Religious Persecution of Spain

The three-year period from 1936 until 1939 was a time of bloody martyrdom for the Church in Spain. During this religious persecution, there were thousands of persons who suffered violent death, who were tortured and shot solely because they were believers; or because they wore a cassock or religious habit; or because they were priests or religious who conducted pastoral ministry in parishes, schools and hospitals; or because they were dedicated laity, committed to their faith in Jesus Christ.

The priest and journalist, Antonio Montero, now a retired archbishop, in his doctoral thesis entitled *History of the Religious Persecution in Spain* (*Historia de la persecución religiosa en España*) presents a statistic of 6,932 members of the clergy and religious sacrificed in this persecution: 12 bishops, 4,172 diocesan clergy, 2,365 religious men and 283 religious women. It was impossible to come up with the number of Catholic laity murder because they were believers. Furthermore, he narrates the Oblates martyrs as given below.

The Story of the Martyrs of Pozuelo

Among those who were martyred there were 22 Oblates: priests, brothers and scholastics from Pozuelo de Alarcón (Madrid). The Oblates has established themselves in Estación Pozuelo in 1929. They served as chaplains in three communities of sisters. They also provided pastoral service in the surrounding parishes: confessions and preaching, especially during Lent and Holy Week. Oblate scholastics taught catechism in four neighbouring parishes.

The ministry of the Oblates worried the revolutionary committees, such as the socialists, communists and the radical lay labour unions in the Estación neighborhood. They were greatly worried that the “friars” (as they called them) were the driving force behind religious activity in Pozuelo and the surrounding area. This created anger among the revolutionary groups. It irritated the Marxist revolutionary groups that the Oblates went around in the streets in cassocks wearing the Oblate cross.

Nevertheless, the Oblates did not allow themselves be intimidated. They simply adopted an attitude of prudence, composure and calm, committing themselves not to respond to any provocative offence. It should be noted that none of the religious Orders or Congregations got involved in political activities, not even occasionally. In spite of that, they maintained their program of spiritual and intellectual formation and carried on the various pastoral activities that were part of the priestly and missionary formation of the scholastics.

Oblates never suspected or imagined that they would be victims of hatred and dealt them severely being messengers of Jesus Christ. But on July 20, 1936, the socialist communist youth took to the streets and began to burn churches and convents in Madrid. The militia of Pozuelo, on the other hand, attacked the chapel in the Estación neighborhood; they threw vestments and images into the streets and set them on fire.

On the 22nd July, a large contingent of militia, armed with shotguns and revolvers, attacked the Oblate house. The first thing they did was to round up the Oblates about 38 and lock them into a small room where they were closely guarded and threatened by the guns. It was a terribly tense moment because they could not expect anything else and they felt that the moment of death has come.

Thereafter, the militia meticulously searched the Oblate house looking for guns. All that they managed to find were religious pictures, crucifixes, rosaries, and sacred vestments. They threw all these objects outside the house and set fire. Oblates were made prisoners in their own house. It was their first jail.

On the 24th, the first executions took place. There were no interrogations, trials or defense. Seven Oblates were the first to be called and sentenced: Juan Antonio Pérez Mayo, 29, priest and professor; and students Manuel Gutiérrez Martín, 23, sub-deacon; Cecilio Vega Domínguez, 23, sub-deacon; Juan Pedro Cotillo Fernández, 22; Pascual Aláez Medina, 19; Francisco Polvorinos Gómez, 26; Justo González Lorente, 21. They were put into two cars and taken to their martyrdom.
The rest of the Oblates remained imprisoned at the Oblate house and spend the time in prayer, preparing to die. On the same day, someone probably the mayor of Pozuelo, communicated to Madrid the risk the others were in and that a guard truck arrived with orders to take the Oblates to the General Security Office. After filling out some forms, they were unexpectedly set free.

The Oblates thereafter sought refuge in private homes. The provincial put himself at risk by going around to encourage the others and bring them communion. However in month of October, by a search and capture order, they were captured, detained and taken to prison.

There they endured a slow martyrdom of hunger, cold, terror and threats. There are testimonies from survivors of the way they accepted that difficult situation with heroic patience, foreseeing the possibility of martyrdom. Charity and a climate of silent prayer reigned among them. For the majority of them, the end of their Calvary came in November.

On the 7th, Father José Vega Riaño, 32, priest and formator, and a scholastic Serviliano Riaño Herrero, 30, were shot. On being called by the executioners, the latter went to the cell of Father M. Martín and asked for sacramental absolution.

Chaos of hatred

The executions did not end. Twenty days later, it was the 13 others. The procedure was the same for all. There were no accusations, trials or defense. They were taken from prison to Paracuellos de Jarama, where their names were called via Loudspeakers and one by one they were executed. Those are: Francisco Esteban Lacal, 48, provincial superior; Vicente Blanco Guadilla, local superior, 54; Gregorio Escobar García, 24, newly ordained priest; and the scholastic brothers: Juan José Caballero Rodríguez, 24, sub-deacon; Publio Rodríguez Moslares, 24; Justo Gil Pardo, 26; José Guerra Andrés, 22; Daniel Gómez Lucas, 20; Justo Fernández González, 18; Clemente Rodríguez Tejerina, 18; coadjutor brothers Ángel Francisco Bocos Hernández, 54; Marcelino Sánchez Fernández, 26 and Eleuterio Pardo Villarroel, 21.

The newly ordained priest Gregorio Escobar had written his family: "I have always been extremely moved by the accounts of martyrdom that have always existed in the Church, and on reading them I have always been overtaken by a secret desire to run to the same fate as theirs. That would be the best priesthood to which all of us Christians could aspire: each one to offer his own body and blood in holocaust for the faith. What happiness it would be to die a martyr!" All died professing the faith and forgiving their executioners and, despite the psychological tortures during their cruel captivity, no one apostatized, or failed in the faith, or lamented having embraced the religious vocation.

Gregorio Escobar Barbarin, a nephew of the young newly ordained priest killed at 24, who bears his name, and is the only relative of the martyr who is still in Estella, has said "Moments like this are the occasion we all have to walk toward reconciliation." Escobar Barbarin, who was town councilor in the Municipality of Estella between 1999 and 2003, said he believes it is necessary to learn from history. "Gregorio and his companions gave their lives generously in correspondence to their faith. Their young hearts longed only to give help and consolation to those who needed it. However, they were taken as sheep to the slaughter amid a chaos of hatred and confusion." (Reported by Zenith, 08.11.20110)

The 22 Oblates will be beatified on December 17, 2010 at the Cathedral of Nuestra Senore de la Almudene in Madrid, Spain.

"To this glorious band of martyrs belong many Spanish Christians, executed out of hatred for the faith in the years 1936-1939 ... during the wicked persecution unleashed against the Church, its members and its institutions. Bishops, priests and religious were persecuted with particular hatred and cruelty; their only fault – if one can express it that way – was believing in Christ, preaching the Gospel and leading the people on the road to salvation. The enemies of Christ and of his teaching believed that by eliminating them, they could make the Church completely disappear from Spanish soil." (John Paul II, Decree of the Congregation for the of saints 1992)
Mártires Oblatos de Pozuelo - Madrid


Cuando estábamos “gustando” el momento en que nos iban a matar, queríamos pronunciar alguna oración y no nos salía, pero, sin embargo, lo que sí salía espontáneamente eran sentimientos de amor hacia Dios, de afecto hacia nuestros hermanos y de perdón hacia los que nos iban a matar, así como una petición de perdón a Dios por nuestros pecados y debilidades.