

Arriving in Barbastro

The truth is that I am not too lazy to write, so I want to tell you something about my life and that of my companions before the events we are foreboding come upon us. Yesterday, July 1, 1936, we arrived from Cervera to this house in Barbastro. It seems there are real possibilities for our safety here. The Superiors had told us that, given the political situation in Spain, it would be convenient to send us to a nearby country. They spoke of Andorra but also of Portugal, France, and Italy. Naturally, we are still determining what will happen; the situation is agitated. But let's get down to business.

My name is Faustino Pérez. I was born in 1911, so I am 25 years old, more or less like my classmates. I belong to a humble family in Navarra, more or less like all my classmates. I lost my father as a child and took care of goats in my childhood. I already differ somewhat from my companions in this, although several of them are also orphans like me. The last piece of advice I received from my family when I entered the Claretian seminary in Alagón was from my stepmother: *"Son, when you go back to preach to the people, shout."* My companion Teodoro Ruiz told me that the last advice he was given was: *"Do not become a friar, because most of them leave,"* to which he replied: *"They were not good enough before going to the convent. As for me, I go, willing not to return"*.

I entered the seminary a little late for what was customary in those days. Some of my companions had entered when they were 11 or 12, Ramón Illa was even 9. It was normal then that we joined with little knowledge of what we were looking for. But many of us had been motivated by some Claretians who went around the towns preaching missions. Those from the Burgos area, for example, spoke of Father Damián Janáriz, those from Catalonia of Father Emili Bover, etc. For some others, the way had been opened for them by a Claretian relative or a boy from the same town. In general, as I've said, we all came from humble but very religious families, closely bound to the Church and the village's parish priest.

If someone had asked us then about the political situation, we would have said very little. Very few people knew how to read and write in the villages, and newspapers were scarce. Today, July 1936, we could add something more, as I will say later, since during the studies, even though we did not have the opportunity to read the newspaper or listen to the radio; some Fathers and some readings somewhat opened our eyes. That helps to understand why we found ourselves on the run, somehow, secretly.

We did not all come from the same area, so we did not enter the same Claretian seminary. Some had joined in Alagón, others in Barbastro, others in Cervera. But we all met in Vic to do the Novitiate after four or five years. From then on, our story would be the same. Now we were all in uniform to face our mission: we wore, at last, our dreamed-of cassock and our sash on the left, and our cape and our tricorne—an absolute dream. And we were accompanied that year by our Master, Father Ramón Ribera. Before that, we had met other Fathers, such as Francisco Pinyol, José Ribé, Pedro Sitges, and Felipe

Calvo. All of them had opened our eyes to a new world, full of missionary dreams mixed with other children's dreams of adventures and exotic and distant countries.

But the Novitiate really formed us in the themes that would later lead us to face situations like the one we are now living in. In the Novitiate, we learned what the Constitutions were, with their intense and demanding spirituality. Although to tell the truth, the fact that they were written in Latin did not facilitate their comprehension. There we got to know more deeply our Father Founder, who was not yet beatified. Although none of us had been able to read his Autobiography, we knew that it had been published for the first time in 1915 but that only well-formed Claretians could read it. There we were passionate about the history of the Congregation. And there we learned the names of faraway countries: Spanish Guinea, Chile, Mexico, China...; and of missionaries whom we considered our heroes: Fathers Fogued, Valier, Ajuria, Avellana, Onetti... Since we could not speak in the dining room, they read to us their stories that filled us with missionary dreams. There we learned songs like the *Canción del Misionero (The Song of the Missionary)*, which we are rehearsing these days to encourage ourselves and not to lose hope of being able to go on mission around the world: "*Jesus, you know, I am your soldier...*".

While at the Novitiate, we still had a long way to go, but at the end of the Novitiate, each one of us had already begun to imagine a long missionary life. However, it was time to go to Solsona to study philosophy. Philosophy helped us to substantiate many of the things we had learned in the Novitiate. Our good teachers and, above all, our Prefect, Father Felipe Calvo, whom we would later meet in Cervera, and who is the one who accompanied us here to Barbastro, were in charge of the Philosophy classes.

And, finally, Cervera, the great University! And the great professors of theology! And our great Prefects: Clemente Ramos, Felipe Calvo.... During this period, we experienced an unforgettable event: the beatification of our Father Founder on February 25, 1934. What mattered most was not the institutional or doctrinal grace. In the Founder, we young people saw the gifts that he had received: faith, charity, self-denial, and meekness... Intense communication with the Spirit led him to identify spiritually with the sacrificial and redeeming charity of Christ. This is the force that moved him interiorly to imitate the life of Christ and to sacrifice himself entirely for the good of the Church and the salvation of mankind. He did not receive these gifts for himself alone but to be, in the Church, a continuator of the life of Christ and the apostles in the proclamation of the Gospel. A proclamation capable of being incarnated in different cultures and adapted to the needs of different environments.

The month following the beatification, the most prestigious Claretians, some of whom we knew well, gathered in Rome to celebrate the General Chapter. We received the news of the election of a famous jurist well-known in the Roman Congregations, Father Felipe Maroto, as the new General. Then, we realized the importance of intellectual preparation that should accompany spiritual and pastoral practice. We all wanted to be like Fathers Maroto, Larraona, Tabera, Goyeneche...

But, at the same time, life at the University of Cervera opened us to the social world. Fr. Calvo would comment on the newspapers on our Sunday walks, especially *Debate*. We listened to our superior, Fr. Jaime Girón, talk about the working-class world. We listened attentively to the book read to us during meals: *Por un porvenir mejor* (*For a better future*) by the French Jesuit Fr. Croizier of the French Social Action. And there, we studied our sociology text by Fr. José María Llovera and the commentaries on the papal encyclical "*Quadragesimo Anno*."

While all this was happening, we continued with our studies, prayer, sports, and activities in favor of the missions under the orders of the director of the *Academia Misional Cervarina*, (*Cervarina Missionary Academy*) in the *Centro Filatélico-misional* (*Philatelic-Missionary Center*). And we were literary taking our first steps in the internal magazine: "*Legión Cordimariana*" (*Cordimarian Legion*) or "*La Fiesta Santificada*," (The Sanctified Feast) etc.

And finally, here we are. We have only come to Barbastro, the students of the last course, with some Fathers. We do not know what will happen in the next few days. We are continuing our normal life and preparing ourselves for the Priestly Ordination, which is already near. It's been a long road, but we are well prepared. The harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few. We have told the Lord: "*Here we are, send us. Wherever you want. You know, we are your soldiers*".

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