

ATTACKS AGAINST Fr. CLARET: FACTS, CAUSES AND ATTITUDES

The 19th century in Spain was a turbulent period of constant political ups and downs and conflicts between mentalities. The Enlightenment had a hard time finding a place in the Iberian Peninsula and sought it clumsily without knowing how to win over the people. It arrived with shouts of "long live liberty" but "forbidding the existence" of anyone who did not accept its so called liberal postulates.

Claret was born on the eve of the Napoleonic invasion of the Peninsula and died in exile near Spain that was in revolutionary struggles, looking for its form of state.

Catalonian Period. Claret could not finish his career in the seminary of Vic because it was closed due to the First Carlist War (1833-1840). Nor could he found a Congregation of Missionaries in 1839, as was his desire. And Espartero's Regency prevented him from dedicating himself to itinerant preaching; he could only do so at the end of the war in 1843.

But the situation was not calm. He preaches on peace and harmony with great success, but this does not please those who want revolution. And many fear that his overwhelming success could favor the more conservative political sector even though he does not deal with politics. The emerging anarchism sees in Claret an impediment to its plans for the supposed "modernization" of Spain. Jaime Brossa lamented: "Before the appearance of Fr. Claret, Catalonia was ripe for indifferentism... If Father Claret had not existed, Catalonia would have understood the message of the revolution,"; and he added: "We have not known how to make any *Straight Path*." Claret bothered many.

Fr. Claret spent most of 1846 in the diocese of Tarragona (Auth. 194: "Other bishops often asked my own bishop to let me preach missions in their dioceses. As long as he granted their requests I would go"). Great persecutions arose against the missionary: "...there were a few who wanted to kill me. The archbishop knew this, and one day as we were talking about this possibility, I told him, "Your Excellency, this in no way frightens me or holds me back. Send me anywhere in your diocese and I'll go there gladly, even if I knew that the road was lined with two rows of murderers waiting for me with daggers drawn" (Aut 466).

The attack did not happen. But at the end of January 1847, because of an anonymous letter, the general commander of Tarragona gave the order to arrest Fr. Claret, he had to interrupt his preaching in Povoleda to appear before the commander, who was convinced of his innocence. But the danger of public disorder prevented Claret from

preaching for three weeks in Reus, as planned, and he had to retire to Vic for several months. It was the time of the second Carlist war or *Dels Matiners*, and the atmosphere was not conducive for missions (EC I, p. 197s and 201). In 1848-49 the Canary Islands will be his haven of peace.

The Cuban Period. Everything has changed; Claret is now an authority and uses all the resources provided by civil and canon law to remedy evils. As soon as he arrived on the island, after perceiving social and moral abuses, etc., he published his *Letter containing the primary Laws of the Indies*, (*Carta que contiene las principales Leyes de Indias*) which did not please the landowners who kept slaves, since it recalled the rights of the slaves. Archbishop Claret is aware that these slave owners are against him and that "they are enemies of missions, religion, and morality" (EC I, p. 705).

A point of extraordinary scandal for the Archbishop is the lack of marriage morality, not only among the natives but also among the residents of the Peninsula: concubinage and adultery. Also, on this point, he uses civil law and seeks the support of the Spanish authorities who direct the life of the Island. But sometimes, they are the ones who cause scandals in the matter, and Claret is inflexible. In what depends on him, he makes it possible to regularize the situations, blessing interracial marriages, but he encounters much opposition.

And a third field of struggle was that of the clergy itself: of the 125 priests he had, most of them lived in concubinage, causing scandal for the faithful; 83 percent had children. Claret tackled the problem head-on: he exhorted as much as he could and threatened with canonical penalties those who did not amend the situation. In cases where he failed, he applied "Suspension *a divinis*" (EC I, p. 910).

To a lesser extent, Archbishop Claret was considered a hindrance by the nationalist revolutionaries. He did not preach about politics, but his exhortation for peace was seen as an impediment to that struggle; "without warning or thinking about it I have disarmed the revolutionaries... while God preserves my life, there will be no revolution" (EC I, 580f).

Probably many wanted to kill him for one reason or another, but his high dignity and prestige commanded respect. Think of the man who, in Santa Cruz del Sur, killed - vicariously - his concubine because, having repented, she decided to change her life (cf. *Memoirs of Fr. Adoain*). A few months after being on the island, they intended to poison him, but they finally backed out (EC I, p. 581).

He only suffered one bloody attack in Holguin on the evening of February 1, 1856. By pure chance, the knife did not reach his neck, which is where it was aimed. And the attempts continued in the following weeks when he was returning to Santiago; the persecutors burned a farm where he had spent the night and another one where they believed he would spend the night (Aut 586).

Claret, apart from diabolical intervention (Aut 585), expressed two motives for this attack: his fight against adultery (EC III, p. 235: "in this archdiocese, there are many Herods and Herodias who live immorally") and against the concubinage of the clergy ("I was wounded by two lustful clergymen," in MssClaret vol. 12, p. 18).

Along with Claret's mystical-martyrly joy, his generosity in forgiving and not bothering about being killed, there were also the usual human fears. The consequences were severe, both physiologically and psychologically; his ministry was practically interrupted for a year, his wounds took a long time to heal, and he somewhat suffered depression. He consulted the Pope on whether to continue in Cuba or to return to the Peninsula (EC III, p. 235). Still, the answer from Rome did not reach him until December. The waiting months felt like eternity for him. In March he asked Cardinal Brunelli to urge the Pope to give him a quick answer, and he expressed his clear conviction: "I know very well that if I stay, they will kill me" (EC III, 239). This persecution and conviction was a concomitant reason for the queen, in consultation with the pro-nuncio Simeoni, to recall Archbishop Claret to Madrid.

The Period of Madrid. Here the motives for persecution will multiply; they are anti-religious and anti-monarchical in their forms. Although Archbishop Claret flatly refused any participation in politics (he renounced his seat in the Senate, granted by law in June 1857), no enemy could believe that he did not influence the political decisions of the queen. On the other hand, the revolutionaries, and even Claret himself, were convinced that his preaching, as before in Cuba, would discourage the attempts of the uprising: "I am moralizing the people, which is as if I were saying, destroying the elements of revolution" (EC I, 1443; cf. 1442, 1550 and EpPas II, p. 57).

It goes without saying that the anti-religious movements did not support the overwhelming success of Claret's preaching in the capital, especially, the Freemasonry. And the restoration of the institutions of El Escorial, as religious and moral revitalizing forces, supported by the queen, was abhorred by the anti-ecclesiastical and anti-monarchist groups, even denigrating it furiously in Parliament (EC II, p. 410-416).

The hatred against Claret was immense. However, it must be recognized that he did not suffer any physical attack, but everything remained in intentions and attempts, whose number perhaps the biographers have exaggerated. The attempts documented by statements in the Informative Process for the Beatification (1887-90) are four or five, and not all are well known. Sometimes they have been transmitted with "variations."

We know the following for sure:

The convert of the Church of St. Joseph. He had the intention of assassinating Claret on October 15, 1859. He told Claret himself between tears and hugs. He belonged to Freemasonry (Aut 688).

The one with the hidden dagger. An assassin sought Claret as if to consult him; Claret immediately made him throw the dagger to the ground. He belonged to a secret society (carbonari, according to A. Barjau), and he had been chosen by lot to kill the Archbishop under penalty of death. Claret and his page, Ignatius Betriu disguised him so that he could flee without being recognized. Xifré confirmed he heard this story from Archbishop Claret himself (PIM ses. 17), and A. Barjau confirmed he heard it from Ignatius Betriu (PIV ses. 28). The event took place in the Church of the Hospital of Montserrat, and must have happened before the summer of 1863, date of the last possible meeting of Barjau with Betriu (EC II, p. 713).

The poisoned letter. Palladio Currius declared he heard it from Claret himself (PIT ses. 13); Currius said that the letter arrived from America, and Fr. Clotet (PIV ses. 55) specified that the letter arrived from the United States and that he heard it from Brother Saladin, the one who took the correspondence to the Archbishop. Brother Saladin was asked to destroy the letter. Therefore, it happened after September 1863, the date of incorporation of the Brother to the house of Claret.

The fake sick man. Clotet stated it in PIV ses. 56 and in his biographies of Claret, as heard from many people, one of whom, a nun of Our Lady of Loreto. He specified that it happened in 1866. It is about a lover rejected by his concubine who had repented upon hearing a sermon of Claret. He got into bed with two pistols under his pillow and sent a friend to ask Claret to come and administer to him the sacraments. When Claret entered the room, he found that the potential murderer had died.

In the revolt of the sergeants? It happened on June 22, 1866, in the barracks of San Gil, in the current "Plaza de España". They were against the monarchy, and it is supposed that they also planned to assassinate Claret, but there is no concrete information.

He spent the day hiding in the chapel of the Virgin, in the Church of Montserrat and believed he would be killed (EC II, p. 1015ff).

Perhaps there were a few more attempts, but they are not adequately documented. The previous ones have sometimes been counted with variations and perhaps *legendarizations*. Where did the breviary emptied to hide a gun, preserved in the general curia, come from?

In France. The Spanish diplomatic representation in Paris obtained, in September 1870, a search and arrest warrant from the French authorities against Claret, so he left Prades and took refuge in Fontfroide. He feared being captured on the road in Narbonne, so he continued to the next station, the halt of Marcorignan (PIC ses. 4), freer from surveillance. The last attempt to attack the Archbishop was that of some republicans of Narbonne, emboldened by the fall of the empire; they announced that they would go to the monastery to whisk Claret away from there, to which the medical monk, Father Amadeo, responded saying that it would happen over his dead body (PIC ses. 4).

Meanwhile, the Spanish authorities tried Claret in Colmenar Viejo for the alleged theft of jewels in El Escorial. His vice-president, D. Dionisio González, vouched for him, and soon the accusations faded away (EpPas III, pp. 358-361).

How Claret experienced these events

Faced with the persecutions in Tarragona: " I have always wanted to die a poor man in some hospital, or on the scaffold as a martyr, or to be put to death by the enemies of the holy religion we profess and preach" (Aut 467). He constantly desired to seal the truths he preached with his blood.

During the days of Holguin: " I had been feeling very fervent and full of longing to die for Jesus Christ (Aut 573). He would even say it from the pulpit, hence the spiritual joy in the attack, which he experienced as the first fruit of total martyrdom (Aut 577).

After Holguin, he tells the Pope: "*Paratus vel loco cederé vel sacrificium consummate, si Deus ita velit*" (EC III, p. 235: "*ready to change to another place or to consummate the sacrifice if God wills it*"). And he referred Cardinal Brunelli, former nuncio in Madrid at the time, to the words of Paul according to Acts 20:24: " But I consider life of no importance to me, provided I do the will of God" (EC III, p. 239).

In 1865, faced with the dilemma of whether to stop being a Confessor or return to Madrid, he wrote: "As for slander and death, with God's help I do not fear them," and he quoted the complete text of Acts 20:24: "so long as I fulfill... the ministry of the word which I received from the Lord Jesus" (EC III, p. 504).

In May 1862, in the chapel of the palace of Aranjuez, Claret offered himself to Jesus and Mary as a victim, to labor, "and suffer even death itself, and the Lord deigned to accept my offering" (Aut 698). These were the days in which he concluded the writing of the Autobiography, in which he included in his *Definition of the Missionary*: "nothing daunts him... he rejoices in torments" (Aut 494). He would write years later about this offering accepted by the Lord, already from Rome: "I offered myself as a victim, and the Lord deigned to accept my offer, for all kinds of [suffering] has come upon me" (EC II, p. 1410).

We know his response to Crusats' death and the wounding of Fr. Reixach: "I wanted very much to be the first martyr of the Congregation, but I was not worthy; someone else won it before me. I congratulate the Martyr and Saint Crusats, and St. Reixach for the good fortune he has had" (EC II, p. 1298).

There is no doubt that Claret desired martyrdom, and he experienced it in a peculiar way. He did not give himself up to death; he even hid when he saw it close because he never wanted to recklessly expose his own life gratuitously. Archbishop Claret died in bed, but after having lived a profound martyrial spirituality, which has nothing to do with masochism, but with the mysticism of maximum configuration with Christ Crucified and with love for his Word, of which he was a joyful herald and of which he wished to bear witness, even shedding his blood.

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