

## At the Piarist Assembly Hall

Since the afternoon of the 20th, we have been imprisoned in this room of the Piarist school -six priests, 37 seminarians, and six brothers. Today, August 14, only 20 of us are left because on the 12<sup>th</sup>, the six older ones were executed, and on the 13<sup>th</sup>, another 20 suffered the same fate. The militiamen have already told us that tomorrow, on the eve of the Assumption, the 20 of us who are still left will face martyrdom.

It has been *days of pain and anguish* (Farewell letter), we all die happily *because the Lord has permitted that we suffer for his love* (Casadevall) and *be martyrs for Christ and for the Church* (Lladó). *We are executed only for being Religious* (Pigem), *forgiving our enemies* (Bregaret), *and praying for the salvation of the souls of the whole world* (Figuro) *and for our blood to stimulate the development and expansion of our beloved Congregation throughout the world* (Farewell letter).

From 1934, because of the anticlerical climate and the violence against the Church in Spain, and because of the experience of searches and threats that we experienced in Cervera, we knew that "martyrdom was a real possibility" (*Viñas*). Yet, in Barbastro, we were calm; we trusted in the security that Colonel Villalba gave us, we lived as usual - studying, praying, playing, preparing ourselves to be priests and missionaries in distant lands, in the ministry of the word, in the pastoral care of workers, in the press or wherever the superiors wanted. We told ourselves that we are people of peace, that we have done nothing wrong, nor do we belong to any political party.

After several attempts, the rumors circulating in Barbastro came true. In the afternoon of July 19, many militiamen came to the house to search for the weapons they supposed we had hidden. We were all in the courtyard and facing the wall, they searched everything, rooms, closets, drawers, and even opened the tabernacle. There were moments of great tension. The militiamen had to prevail upon the crowd that entered the house and demanded our immediate execution; the leader of the militiamen promised the crowd that he would take us to jail.

Although we were frightened, we remained calm and silent, but the waiting for it all to be over was long. Finally, upset that they found nothing, the militiamen took the three superiors. We did not know where they were taking them to; we exchanged questioning glances with a certain uneasiness but trusting in Providence.

Fathers Masferrer and Cunill managed to slip away and reach the chapels of the Seminary and the Church to save the consecrated hosts. They allowed all of us to receive communion, and we took with us the remaining hosts in a briefcase. It was God's grace because

they served us as viaticum in prison. Father Calvo gave us absolution before they took us out of the house and paraded us through the streets of Barbastro under the respectful or compassionate gaze of some and the aggressive and threatening eye of others.

They locked us in the hall of the Piarist school, which was "*witness of our hard anguish*" (Faustino P.) until they took us out for execution. The Piarists welcomed us fraternally, they gave us consecrated Hosts daily, hidden in our breakfast bread so we could receive Holy Communion, and provided us with foodstuff which Brother Vall prepared for us. We could maintain our usual rhythm, adapting to the circumstances. We had moments of personal prayer, recollection, and recreation. We indeed suffered several inconveniences, especially the heat and the lack of water for drinking and washing, but we endured everything without complaining. We hoped that this situation would be resolved in a couple of days.

However, everything changed at some point. We were forbidden to meet in small groups and talk to each other; we were closely guarded. We prepared to die when we learned that our superiors had been executed. In any case, we already considered ourselves martyrs of Jesus Christ; we felt an intimate joy that we tried to communicate to our families. Several of us left little notes written for them on small pieces of paper, on the walls, and on wood to console them and encourage them to thank God for this gift that the Lord has given us.

We were all united as one: the fate of each one was the fate of all, and we were all for one another. We helped Mr. Blasco to overcome the fear of not being able to endure martyrdom and be a cause for scandal; we protected Casadevall from the insinuations of one of the prostitutes who was brought into the room to tempt us; Pigem refused to save himself alone. We encouraged one another to die as martyr and no one gave up. We all remained united until the end.

We had to consider what to do when the militiamen proposed to save us from death if we joined them. What was better - to pretend in order to save our lives and have the possibility of fleeing and then exercise the ministry, or die as martyrs? The priesthood, the missions, and the ministry were the desire of our life. Finally, we realized that what we wanted was not necessary but what God had in mind. We were sure that our blood would penetrate the Congregation's veins and be the seed for new missionaries who would carry out our dream.

We offered the Lord our lives and the sufferings to which we were subjected. From the windows overlooking the street, we were insulted and threatened; the militiamen forced us to do military exercises, delaying us from going to relieve ourselves. But the worst was when they made us stand in line, for almost an hour, for mock execution. We wished they would kill us

to put an end to our agony. The militiamen would end up laughing or swearing, and we would fall, our nerves shattered.

Hall and Parussini, our two Argentinian companions, were released because they were foreigners. We asked them to tell Father General that we all died, happy to belong to the Congregation of the Missionary Sons of the Heart of Mary. We gave them a small piece of paper signed by the 40 still alive as an official farewell to the Congregation and a handkerchief of Father Sierra, which we kissed as an expression of "our kiss to the beloved Congregation in whose bosom we had the good fortune of dying."

Aware of being called to martyrdom, we prepared to die, prayed, and forgave our executioners. We were restless, unable to sleep, but firm in our decision. We were called in groups on three nights to be taken to the place of the firing squad. I stayed in the last one. When the brothers were being taken away, some prayed the rosary with the sorrowful mysteries but changed them to the glorious ones when they heard the rifle shots; others intoned a Magnificat for each of the brothers executed.

As we left the hall and entered the city square to get on the trucks, people insulted us, but we were not intimidated. We shouted long live (*viva*) the Heart of Mary, Christ the King, and sang:

"Jesus, you know, I am your soldier, always by your side I will fight. With you always and until I die, a banner and an ideal. And what ideal? For you, my King, to shed my blood".

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