martyrs."

When the order rang out, those who were asleep arose. Lighting their lanterns, the militiamen spread out cautiously on all sides, rifles in hand. It was the beginning of the end.

"Attention!" a voice snapped. It was Mariano Abad, "the Undertaker," famous for his butcheries. He used to say that if the number of those to be executed was less than twenty, the trip wasn't worth his "trouble."

"Attention! All those more than 26 years old step down here!"

Nobody stirred.

Mariano Abad repeated the order harshly:

"Then all those over 25!"

There was nobody that old, either. Mariano Abad was livid.

"Turn on all the lights!"

He took out a list, and since he barely knew how to read, handed it to another, much younger militiaman, who read it out in a leaden voice:

"Secundino Ortega!"

"Long live the Heart of Mary, my Mother
and Christ the King, my Redeemer!
Pater, ignosce illis!"
Luis Masferrer, C.M.F.

"Long live the Pope and Catholic
Action!"
Secundino M. Ortega, C.M.F.

"Long live the Congregation: holy,
persecuted and martyred! Live
immortally, beloved Congregation, and so
long as you have sons in prison like those
you have in Barbastro, never doubt that
your destiny is eternal. I would have
wished to fight among your ranks, blessed
be God!"
Faustino Pérez, C.M.F.

Father Ortega stood up and jumped down from the stage. "Present!" And he went to take his "place."

José Brengaret
Antolín Calvo
Antonio Dalmau
Juan Echarri
Pedro García Bernal
Hilario Llorente
Salvador Pigem
Javier Luis Bandrés
Tomás Capdevila
Esteban Casadevall
Eusebio Codina
Juan Codinachs
Ramón NoVic
José M. Ormo
Teodoro R. De Larrinaga
Juan Sánchez
Manuel Torras
Bro. Manuel Buil
Bro. Alfonso Miquel

They kept jumping down, agile and ready, as if they were going to receive a medal, and lined up in a row against the wall. The militiamen began tying their hands behind their backs and then tied them by the arms in pairs, to prevent any attempt at flight. "At that moment," says Parussini, "those faces had something supernatural about them that I don't know how to describe." His fellow-survivor, Hall, adds: "Not one of them flinched or showed any sign of cowardice."

As they were leaving, Juan Echarri turned towards those who remained and shouted out, loud and clear:

"Farewell, brothers, until heaven!"

Some of the missionaries answered him loudly. This disconcerted the guards, who seemed to be in a hurry. They cut short these out-pourings with a sardonic message:

"You who are staying here have a whole day to eat, laugh, amuse yourselves, dance and do whatever you want. Enjoy it well, because tomorrow at this same time, we'll come to look for you just as we did for these fellows, and we'll give you a little trip in the fresh air - to the cemetery. Now put out the lights and go to sleep."

The twenty condemned missionaries crossed the square, where a boisterous crowd was milling about. They were led to the van. There was a little bench leaning against the back of the van. They had hardly climbed on board when the motor started. Felipe Zalama, an old-time civil guard who was accompanying them on their final trip, took the initiative and lifted up his voice:

"Long live Christ the King!"

"Long live...!"

"Louder, boys! Viva Cristo Rey!"

They repeated these acclamations several times. Then they began to sing canticles antiphonally. Infuriated at this, the armed guards began beating them with the butts of their rifles to silence them.

The van took off, first along the main street, "El Coso," and then onto the roadway that leads toward Sarinena and Berbegal, zigzagging as it followed the many curves and bends in the road, for two hundred metres short of three kilometres, where it stopped.

In front and in back of the van were several cars carrying the leaders and executioners.

"They threw them off the van roughly, two by two." And they shoved them toward the embankment, with their backs to the monastery of Pueyo. Now and then crickets could be heard, chirping in their earthbound indifference. An eyewitness saw the missionaries kneeling on the heaped up earth, trying their best to stretch out their bound arms in the form of a cross.

The glare of several headlights converged on them and their black cassocks. While the guns and rifles were already trained on them, Mariano Abad yelled out in a booming voice:

"You still have time. Don't you want to come with us to fight against the fascists?"

"Long live Christ the King!"

"Why won't you say, 'Long live the Revolution?'"

"Long live Christ the King!"

A fearful volley rang out in the night. It was twenty before one in the morning of August 13th. A short time later, the coups de grâce could be heard, one by one. A farm worker who was listening in the nearby loft of "La Jaqueta" testified later that "We could tell the number by the number of final shots."

The missionaries in the auditorium heard both the volleys and final shots being fired. "We were all praying for our brothers," says Hall, "praying that they would persevere to the end, as the other had the night before. Two had begun saying the rosary, meditating on the sorrowful mysteries, but when they heard the shots, they switched to the glorious mysteries. Another managed to say the Magnificat twenty times before each shot: one for each brother who was going to be shot. From this we could follow the trajectory of the van and know exactly how long it took before they got there and were killed."

FOUR WITNESSES

Not far from the scene, there were four farmhands from Costean who were harvesting at the "Torre la Jaqueta" of Antonio Pueyo Coscojuela: the two Santaliestra brothers, José, who is still living in Costean, and Francisco, who has since died: Joaquin Pano, who died in 1985; and of course, Antonio Pueyo himself, the owner, who is still living today - 1992 - in Barbastro. The four of them were staunch Catholics and regularly attended Mass at the missionaries' church in Barbastro. Antonio Pueyo always makes one point clear:

"On the 13th, the killings did not take place on our farm, but a bit further up the road on a lot belonging to the Township of Barbastro where they dump and burn trash.

"And that morning they brought the van to the Daughters of Charity to have them wash the blood off it."

The farm workers had already retired for the night and didn't dare get up. They were living "in terror because of the shots being fired nearby" and they were afraid that "they would also be coming for them." As they told the owner of the farm, "It's horrifying. A fine mess we've gotten into here!" Pueyo told his workers: "If they come, whatever you do, don't tell them that I'm their owner."

Then they noticed that the militiamen turned two cars about and trained the joined beams of their headlights on their victims. They could hear their shouts and those of the missionaries.

When it was all over, and they could see that the militiamen were heading for their "torre," Pueyo told the workers, "Go on, now, and give them whatever they want to drink." They opened the main gate and let them in.

While they were drinking wine, the militiamen recounted all that had happened, boasting about it, between jokes and curses. The ones shot on the 13th were "the missionaries - twenty missionaries." They explained to the workers that they "were going to leave them on the ground for an hour or so to let them bleed, so that they wouldn't leave a trail on the road or dirty the van."

The next morning, on that little patch of blood-soaked ground, the workers found "holy cards," books and an odd shoe that had belonged to the "missionaries."

OTHER WITNESSES

As Luis Befaluy, another neighbour from Costean, was driving along that gloomy and glorious road together with "el Trucho", the latter volunteered the following commentary. He pointed out the exact spot, now marked by an austere cross.

"That's where we shot the missionaries. They knelt down with their arms in the form of a cross and shouted, 'Long live Christ the King!' And that's how they were shot."

In a nearby "torre," about 400 metres away from the site of the executions, lived the Iglesias Sopena family, from Enate. "Because it was so hot at the time, they were sleeping in the open air, on the new-mown hay, under an oak tree that still - 1992 - stands there. They heard the noise of the vehicles, the death-wagon and some five cars that lighted up the roadway." In 1992, three of their children are still living: Manuel, Luis and Ramona. "They were coming from Barbastro," says Manuel, "firing shots in the air as they went along." The farmer's dog began to bark, "There were a lot of executioners, between 30 and 40, I believe. You could hear their voices: 'Shoot the prisoners! Come on, get down!'"

They could hear the bullets whistling over the 'torre.' "We saw the lights of the cars. They lined the martyrs up in a row, on the edge of the right embankment of the road, sloping down. The militiamen were posted on the left." They were shooting toward Pueyo's place.

"Keep an eye on how you're firing!" said one of the leaders.

"The van backed off along the broad dip and then turned around. They faced it toward Barbastro and began shooting the martyrs."

"Come on," said one of the killers, "This guy's heavy."

"Look, this one's still breathing. He's going to make a mess of it!"

"The following morning people from the Committee came to mop the blood off the roadway. They told us there were bits of brains and bones on it." They shovelled some dirt over it.

The bodies were transported to the cemetery of Barbastro and thrown into a common pit that they forced some Gypsies to dig. There, they were discovered some years later and identified one by one, thanks to the numbered tags on their clothing, which corresponded with the brother tailor's well-kept list that was needed in such a large community, so that he could hand out the right weekly "change" to its members.

"They died for being disciples of Christ, for not wanting to be renegades to their Catholic faith and their religious vows."

"Its hard to imagine a death that was more lived in advance, better accepted, and offered in greater union with Christ sacrificed for the salvation of the world."

"Their fraternal life in the Piarist's hall, their prayers, their songs, their expressions of forgiveness and hope, make us re-live the Acts of the first Martyrs, the seed and deepest roots of our Christianity."

(His Excellency, Fernando Sebastian,
Auxiliary Archbishop of Granada)

THE DEPARTURE OF THE ARGENTINEANS

Between one-thirty and two, "some militiamen came to advise" the Argentinean seminarians, Pablo Hall and Atilio Parussini, "that they should get ready," because they were going to take them by auto to Barcelona.

"We spent our remaining time in jail praying and bidding farewell to the last 20 of our brothers.

"We were deeply moved, but they were quite encouraged by the example of the earlier martyrs and assured us that they would travel the whole way singing and shouting 'Viva's' to Christ the King, to the Heart of Mary, to the Catholic religion and to the Pope." "They told us that they would be singing, 'Jesus, You Know' and 'With Voices Firm and Glance Serene,' which we had often sung 'sotto voce' during our imprisonment."

Ramón Illa told the Argentineans: "How poor and unhappy you two must be, not to be able to die as martyrs for our Lord!"

They would not be "martyrs," but they would be first-hand "witnesses" of that great holocaust of missionaries up to the 13th day of August. They were to be the providential emissaries, the living postmen who brought the Congregation the "inside story" of the last days and will of the "martyrs."

At five-thirty they were released from jail and at six they boarded the train. Among other items, they saved the "Last Offering," signed by the forty martyrs of the last two "hauls." In Barcelona, they put themselves under the protection of Father Carlos Catá, a fleeing missionary whom they had providentially chanced to meet.

THE 14th

In the hall, the last 20 missionaries were convinced that the 13th would be their last day on earth. They believed they were duty bound to leave behind their own "last will and testament":

"Beloved Congregation: The day before yesterday, the 11th, six of our brothers died with a generosity befitting martyrs. Today, the 13th, twenty more have won the palm of victory. And tomorrow, the 14th, the remaining twenty-one of us expect to die. Glory to God! Glory to God! How nobly and heroically your sons have borne themselves, beloved Congregation! We are spending the day encouraging one another for martyrdom, and praying for our enemies and for our beloved Institute. When the moment comes for them to designate the next victims, we all feel a holy serenity and an eagerness to hear our own names called, so that we can join the ranks of the chosen. We have been looking forward to this moment with generous impatience. When it came for those already chosen, some of them kissed the ropes that bound them, while others spoke words of pardon to the armed mob. As they drove off in the van towards the cemetery, we could hear them shouting, 'Long live Christ the King!' The angry mob answered 'Death to him! Death to him!' - but nothing intimidated them. They are your sons, beloved Congregation, these young men, surrounded by pistols and rifles, yet they have the calm courage and daring to cry out 'Long live Christ the King!' on their way to the cemetery."

"Tomorrow, the rest of us will go, and we have already chosen the passwords we will shout, even as the shots are being fired: to the Heart of our Mother, to Christ the King, to the Catholic Church, and to you, the common Mother of us all. My comrades tell me that I must begin the 'Viva's ' and they will respond. I will shout to the top of my lungs, and in our enthusiastic cries you will be able to discern how much we love you, beloved Congregation, since we will carry the memory of you even into those deep regions of suffering and death."

"We all die happy with no regrets or misgivings. We all die praying God that the blood that falls from our wounds will not be shed in vengeance, but will rather transfuse your veins and stimulate your growth and expansion throughout the world. Farewell, beloved Congregation. Your sons, martyrs of Barbastro, salute you from prison and offer you our sufferings and anguish as a holocaust to expiate for our failings and as a witness to our faithful, generous and everlasting love. The martyrs of tomorrow, the 14th, are fully aware that they die on the Eve of the Assumption. And what a special awareness it is! We are dying because we wear the cassock, and we are dying precisely on the same day we were invested in it."

"The martyrs of Barbastro greet you, as I do, the last and most unworthy of their number, Faustino Pérez, C.M.F."

"Long live Christ the King! Long live the Heart of Mary! Long live the Congregation! Farewell dear Institute. We are going to heaven to pray for you. Adios, adios!"

We also have another message from Faustino Pérez. Like a poor beggar, he wrote it in pencil on a handkerchief and sent it to his family in Navarre.

"My last remembrance: I wish that this handkerchief might reach you stained with blood; for then you would see that I have known how to shed it rather than renege on the religious ideals that I learned at home. It is not soaked in blood, but before you receive it I will have shed my blood crying out 'Long live Christ the King!' and 'Long live Catholic Spain!' and 'Long live Christian Barindano!' Today, six of my companions have died; tomorrow it will be my turn. Therefore, within a short time, I'll be praying for you in heaven. Farewell, until heaven. Faustino Pérez, C.M.F."

There is one more message written in his own hand, although it is unsigned. It is written on a little wedge of wood that measures 17x6x3 centimetres.

"Workers! We martyrs die loving you and forgiving you. Many of us have offered our lives for your salvation. See how sincerely we are concerned for you! You are caught up in social and religious errors. I, who am to die within five hours, am telling you this."

Each side of the wedge contains these fiery words: "Long live the Rule of Christ in Society!" "Workers, we love you! Long live the Heart of Mary!"

THE MARTYRS OF "THE ASSUMPTION"

Death did not come for them at dawn on the 14th, as they had been told. The missionaries lived through a night of turmoil and prayers, capable of breaking the nerves of even the bravest man.

The day of their execution had been postponed to Saturday, the Feast of the Assumption. They were sure it would take place in the early hours, since they never shot anyone in broad daylight.

Eduardo Ripoll took out his pencil, crossing out the old date and writing in the new one, preceded by a cross:

"Long live Christ the King! Long live the Heart of Mary! Long live the Catholic Church!"

"Lord! With all my heart I forgive all my enemies, and I ask that my blood may wash away as many sins as have been committed in this martyr-town of Barbastro. Eduardo Ripoll, C.M.F. (t 8/15/1936)."

Around midnight, between the 14th and 15th, shouting broke out in the square. The execution van rolled up. All the witnesses agree on the date and the details. The town jailer, Andres Soler, has left us an account of the "liturgy" that preceded and followed each one of those massacres:

"Every night when there was a catch of prisoners, the militiamen would get together before and afterwards to drink beer in the gallery of the jail, which faces on the River Vero, and comment on the incidents."

Mariano Laguens, a 19 year old butcher boy, had to go to the Piarists that night to cut up some lambs for a surprise dinner for a group of militiamen coming in from outside. But God also allowed him to be a witness to the whole scene when the guards burst in to the hall where the missionaries were sleeping. As they had done the last time, the guards were carrying a number of bloodstained cords. The case maker, Torrente, who was acting as captain that night, read out the roll-call:

Father Luis Masferrer
José Amorós
José M Blasco
Juan Baixeras
José Badía
Rafael Briega
Luis Escalé
José Figuero
Ramón Illa
Luis Lladó
Miguel Massip
Faustino Pérez
Sebastian Riera
Eduardo Ripoll
José Ros
Francisco Roura
Alfonso Sorribes
Jesus Agustín Viela
Bro. Francisco Castán
Bro. Miguel Martínez Jarauta

Once the "blacklist" had been read out in the hall, Torrente asked them, as he toyed with a handful of red-stained cords:

"Where would you rather go: to the front, to struggle against fascism, or to the firing-squad?"

There was a heavy silence. They all knew that 'going to the front' was a euphemism that really meant abandoning their faith and the religious calling.

"We would rather die for God and for Spain."

They bound them so tightly with wires and tourniquets (an eye-witness tells us) that blood ran down their wrists and hands, and the cords began to be soaked with it again.

None of them complained. They bound them at the elbows, two by two, so that they stumbled as they went up the steps, passed through the door and crossed the square. There they were joined by three priests from Barbastro, who were also bound: Don Vicente Salanova, Don Mariano Albas and Don Vecente Artiga. Blood was spurting from Artiga's right jaw

As the missionaries proceeded toward the van, the people in the square were startled to see how young they were.

The van was guarded at all strategic points. Near the cabin stood a militiaman, pistol in hand, who never stopped pointing it at them throughout the gruesome trip. Four others, bearing rifles, were stationed at the four corners of the platform.

Before they got up onto the van, Mariano Abad stopped them and made them a last offer:

"I'm going to offer you a deal, and you can be sure I'm not going to deceive you. If you come and fight the fascists and give up your religion, we'll spare your life."

Nobody answered. "The Undertaker" repeated his offer. Finally, seeing that no one budged, he started cursing and said:

"What a pity that men as tough as these aren't fighting on our side! Well, there's no more to talk about. Don't let me hear any of you start yelling 'Viva Cristo Rey,' or I'll bash your head in."

As they were tied together in pairs, it was not easy to keep their balance as they were loaded on to the van. Iron hands grabbed them by the sides and shoved them into that oversized cage, that resounded like a coffin as they landed. They fell helter-skelter in a heap. Then they had to crawl nearer to the cabin to make room for the ones that followed them. Little by little, the last of them were crammed in. The militiamen hoisted the tailgate and bolted it.

Mariano Abad gave the order to push off. As they began to go down the "Rollo," called "Calle de la Academia Cerbuna" nowadays, a cry arose from the back of the van, piercing the night. It was the voice of Faustino Pérez.

"Long live Christ the King!"

Mariano Abad ordered the driver to stop the van. He scaled the back of the van and "struck the missionaries with a rifle butt." The blows came crashing down on Faustino's skull. One of the other seminarians cried out in Catalan:

"Mare meva!" (My mother!)

As they went down the Rollo, over the shouts of their captors, the missionaries' vivas and shouts filled the street with a deafening outcry:

"Long live the Heart of Mary! Long live the Assumption! Long live Christ the King! Long live the Pope!"

The van with its precious cargo headed toward the main street and then turned off on the roadway to Sarinena.

After they had wound for a little more than three kilometres through hairpin turns over potholes and up steep grades, the desolate valley of San Miguel loomed up before them. Before crossing it, the road veered off at a right angle, at the top of which was a narrow embankment. It was "Val Martin, Pueyo's farm."

"They threw them onto the ground like sacks." The leaders' cars, with headlamps on, lit up that Dantesque scene. The missionaries kept trying to keep together and stretch their arms out in the form of a cross as they knelt there repeating their prayers of aspiration and forgiveness.

From the "torre Jaqueta," Antonio Pueyo and his three harvest helpers heard the cry of "Long live the Assumption!" They would never forget it. Antonio had climbed up into the rafters, and through the broad loft window he looked out on an execution scene worthy of Goya, taking place less than two hundred metres away. He saw and heard the blows, and the missionaries falling off the van "like sacks or bundles" onto his own land, near the roadway. The cries of the anarchists and the last "vivas" of the seminarians both reached and racked him. He also heard the last "offer" of "the undertaker."

The rifles cracked and the condemned men crumpled. New shots rang out to stifle the last hushed cries. "From the moment they left the van," says one witness, "until the moment they died, they never stopped repeating ejaculatory prayers."

And then, a little later, came the coups de grace. In this way, even from a distance, people could mathematically compute the exact number of martyrs killed that night.

"They held firm to their purpose. Even after they had been shot, their death rattles mingled with their prayers and they kept clutching their crucifixes until they were pried forcefully from their hands."

"Others were holding their rosaries."

The following day, several field workers approached the blood soaked embankment and saw the remains or relics of the missionaries' belongings lying amidst the dust and blood: the frames and broken lenses of their glasses; rosaries and half torn scapulars drenched in blood; bits of clothing, splinters, penholders, medals...

Antonio Pueyo found a wallet, inside which he found a name stamped on the back: "Sebastian Riera, C.M.F."

Later on, Salvador Fajarnes heard it said in the Committee, that "the young seminarians could all have been saved, if they'd only taken off those cassocks and denied their faith."

Two eye-witnesses still alive in 1992 tell the following anecdote:

"That day we were driving along with a heavy cartload of wheat, nearing the site where the missionaries had been shot just five hours earlier. Our lead horse, who was also our best, must have smelt the fresh human blood, because he stopped with a start and refused to go forward. In fact, he tried to back away from the place, so I had to get down and beat him with a switch."

THREE DAYS LATER

On August 18th, a Tuesday, the last two seminarians, Jamie Falgarona and Atanasio Vidaurreta, fell in the same place, thus completing the glorious crown of the fifty-one Claretian Martyrs of Barbastro.

The two seminarians had been staying as patients in the local hospital, along with Brother Joaquin Munoz, since the evening of July 20th. The doctors kept them there as long as they could, because they knew that as soon as they left they would be condemned. Finally, on the evening of August 15th, they had to release them, and they went off to occupy a cell in the municipal jail.

Brother Munoz spent the whole day saying rosaries. On the day of the execution, when the two militiamen saw him so disabled with his hernia and other ailments, they said aloud:

"What are we going to do with this old thing?"

And they left him alone.

Falgarona and Vidaurreta gave up their lives under the same glaring lights, in the same place where their brothers had fallen. Antonio Pueyo confirmed this, because he heard it from Florencio Salamero, "the mute woman's son," who was a member of the committee.