

The Testimony of Cardinal Aquilino Bocos Merino

The Martyrs, "even when dead, still speak." They are pioneers and relaunch the mission of the Church. When I remember our Brother Martyrs of Barbastro, these brief reflections of two philosophers come to mind: *"No life has a greater effect than that of the martyrs; for the martyr begins to act only after death"* (S. Kierkegaard). *"Cheerful death is the symptom of every lively and complete culture, where ideas are effective in snatching hearts"* (Ortega y Gasset, J: OC, II, 88).

Arturo Tabera, Bishop of Barbastro, said: *"Missionaries who preached, many of them their first mission, all of them their last, leaving to the world the authentic sermon of their young soul, poured out for Christ. Like the first twelve missionaries, those He sent to conquer the world"*.

The martyrs do not teach us primarily to die but to live. Not just in any way, but in a more serious, responsible, and radical way, according to the Gospel. Their memory is always dangerous and timely. Dangerous because it calls into crisis our way of life and our way of serving. Timely because they rekindle vocational fervor and inflame our spirits to support our missionary commitments.

My story begins with the canonical visit I made to the Claretian Missionaries in the city of Barbastro in November 1989. I came on behalf of the Fr. General, who had entrusted me the task of preparing the closure of the community of Barbastro. However, the prayer before our brother Martyrs and other pastoral circumstances led me to conclude that it was not convenient to close the house but to improve and enhance the Claretian presence there. And so, on my return to Rome, I presented this idea to the Father General and his Council. The possibility of the beatification of the martyrs was not yet on the horizon.

In September 1991, I was elected Superior General, and a few days later, we were notified that the beatification of the Martyrs of Barbastro would take place on October 25, 1992. In those years, there were still reservation about the martyrs of the Spanish Civil War. In the evenings I would read the book of Fr. Gabriel Campo - *"Esta es mi sangre"* (*This is my blood*). I noticed that the Martyrs always addressed the Father General and the entire Congregation. This gave me the courage to speak to the General Chapter about the value of our martyr heritage: Fr. Claret, other missionary martyrs, and now those of Barbastro.

During the General Chapter, we had insisted on the need to “widen the tent”, that is, to make the Congregation present in other countries in need of the Word of God. In several previous meetings, General Assemblies, or General Chapters, it had been noted that it was urgent to promote missionary availability and to open new ways and possibilities for evangelization.

In preparation for the beatification of our Martyrs, I wrote a circular letter to the Congregation entitled "**Missionary Testament of our Martyrs.**" In it, I put together the expressions of their desire to announce the Gospel in Africa, America, and China and asked: "What are we going to do so that their fire does not quench? -We are the depositaries of their Testament and the first recipients of their witness. We cannot remain indifferent. It is a moral duty to accept their last will generously. They wanted a vigorous missionary Congregation, capable of being present on the peripheries and frontiers of the world where they could no longer reach. They dreamed of a Congregation faithful to the radical following of Jesus Christ and to his evangelizing mission, faithful to the Catholic Church and people in need" (n. 32).

Among other proposals for the celebration, I suggested a community homage, not sculpted, not painted, not written, but expressed in missionary life. Why not found the Congregation in some country in preparation for entry into China as a homage to our brother Martyrs? Naturally, this foundation would have to be made with missionaries who offered themselves voluntarily. I said, from now on therefore, "I invite all those who feel they are capable of learning languages and motivated to carry out this project to write to the Father General" (n. 35, 4).

In response to this proposal many letters were written in which, especially young people, offered to go where the Martyrs wanted to go but could not. Moreover, the memory of the Martyrs aroused in many Claretians missionary enthusiasm, availability, and commitment.

A month before the beatification, all the Major Superiors met in Rome with the General Government. The Action Plan of the Government for the next six years was presented to them. This Plan had ten proposals for new foundations in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. For some, it was an unattainable utopia, something more or less impossible. In the discussions, the invocation of the Martyrs was constant. The example of the Martyrs of Barbastro made it possible to approve the plan. Moreover, during the twelve years of my service as Superior General, the Congregation founded communities in 15 countries.

The countries where new presences have been established are Taiwan, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year with the title of Martyrs of Barbastro, Chad, Russia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Vietnam, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ghana, Belize, Haiti, Belarus. At this point, it should be noted that three of them did not take root and the missionaries moved to other countries. Nevertheless, in some of the foundations, they have flourished remarkably, so much so that some have become autonomous Organisms with government and formation structures.

Another example of the great development of the Claretian missionary life is found in India. I narrate this anecdote in connection with the beatification of the Martyrs. In mid-January 1993 I made my first visit to India. Franz Xavier Dirnberger can be considered the founder of the two Organisms we had in India at that time. There are five of them now. Franz Xavier was of German origin. He went to India around 1965 without knowing a word of English. He trained several generations of Claretians and established formation and pastoral structures. With the help of Germany, he organized the first Province and prepared a second. At present, there are three provinces and two delegations.

He was in Karumatur in Tamil Nadu. When I saw him, he was already in a wheelchair. I was asked to have a colloquium with the community, and the students and Father Franz attended the meeting. They called him "grandfather." I was struck by the interest he took in everything I told them. As the beatification of our brother martyrs of Barbastro was still recent, I took some relics and souvenirs to give to the community, especially to Fr. Dirnberger, since he had worked with such enthusiasm and total dedication to the establishment and development of the Congregation in India.

When I presented him with my gifts, he took them in his hands and put them aside with a certain indifference without any comment. I was surprised by this indifference. And I was even more surprised when, in the evening, I was invited to an event where the seminarians staged the martyrdom of their brothers of Barbastro. At the same time, I was informed that the students of all the centers in India had organized various contests around the Martyrs of Barbastro. I thought to myself: all this is the fruit of what Father Dirnberger has passed on to them.

I left the community with this open question: Why the indifferent attitude of Father Franz X. Dirnberger when I gave him the gifts? I supposed that it might have been strange to him since he had never been to Spain. But I received the answer to the question that remained with me during my visit to Karumathur soon after. On April 12 of that same year 1993, on Easter Monday, the much-admired Fr. Franz X. Dirnberger passed away.

They told me the sad news and added that, in his room, they had found some pieces of the cassocks of the Martyrs of Barbastro that enveloped the diary of his life. These fragments had been given to him by the Fathers of Germany, who had studied in Spain, to accompany him during his mission in India. Then my eyes were opened, and I thought: How could he be interested in the gifts I was offering if he possessed the precious treasure of the religious habit that some of the Blessed had worn to martyrdom?

Since then, I have had the conviction that the Martyrs of Barbastro laid a solid foundation for the life and mission of the Claretian Missionaries in this great country.

I conclude with the words of Pope Francis:

"God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7). He loves a Church that goes forth. But we must be attentive: if it is not going out, it is not the Church. The Church is meant to go forth, the Church walks. A Church that goes forth, that is missionary, is a Church that does not waste time crying for things that do not work, for the faithful it no longer has, for the values of yesteryears that are no longer there. A Church that does not seek protected oases to be at ease; but only desires to be *salt of the earth and leaven for the world*. This Church knows this is its strength, the same strength of Jesus: not social or institutional relevance, but humble and gratuitous love"¹.

The Martyrs of Barbastro gave the supreme witness of joy in self-giving. Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga, who, as a formator in Barbastro, felt very deeply the influence of these Martyrs, has underlined the evangelical radicalism of this seminary community in the hymn he composed for the Beatification.

Missionaries of Barbastro,
blood united in holocaust
of the Claret house,
partners in ideals,
radical supporters
of Jesus of Nazareth.
(...)
Martyr's Eucharist,
the three vows, day by day,
made you an oblation
in Mary's forge;

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Homily*, October 1, 2019.

and today you know how to die on your feet
between singing and forgiveness,
Claretians in mission
of witnesses of the faith (...).

May they accompany us on this visit to the museum where all the memories are eloquent and invite us to give our lives for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Cardinal Aquilino Bocos Merino, cmf