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“They walked towards their death as if to a party.” Martyrdom, Agency and Performativity in the Spanish Civil War¹

Abstract

Despite the great number of articles and publications on anticlerical violence during the Spanish Civil War, this is the first to focus on the perceptions of its victims. In the documents they left behind, these imprisoned clergymen represented themselves as martyrs. With no influence from rebel propaganda, these statements provide evidence that the rhetoric of martyrdom was embedded in Spanish Catholic culture prior to the *coup d'état* against the Second Republic in 1936. Through a case study of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Barbastro, one of the districts most disrupted by anticlerical violence, this article explores the existence of a Catholic agency which transformed death in the name of God into a path of perfection; a path toward the improvement of oneself and of the whole of society. They thought of their martyrdom as a contribution to the victory of the rebels that would bring the Kingdom of God closer to Spain. Imbued by this ideal they performed their own martyrdom.

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Dostoevski said once, "There is only one thing I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings." These words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behaviour in camp, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.

Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's search for meaning*

The bloody and unusual violence which repressed the clergy during the summer of 1936 has been one of the areas that has drawn the greatest attention of researchers of the Spanish Civil war. Many studies have been devoted to explaining the reasons behind the massacre of around six thousand clergymen in just a few months, and how it was commemorated by the Francoist regime. However, not a single research paper, apart from some hagiographic writings, has focused on how the clerical victims experienced and perceived this violence. Exploring the testimonies left by the murdered priests can help us to better understand the political dimensions of their experience, and how they perceived and accommodated the events that convulsed Spain's social fabric during the 1930s within their worldview.

For the majority of Spanish Catholic priests, the fall of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in 1930 and the proclamation of the Second Republic in 1931 had entailed the renewal of a religious persecution that, from their perspective, they had endured since time immemorial. The most recent demonstration of this was government policies of laicization from the first decade of the twentieth century. They considered that Spain was ontologically a Catholic nation, and therefore any steps toward secularisation added insult to injury, both as Spaniards and Catholics.²

This feeling of persecution and hostility drove some of them to develop an increasingly positive idea of martyrdom. At the individual level, in addition to releasing them from their physical limitations, martyrdom in the name of Christ was by far the most perfect and

² On the idea of persecution during the Second Republic see Francisco Javier Ramón Solans, 'Persecución, milagros y profecías en el discurso católico zaragozano durante la Segunda República' *Historia social*, 78 (2014), pp. 81-98. On the links between Catholicism and nationalism in Spain see Joseba Louzao Villar. 'Versus Laicism: Culture Wars and the Making of Catholic National Identity in Spain', *European History Quarterly*, 43:4 (2013), pp. 657-680.

absolute way of dying; a death which brought the individual closer to God. At the same time, the suffering they experienced epitomized a way of re-creating a time of purity of the primitive Church and the ill-treatment it suffered at the hands of the Roman Empire. Finally, such martyrdom was viewed positively because it would bring the Kingdom of God closer to Spain.

The purpose of this article is to look at how, from the standpoint of Catholic agency, suffering and death conveyed a sense of emancipation, and how these elements became a path to the perfection of oneself, and of society as a whole. Imbued by these ideals of martyrdom, the victims played a role they felt they had been chosen to perform until their last breath. To address these issues we will focus on the Diocese of Barbastro - one of the districts most disrupted by the anticlerical violence of the time - which has an archive of extraordinary documents concerning the final moments of the murdered priests. These documents were produced without any influence of rebel propaganda, showing that the rhetoric of martyrdom was embedded in Spanish catholic culture prior to the *coup d'état*.

Rethinking the Anticlerical Violence: From the Study of the Reasons to the Perception of the Victims

The fears of religious persecution materialised in the summer of 1936 in the most grievous period of anticlerical violence in the history of Spain. Following a well-known paradox, the defeat of the counter-revolutionary coup ended with the unleashing of a revolutionary process which cut short the life of approximately 55.000 people.³ Without any doubt the most persecuted group was the clergy, which accounted for 6.770 victims, to which we must add those laymen who were executed because of their religious beliefs. In the Diocese of Barbastro, the focus

³ José Luis Ledesma Vera, *Los días de llamas de la revolución. Violencia y política en la retaguardia republicana de Zaragoza durante la guerra civil*, (Zaragoza : Institución Fernando el Católico, 2003) and José Luis Ledesma Vera, '«La santa ira popular» del 36: la violencia en guerra civil y revolución, entre cultura y política' in Javier Muñoz Soro, José Luis Ledesma Vera and Javier Rodrigo (eds.) *Culturas y políticas de la violencia. España siglo XX* (Madrid : Siete Mares, 2005, pp. 147-192.

of our analysis, the anticlerical violence was particularly intense, as 87.7% of the clergy was assassinated.⁴

These attacks were not limited to the living: they also encompassed objects and sacred spaces. Churches were either destroyed or secularised (being transformed into dance halls or garages), religious symbols and archives were burned, liturgical ornaments were profaned, tombs were desecrated and their mummified contents were exhibited to reveal the hidden ‘secrets’ which were supposed to exist within the confines of the monasteries and convents. No other violence took such ritualised forms as that exerted against the Roman Catholic Church - from genital mutilations to masquerades parading with robes, bibles and other items of worship. In most parts of Republican Spain, and during the beginning of the Civil War, the Catholic religion virtually disappeared from the public sphere.⁵

Similar to that which occurred within other revolutionary processes, not only did this iconoclastic enthusiasm acquire a religious nature; it was also swayed by the new project of society starting to take shape. The destruction went hand in hand with a period of ‘collective effervescence’, characterised by intensity, creativity, and passion.⁶ At the same time, on the other side of the front, the *coup d'état* and the war were welcomed by a sector of the population with a genuine religious fervour: the events were understood in terms of a crusade, martyrdom, and religious persecution. For this reason, some historians have reconceptualised the Spanish Civil War as an actual war of religion.⁷ This, of course, does not imply that there were no Catholics among the Republicans or that there were no clergymen repressed by Rebel authorities.

⁴ María Pilar Salomón Chéliz, ‘Conflictividad e identidad anticlerical en el Somontano barbastrense del primer tercio de siglo XX’ In Miguel Ángel Ruiz Carnicer and Carmen Frías Corredor (eds.) *Nuevas tendencias historiográficas e historia local en España* (Huesca: Instituto de Estudios Altoaragoneses, 2001), pp. 317-332.

⁵ See José Luis Ledesma Vera, ‘*Delenda est Ecclesia*. Sulla violenza anticlericale e la Guerra civile del 1936’, in Alfonso Botti (ed.) *Clero e guerre spagnole in età contemporanea (1808-1939)* (Rubbettino : Soveria Mannelli, 2011), pp. 309-332.

⁶ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. The Totemic System in Australia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For the collective fervour, iconoclasm and creation of a revolutionary religion, see Albert Mathiez, *Los orígenes de los cultos revolucionarios, 1789-1792* (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2012).

⁷ Mary Vincent, ‘The Civil War as a «War of Religion»’ in Martin Baumeister and Stefanie Shüler-Springorum (eds). *«If You Tolerate This...» The Spanish Civil War in the Age of Total War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 74-89.

The spectacular wave of anticlerical violence that shook Spanish society in the summer of 1936 has caught the attention of a great number of psychologists, anthropologists, and historians. Beyond the Francoist panegyric and other propagandistic texts disseminated during the war and the post-war period, two interpretative models have been outlined in social sciences.⁸ In theories of social movements, to cultural histories of politics, we find a line of thought that interprets anticlericalism as a response to Catholic mobilisation and which essentially focuses on the legislation, the protests, and the discussions around the secularization of the public sphere. Within this analytic framework, the explanation of the violence in 1936 is connected with the privileged status of the Church and its intense campaign to support the conservative sectors during the Second Republic.⁹

The second interpretative model is greatly influenced by anthropology and is interested in the ritual dimension of this violence. It studies the surprising resemblances of the Spanish Civil War with other epochs and regions, such as the 1834 anticlerical riots in Spain and the religious wars of France in the sixteenth century. These kinds of cultural interpretations help to explain the patterns that the anticlerical violence of the Civil War adopted. However, as José Luis Ledesma has observed, the decisive trigger was the Civil War, and with it, the banalisation of death and fragmentation of power. Beyond the

⁸ An evaluation of the anticlerical violence during the Civil War can be read at Ledesma Vera, *'Delenda est ecclesia...'*, *op.cit.*. For the discussion between both interpretations see Gabriele Ranzato, *'Dies irae: la persecuzione religiosa nella zona repubblicana durante la Guerra civile spagnola (1936-1939)'*, *Movimento Operaio e Socialista*, 2:11(1988), pp. 195-220. An attempt to combine both explicative models can be read in Maria Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury: Popular Anticlerical Violence and Iconoclasm in Spain, 1931-1936* (Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2013). For the propagandist literature of the martyrdom, the religious persecution and the construction of the crusade see Mary Vincent, *'Expiation as Performative Rhetoric in National-Catholicism: The Politics of Gesture in Post-Civil War Spain'*, *Past and Present*, 203:4 (2009), pp. 235-256 and Mary Vincent, *'The Martyrs and the Saints: Masculinity and the Construction of the Francoist Crusade'*, *Historical Workshop Journal*, 47, pp. 68-98. A good example of the assimilation and reproduction of the religious persecution and crusade speeches can be found in Vicente Cárcel Ortí, *Caídos, víctimas y mártires. La Iglesia y la hecatombe de 1936* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2008).

⁹ See, as an example, Hilari Ragner, *Gunpowder and Incense: The Catholic Church and the Spanish. Civil War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Demetrio Castro Alfín, *'Cultura, política y cultura política en la violencia anticlerical'* in Rafael Cruz and Manuel Pérez Ledesma (eds), *Cultura y movilización en la España contemporánea* (Madrid: Alianza, 1997), pp. 69-97; María Pilar Salomón Chéliz, *Anticlericalismo en Aragón. Protesta popular y movilización política (1900-1939)* (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2002); or Julio de la Cueva Merino, *'Si los curas y frailes supieran: la violencia anticlerical'* in Santos Juliá (ed.), *Violencia política en la España del siglo XX* (Madrid: Taurus, 2000), pp. 191-233.

specificities of anticlericalism, and as the clergy was not the sole target of republican repression, this violence has to be contextualised.¹⁰

In addition, many other factors such as gender, age, or nationality, intervened in the repression of the clergy. The Poor Clares and the Capuchin congregations in Barbastro were dissolved and the nuns were given a letter of safe-conduct to return to their homes.¹¹ If the causes of violence had been exclusively religious, the Argentine Claretians would have not been kept from danger. On the other hand, had the causes of violence been exclusively political - considering the Catholic contract with the armed defence of the counter-revolution - the younger and the older priests would not have survived. In fact, both explanations are complementary and both are needed to explain the anticlerical violence and why around 100 congregants, including Piarists, Claretians and Benedictines were saved.

Surprisingly, considering the vast bibliography on this issue, little attention has been paid to the perception of the victims. There is much reflection on the political uses of the past deployed by the Francoist regime, but there are no studies concerning the clerical self-representation as martyr, nor of their analysis of reality from a religious construct.¹² To address these issues, we will highlight the case of Barbastro, one of the most persecuted dioceses during the war. Here, in the principle city of the Somontano area of Aragon, the Bishop, along with almost all of the secular priests and many of the regular clergymen, were put to death.

¹⁰ For the anthropological theoretical approaches see Bruce Lincoln, 'Revolutionary Exhumations in Spain, July 1936', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 27:2 (1985), pp. 241-260; Mary Vincent, '«The keys of the kingdom»: religious violence in the Spanish civil war, July-August 1936' in Chris Ealham and Michael Richards (eds.), *The Splintering of Spain. Cultural History and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 68-89; and especially Manuel Delgado, *La ira sagrada. Anticlericalismo, iconoclastia y antiritualismo en la España contemporánea* (Barcelona: RBA, 2012) and Manuel Delgado, *Luces iconoclastas. Anticlericalismo, espacio y ritual en la España contemporánea*, (Barcelona: Ariel, 2001).

¹¹ Campo Villegas, *op.cit.* This sexualised repression drew on the childish image of the nuns forged by the anticlericalism. See María Pilar Salomón Chéliz, 'Beatas sojuzgadas por el clero: la imagen de las mujeres en el discurso anticlerical del primer tercio del siglo XX', *Feminismo/s*, 2 (2003), pp. 41-58 and Ruth Harris, *Lourdes. Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 213.

¹² See, as an example, the articles of Vincent, 'Expiation as Performative', *op.cit.*, pp. 235-256 and José Luis Ledesma Vera and Javier Rodrigo, 'Caídos por España, mártires de la libertad. Víctimas y conmemoración de la Guerra Civil en la España posbélica (1939-2006)', *Ayer*, 63 (2006), pp. 233-255.

Hagiographical Sources

Working on Martyrdom inevitably raises questions about the nature and credibility of these sources. Since Michel de Certeau's *The Writing of History*, hagiography has proved to be a valuable source to study Christian worldview, despite the fact that it is impossible to consider it 'solely in terms of its «authenticity» or «historical value»'.¹³ These documents usually tell us more about the society itself than about the victim's perception. Hagiography in this sense is 'saturated with meaning, but with *identical* meaning. It is a tautological tomb'.¹⁴

During the war and the post-war period, we find two hagiographical projects, gathering documents on the assassinated clergymen in Spain. On the one hand, episcopal authorities ordered priests to gather testimonies about so-called martyrs in order to begin their beatification. Unfortunately, these documents remain largely inaccessible to historians. On the other hand, in 1940 Franco set up a massive state investigation, the *Causa General* (General Cause), making a list of the killings committed by Republican loyalists with the aim of legitimising the dictatorship. Due to its ideological nature, this public inquiry devoted itself to the gathering of information about the massacres of clergymen and the destruction of religious buildings. Compiled by the *Causa General* between 1941-43, these testimonies represented the victims of the anticlerical violence in terms of martyrdom.

Besides their ideological character, these testimonies are not reliable. Interrogations took place six years after their deaths and, usually, witnesses didn't see a 'martyr's' death at first hand but they heard it from a secondary source. A good example of this is the testimonies gathered concerning the assassination of the Bishop of Barbastro, Florentino Asensio Barroso. Father Cipriano Asensio Barroso, came to Barbastro after the Civil War to find out what had happened to his brother. In the *Causa General*, he stated that he had collected 'contradictory reports'. Witnesses confirmed that the Bishop was

¹³ Michel de Certeau, *The writing of History* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 270.

¹⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The writing of History*, *op.cit.*, p. 269.

castrated but they didn't agree on how he experienced his last moments and his attitude towards death.¹⁵

Unlike these documents, the writings left by the Claretians of Barbastro were produced at the precise moment of their persecution and were not inspired by the Post-war rhetoric around martyrdom. Such documentation was usually destroyed after their death and this is why these few documents are so important to understand the victims' perceptions. Some of these documents remained inside the prison, such as the engraved bench, or were found in exhumed corpses. The writings of other victims were taken out of the prison by clergymen, such as the chocolate wrapper saved by Hall and Parussini and hidden during the war in a photographic studio in Barcelona. After the Civil War, these documents were gathered and preserved by the Aragon Claretian Province. Since 1992 they have been displayed in the Museum of the Claretian Martyrs in Barbastro. Unfortunately, the scattered letters written by Benedictines from El Pueyo and saved by Luis Brualla remain inaccessible to historians. They have been quoted here as they appeared in later ecclesiastic publications, and therefore they may have been subject to possible changes in order to fit the purposes of the hagiographical canon.¹⁶

These writings were inscribed on the media available to the prisoners: chocolate wrappers, a handkerchief, a footstool. Some of them, such as the letter from Aurelio Boix, were meant to be read by their families. Others, though, were public testimonies of their faith, such as the will signed by all the Claretians, or the text left on the bench of a cell. In any case, as Elizabeth A. Castelli points out, authors of this kind of text 'are conscious of the potential readership for their writings, and they appear to see themselves contributing to their own memorializing. In this way, these texts are generative of collective memory'.¹⁷

¹⁵ Archivo Histórico Nacional, Causa General, Legajo 1415, exp. 4, fols. 294-318.

¹⁶ A reflection on religious forgeries in Francisco Javier Ramón Solans, 'In illo Tempore. Una lectura católica de los orígenes míticos de la nación española', *Revista de Occidente*, 410-411 (2015), pp. 133-152.

¹⁷ Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory. Early Christian Culture Making*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 70

The survival of the written sources themselves illustrates, to a certain degree, the dialectics of the political violence. Some of the Claretian scripts, and their personal belongings, have survived thanks to Hall and Parusini, who escaped execution on the grounds that they were foreigners.¹⁸ Furthermore, the story of the Benedictines from El Pueyo is known thanks to Plácido Gil Imirizaldu, who was released because he had not yet been ordained as a priest.¹⁹

The Origins of the Rhetoric of Persecution

The rhetoric of persecution and martyrdom was established well before July 1936 and the war simply gave them a more tragic shape. In both narratives events were connected with three intermingled chronological lines: the first spanning a long period, reproduces Christian myths such as the religious persecution in Roman times and connects these myths to the current political context; the second refers to the culture wars between the Church and the State in modern times, and the third refers to the political events of Spain in the 1930s. However, it was only after the *coup d'état*, the early arrests of the clergymen, and the burning of holy objects that the idea of martyrdom started to adopt its tragic form.

Firstly, as Danielle Hervieu Leger pointed out, ‘all religion implies that collective memory is mobilized’. Present events are ‘supposed to be contained, potentially at least, in the foundational events’.²⁰ In this sense, contemporary occurrences acquired meaning ‘only insofar as they could be transfigured, ritually and liturgically, into repetitions and reenactments of ancient happenings’.²¹ This is why Catholics constantly refer to Early Christian Times in order to understand the present. At the same time, these foundational events were constantly reinvigorated and

¹⁸ Other three priests were released, and sent to Barcelona, for the same reason. Martín Ibarra Benlloch, *La persecución religiosa en la diócesis de Barbastro-Monzón (1931-1941). Tomo I* (Zaragoza: Fundación Teresa de Jesús, 2011) and Gabriel Campo Villegas, *51 Mártires claretianos de Barbastro. Agosto de 1936* (Madrid : Publicaciones claretianas, 1992), pp. 14-16.

¹⁹ Plácido Gil Imirizaldu, *Iban a la muerte como a una fiesta. Crónica de un testigo* (Pamplona : Monasterio de Leire, 1993) p. 98.

²⁰ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p.124

²¹ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ‘Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time’, *History and Theory*, 41:2 (2002), 149-162, p. 152

made real through liturgical commemoration, devotional readings, etc. This allowed for the establishment of a link between the memory of the early Martyrs' suffering and Christian culture and its continuance into modernity and postmodernity.²² Martyrdom was completely internalised throughout Catholicism to such a degree that it is inherent to its identity.²³

References to the early Christian Martyrs or to the Roman Emperors can be easily found in the Spanish Catholic newspapers in the 1930s. Within this Catholic framework, the religious politics during the Spanish Republic re-enacted the mythical origins of Christianity.²⁴ Presidents of the Republic, such as Manuel Azaña, were introduced as a 'Spanish Nero', and Masons were considered the 'modern Tituses and Neros'.²⁵ Present events were also read as a culmination of attacks on the Catholic Church by heretics, Protestants, *philosophes* or revolutionaries.²⁶ It was seen as part of the eternal struggle between God and Evil throughout human history.

Present events were also read within the framework of a long-term Spanish culture war that embraced every sphere of social life: education, graveyards, gender relationships, public space, and national symbols. This conflict was the result of an intense mobilization and polarization of society regarding religion, not only in the public sphere but also in private life and morality.²⁷ Unlike other cultural wars in Europe during the 1870s, this was an on and off conflict, that lasted until the beginning of the 1930s.²⁸ The pivotal moments of this conflict were the 'Sexenio Democrático' (the "six years of democracy" between

²² Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, *op.cit.*, p. 173

²³ For the identity of the Christian martyrdom see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God. The Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 96 and Michael P. Jensen, *Martyrdom and Identity. The Self on Trial* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).

²⁴ Ramiro Trullén Floría, 'España trastornada. La identidad y el discurso contrarrevolucionario durante la Segunda República y la Guerra Civil', PhD dissertation, University of Zaragoza, 2014.

²⁵ *El Siglo Futuro*, 14.11.1933 and 9.01.1934.

²⁶ For the idea of religious persecution and martyrdom see Francisco Javier Ramón Solans, 'Conjugando los tiempos presentes. Figuras temporales de la contrarrevolución española (1789-1814)', *Historia y Política*, 28:2 (2012), pp. 215-244.

²⁷ Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser, 'The European Culture Wars' in Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (eds), *Culture Wars. Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1-11.

²⁸ Louzao, 'Catholicism Versus Laicism', *op.cit.*, pp. 657-680 and Francisco Javier Ramón Solans, '«El catolicismo tiene masas». Nación política y movilización en España, 1868-1931', *Historia contemporánea*, 51 (2015), pp. 427-454.

1868 and 1874) with religious tolerance and civil marriage; the conflict over education and religious orders during the first decade of the 20th century; and the separation of church and state in 1931.

At a local level, this cultural war became a more material and ritual struggle. Conflicts arose on a local basis over the public authorities' participation in religious ceremonies or religious properties. In the early twentieth century, Barbastro witnessed numerous struggles. The emerging republicanism in the region of El Somontano questioned the role of the religious congregations, the presumed obligations contracted by the civil authorities to attend and fund sacred ceremonies and the ownership of the seminar building, the former monastery of Los Paules.²⁹

After a dormant period, these cultural struggles re-emerged forcibly in the Second Republic (1931-1939) with the separation of Church and State, the secularization of education, the expulsion of the Jesuits, and the implementation of civil marriage and divorce. The struggle comprised every sphere of social life, producing an intense mass mobilization and rhetorical radicalization. The republicans presented themselves as revolutionaries, arousing fear amongst the Catholics that were still terrified by the images of the Russian and Mexican Revolutions.³⁰

In Barbastro, the secularisation of the graveyard, the Bishops resistance to it and the breakdown of this 'sacred territory' to conduct the civil burial of a neighbour of Barbastro generated particularly anxious times. Of particular importance to the situation we are dealing with, was the use made by the city council of the Law on Confessions

²⁹ The building was disentailed and handed over to the City Council in 1842. After, the building started to be used by the Archbishop as the seminar compound. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the republicans claimed its property to allocate a public school and a telegraph office on it.

³⁰ On the fear to the Mexican and Russian Revolution in Spain see Chiaki Watanabe, *Confesionalidad católica y militancia política: la asociación católica nacional de propagandistas y la juventud católica española (1923-1936)* (Madrid: UNED, 2003), pp. 139-146; Rafael Cruz, '¡Luzbel vuelve al mundo! Las imágenes de la Rusia soviética y la acción colectiva en España' in Rafael Cruz and Manuel Pérez Ledesma (eds.), *Cultura y movilización en la España contemporánea*, (Madrid: Alianza, 1997), pp. 273-303 and Hugo García Fernández, 'Historia de un mito político: el «peligro comunista» en el discurso de las derechas españolas', *Historia social*, 51 (2005), pp. 3-20. On the representation of the Second Republic as a Revolution see Rafael Cruz, *En el nombre del pueblo. República, guerra y rebelión en la España de 1936* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2006).

and Religious Congregations to take charge of the legally disputed building of the seminar. In light of the Deans refusal to abandon the compound, the building was taken over and the priests were thrown out.³¹

Therefore, when the war broke out, there were already several unresolved issues around the role of the Church in Barbastro, and some of them directly affected the business of the regular clergymen in this city. The young Benedict Plácido Gil Imirizaldu recalled how his community had taken precautions in March 1936 in case a revolution erupted.³² In the same month, the young monk Aurelio Boix wrote to his friend Patricio Shaughnessy in the International (Benedictine) College of Sant' Anselmo in Rome, informing him that the political situation was very volatile, and that they feared some sort of attack.³³ From July 6, as ordered by Colonel Villalba, the theology students received military training in the bullring of the city with the support of Father Faustino Pérez, leading to a confrontation with the Mayor and adding to the rumour that the convents were hiding weapons.³⁴

Martyrdom, Apocalypses and Prophecy

Before the Civil War, ideas of Martyrdom and Persecution were widely spread among Spanish Catholics, especially among those closer to Carlism (Spanish legitimism) and *Integrismo* (Spanish catholic 'fundamentalism'). Both movements were uniquely linked to the idea of martyrdom and, on March 10, annually commemorated their martyrs, and those who had died in the defense of God, Fatherland, and King.³⁵ Traditionalist and Catholic media, such as *La Hormiga de Oro* or *El Siglo Futuro*, interpreted political changes during the Second Republic within this framework of martyrdom. For example, the Archbishop of Toledo, Pedro Segura, was considered the first martyr of religious persecution. His exile which came about due to his public engagement with the

³¹ Salomón Chéliz, 'Conflictividad e identidad anticlerical en el Somontano', *op.cit.*, pp. 317-332.

³² Gil Imirizaldu, *Iban a la muerte como a una fiesta*, *op.cit.*, pp. 30-31.

³³ Alejandro Pérez Alonso, *Informe sobre los mártires benedictinos del Pueyo, en Barbastro, sacrificados en 1936* (Gijón: La Industria, 1986), pp. 172-176.

³⁴ Ibarra Benlloch, *La persecución religiosa*, *op.cit.*, pp. 162-163.

³⁵ Pedro Rújula, 'Conmemorar la muerte, recordar la historia: la Fiesta de los Mártires de la Tradición', *Ayer*, 51 (2003), pp. 67-85.

Monarchy was seen as ‘persecution or martyrdom that can only be received by those chosen by God’.³⁶ His political commitment was far from being an exception. Due to the co-optation system under the Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, most of the Spanish episcopate was *integrist* and sympathized with Pedro Segura.³⁷

Intransigent medias exhorted Catholics to embrace martyrdom. Catholic journalist Luis Carlos Viada y Lluch asked himself ‘didn’t our Martyrs refuse to sacrifice to God, whatever it takes (and it usually cost their life)?’ He invited the Spanish to leave their houses as the early Christians left their catacombs, ‘willing to confess their faith, ready to spill their blood’.³⁸ Another article invited Catholics to ‘go into combat and to sacrifice themselves for the Fatherland and for God’ singing Hallelujah as the martyrs did on their way to death.³⁹

Even the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931 was read as an apocalyptic sign; a commencement of the period of persecution that would come before the coming of the Kingdom of Christ on Earth. Catholic newspapers and magazines were flooded with news of Prophecies and Marian apparitions. As David Blackbourn pointed out:

There is no doubt that modern apparitions were commonly triggered by larger events: periods of wartime or post-war stress, political conflict, socio-economic crisis. It is also plain that many apparitions had an impact in turn on contemporary political conflicts, above all in helping to foster Catholic identity against the claims of the state or the challenge of anticlericals.⁴⁰

Just nine days after the proclamation of the Second Republic, a group of girls playing outside the church of Torralba de Aragón saw the Virgin Mary in mourning dress. They asked her: ‘why are you here’. She answered: ‘don’t mistreat my son’. People from Torralba thought it was a reference to the crucifix that had been vandalized by local anarchists.

³⁶ *El Siglo Futuro*, 17. 9.1935.

³⁷ Hilari Ragner, *Gunpowder and Incense*, *op.cit*,

³⁸ *La Hormiga de Oro*, 17.9.1931

³⁹ *El Siglo Futuro*, 20.04.1933.

⁴⁰ David Blackbourn, *Marpingen. Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 7.

News of this apparition in Torralba was reported on national media as long as the idea of a divine retribution for Spain's sins was spread.⁴¹

In May 1931 the anticlerical riots in Madrid, Andalusia and Valencia, known as the 'Burning of Convents', fueled these fears. Many acts of penance and expiation were performed during these days. In Zaragoza, on May 11, a woman on her knees entered into the Basilica of our Lady of Pilar praying to god to protect Spain. In a few days, hundreds of women joined this kneeling devotee in her prayer for forgiveness. To the aspiration 'Oh Mary, conceived without sin' they answered 'Save Spain'⁴².

This wave of fear, forgiveness and miracles reached its apogee during the summer of 1931 with the apparitions of the Virgin in Mendigorria and in Ezquioga. On June 4, a group of children saw an unearthly woman in mourning clothes praying before the Sacred Heart in Mendigorria, a small town near Pamplona. As in Apparition of Torralba, the virgin mourned for Spanish rejection of the true religion. Just a few days later, on June 29, two Basque kids reported a Marian apparition in Ezquioga. The shrine became very popular in Spain during the 1930s, attracting crowds of curious and devotees, and some of them even experienced visions of the Virgin. Basques Nationalist and Carlists (Spanish legitimism movement) believed that Ezquioga was a sign that Mary supported them against the Second Republic.⁴³

In October 1931, during the constitutional debate over religion, María Naya made public a political prophecy of María Rafols (1781-1853), co-founder of the Sister of Charity of Saint Anne.⁴⁴ Since March 1926, María Naya founded these carefully forged letters of Mother Rafols. At first María Naya was just looking for the canonization of the founder but, with the advent of the Republic, she made María Rafols declare herself against the Republican Religious persecution. She said that when they find this letter 'there will be persecutors of the religion

⁴¹ *La Época*, 29 April 1931.

⁴² *El Pilar*, 16 Mai 1931 and *El Pilar*, 30 Mai 1931.

⁴³ William A. Christian, *Visionaries. The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 1-40

⁴⁴ On the prophecies see Hilari Ragner, "Beatificacions de Màrtirs de la Guerra Civil", in *Fe i Teologia en la Història. Estudis en honor del Prof. Dr. Evangelista Vilanova* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1997), pp. 513-514; Christian, *Visionaries. The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ*, *op.cit.*, pp. 67-74; and Francisco Javier Ramón Solans, 'Persecución, milagros y profecías', *op.cit.*, pp. 81-98.

and the fatherland in Spain and all over the world'.⁴⁵ This vision linked the present to the French revolutionary wars through the story of a crucifix profaned by the Napoleonic troops and discovered by María Naya. Rafols urged the people to pray to the Virgin of the Pilar and to consecrate themselves to the Sacred Heart.⁴⁶

María Naya found the second and last political prediction on 29 January 1932, just a few days after the removal of the crucifixes from the schools and the expulsion of the Jesuits. She made more accurate references to the present. She said that the letter would be found on 'January 1932' in the times of the Pope that would institute the Feast of Christ the King.⁴⁷ She even dated the beginning of the Religious persecution, in a clear reference to the Second Republic:

For the time will come when my sons will be prosecuted; they will be hesitant and worried because of the fight against these enemies that want to destroy the religion and even to wipe my sweet name from the face of the earth. When this time comes, and it will be manifestly in 1931, I want my sons to raise their spirits and place their trust in me and in my sweet mother.⁴⁸

Through this wave of prophecies, miracles, and expiation, Catholics express their fears and the anguish produced by what they call religious persecution. Furthermore Pius XI endorsed the idea of the Spanish religious persecution in his encyclical *Dilectissima Nobis* (on oppression of the Church of Spain) on 3 June 1933. The Pope put the Spanish legislation on the same level as the Revolutions in Mexico and Russia:

from the foregoing, it appears so evident that the alleged motive was nonexistent, that we can only conclude the persecution against the Church in Spain is not so much due to a misunderstanding of the Catholic Faith and its beneficial institutions, as of a hatred against the Lord and His Christ nourished by groups subversive to any religious and social order, as alas we have seen in Mexico and Russia.

⁴⁵ *Escritos póstumos de la sierva de Dios Madre María Rafols. Documentos hallados el primer viernes de octubre de 1931 y el día 29 de enero de 1932* (Zaragoza : Imprenta Editorial Gambón, 1932), p. 50.

⁴⁶ On the Virgin of the Pilar see Francisco Javier Ramón Solans, *La Virgen del Pilar dice... Usos políticos y nacionales de un culto mariano en la España contemporánea* (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2014).

⁴⁷ *Escritos póstumos de la sierva de Dios, op.cit.*, pp. 54 and 59

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

Their worst fears were confirmed during the Asturian miner's strike of 1934 with the execution of 34 clergymen. It was the first time since 1835 that clergymen were killed in a revolt. Right wing parties celebrated the violent repression of the revolutionary uprising and used the martyrdom of priests to mobilize the population against the Second Republic.⁴⁹ Processions and acts of reparation to Christ the King took place across the Country. The eight Lasallian Brothers killed in the village of Turón became quite famous; crowds of people gathered to see their funeral procession. They were represented 'like true martyrs' that 'were going to give their lives on the altar of their faith'.⁵⁰ These Martyrs of Asturias set an excellent example for the Catholics by accepting their end without fear. The leader of the revolutionaries in Turón describes the following scene of strength:

The brothers and the father listen calmly to the sentence and went with determination to the graveyard. Even if they knew where they were going, they went like a sheep to the slaughter, so much so that, although I am a man of mettle, I was moved by their attitude. It seemed to me that, along the way and while they were waiting in front of the door, they were praying in a low voice.⁵¹

Missionaries slaughtered during the Civil War kept in mind this example and they would even express joy for their martyrdom. These experiences and cultural understandings created a predisposition among Catholics to anticipate a violent anticlerical onslaught and to accept their fate as martyrs. For instance, during the Second Republic, the convent of the Discalced Carmelites from Guadalajara organized drama performances of Carmelites guillotined during the French and the Mexican revolutions. Sister Teresa of the Child Jesus assassinated on 24 July 1936 and one of the first beatified of the Spanish Civil War responded to the claim 'Long live the Republic!', included in the letter of an acquaintance, with the expression 'Long live Christ the King!' She wished that she could one day 'repeat those words on the guillotine'.⁵²

⁴⁹Brian D. Bunk, *Ghosts of Passion. Martyrdom, Gender, and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ Ibid. P. 35

⁵¹ Vicente Cárcel Ortí, *Mártires españoles del siglo XX* (Madrid: Biblioteca de autores cristianos, 1995), p. 219

⁵²Quoted in Ragner, *Gunpowder and Incense, op.cit.*, pp. 31-32.

Performing the martyrdom during the Civil War

Considering the news received from Barcelona and Madrid, in Barbastro, the Colonel Villalba, that initially had supported the insurrection, finally decided to remain loyal to the Republic.⁵³ After the frustrated military coup, on 19 July 1936, high-profile members of the Catholic Church and members of the right wing started to be arrested. In light of the overcrowded prisons, the Director of the Piarist fathers, Eusebio Ferrer, that saved his life thanks to being Argentinian, offered the school as a prison, and from that moment, he played a substantial role as a mediator with the new revolutionary authorities. The Piarist fathers, the Benedictines of El Pueyo and the Bishop settled down in the upper floor of the school. The Claretians moved in to the conference hall, on the ground floor, without the contact of others, scarce air circulation, and exposed to the glances of the militiamen going to the dining room.⁵⁴ Most of them were killed within the first weeks of the Civil War.

Without knowing the exaltation of the martyrdom performed by the Francoist side to legitimize its offensive, the clergymen from Barbastro gladly accepted their appalling and tragic end of Martyrdom. As Plácido Gil, a seminarian survivor from the Benedictine monastery, pointed out some years later ‘although we had not yet shaped our complete understanding of Martyrdom’ with the arrival of the anarchist columns and the bonfire made by the sacred objects of the Church of St. Francis, this idea ‘emerged with such intensity, so as to never fade away’.⁵⁵ As they were informed about the religious executions, ‘all their spiritual tension was channelled towards the preparation of death, aware of their innocence, and considering that their total sacrifice epitomized Christ’s oblation’.⁵⁶

⁵³ For the coup d’ état and the Villalba vacillations see Luis Alfonso Arcarazo García and María Pilar Lorén Trasobares, ‘El impacto militar de la Guerra Civil de 1936-1939’ in Juan Carlos Ferré Castán (ed.), *Barbastro 1833-1984* (Barbastro : Ayuntamiento de Barbastro, 2003), pp. 211-246.

⁵⁴ Ibarra Benlloch, *op.cit.*, p. 229 and Gil Imirizaldu, *op.cit.*, pp. 58-62. For the repression and the organization of the Barbastro rear-guard see Esther Casanova Nuez, ‘Guerra y Revolución, 1936-1938’, in Juan Carlos Ferré Castán (ed.), *Barbastro 1833-1984*, (Barbastro : Ayuntamiento de Barbastro, 2003), pp. 247-272.

⁵⁵ Gil Imirizaldu, *Iban a la muerte como a una fiesta*, *op.cit.*, p. 68

⁵⁶ Gil Imirizaldu, *Iban a la muerte como a una fiesta*, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

The fact that they remained as a group played a vital role in the acceptance of their tragic end. Closed up in overcrowded prisons, without any possibility of privacy, the seminarians were subjected to the watchful eye of their peers and the monks could not show any weakness. Publicly, only joy and exhilarating feelings towards the death could be displayed. Plácido Gil stressed the importance of being all-together in the Piarist School to assume the martyrdom:

The fervour, of course, is contagious, it inspires, it gives strength to the weakest [...] I have no idea how difficult it would have been for me to die in the name of Christ, alone before sharing prison with the other monks [...]. The school of the Christian ideal of martyrdom that, as we will see, overwhelmed the prison, was contagious, creating the desire to give your life for Christ, even at the tender age of 15.⁵⁷

Among the shared group experience, there were Benedictine monks like Aurelio Boix and Faustino Perez Claretian who encouraged their colleagues not to assign or recant in exchange for freedom, ‘all the means were used to overcome the inherent human weakness, through prayers, community life and the hope of eternal life’.⁵⁸ In the farewell engraved in a footstool at the prison, Claretian Faustino Pérez also stressed the importance of the community in accepting their tragic fate: ‘we spent the day in religious silence and preparing ourselves to die; all that can be heard are the murmurs of holy prayers, witnessing our anguishes: if we speak, it is only to encourage ourselves to die as martyrs; if we pray, it is only to forgive our enemies’.⁵⁹ In his letter to the congregation, written on August 13, he insisted on this idea:

We spent the day encouraging ourselves to accept martyrdom and praying for our enemies and for our beloved congregation; when the time comes to appoint the next victim, there is a holy serenity among us and we are eager to hear our name to take a step forward and get into the line of those chosen by God. [...] When they go to the graveyard by truck, we hear them cheering long live Christ the King! The furious mob answered death! death! but nothing frightened them.

⁵⁷ Gil Imirizaldu, *Iban a la muerte como a una fiesta*, op.cit., p. 44.

⁵⁸ Gil Imirizaldu, *Iban a la muerte como a una fiesta*, op.cit., p. 85.

⁵⁹ Museum of the Claretians Martyrs in Barbastro.

They are your sons, beloved congregation, those who, surrounded by guns and riffles dare to shout calmly long live Christ the King.⁶⁰

They even prepared the script for the last moments before the execution. Faustino Pérez was chosen by the inmates to start the cheering for Christ the King, the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Catholic Church. He swore to shout at the top of his lungs and proclaimed: ‘we happily die, no one has fainted or sorrowed’. It is also important to notice that Faustino Pérez signed the text on behalf of the ‘Martyrs of Barbastro’.⁶¹ They were fully embedded in the culture of martyrdom and they defined themselves as martyrs by word and deed.

Up to certain degree, we are facing ‘some sort of «drama»’, ‘a choral performance with many bit-part actors involved, a questioned audience and some kind of improvised script, to which, nonetheless, nobody was totally ignorant’.⁶² In this grievous and bloody performance, the repressors seemed to know the rhetoric of martyrdom as well as the victims. The regulars were subjected to temptations that looked drawn directly from the martyrologies. They were offered women for them to break down their chastity vows and offered freedom if they recanted their Catholic religion and joined the revolution.⁶³ They all knew the tragic ending of this harrowing play. Militiaman José Puyal wrote to his uncles in Barbastro that, once they have conquered Belchite, ‘they all know that we still have to kill the parish priest and two other priest that are going to declare’.⁶⁴ The interdiction of the sacrament of communion during the time of captivity also strengthened this dimension of martyrdom, as it transported the devout to the clandestine masses of the early times of the Church. In their ghoulish inventiveness, the guards lead the inmates to believe that they were going to be executed. They were lined up in a firing squad and they were kept waiting, at least one hour, for the shot.⁶⁵

Having assumed their end, the inmates started to prepare the narrative of their own martyrdom. When the Argentinian priests Hall

⁶⁰ Museum of the Claretians Martyrs in Barbastro.

⁶¹ Museum of the Claretians Martyrs in Barbastro.

⁶² Ledesma Vera, ‘«La santa ira popular» del 36’, *op.cit.*, p. 191.

⁶³ Testimony of Antonio Arraiz Auton, 1 December 1941. Archivo Histórico Nacional, Causa General, Legajo 1409, exp. 1, fol. 102.

⁶⁴ Archivo Histórico Nacional, Causa General, Legajo 1415, exp. 5, fol. 5.

⁶⁵ Campo Villegas, *op.cit.*, pp. 18-24.

and Parussini were released, they took with them some mementos of the executed. Some monks gave them objects stressing ‘look, if you can and you are released, take this with you, that belonged to the Fr. executed this morning, and over time it might serve as a relic, if the Blessed Mother Church comes to recognising them as Martyrs, as we, before God, think they are’.⁶⁶

They also managed to deliver to their families and companions some missives slipped through the prison in several formats and by different means. In the letter to their parents rescued by Luis Brualla, Benedictine Aurelio Boix pointed out how, despite the shooting of sixty people:

Until present, I maintain all the serenity of my personality; even more, I look at the hazardous conjunction that approaches me with sympathy: I consider that offering my life in the name of a holy cause for the sole reason of being religious is a unique grace. If God wishes to deem me worthy of [receiving] such a gift, rejoice, my beloved fathers and brothers, because you will have the glory of having a son and a martyr for his Faith.⁶⁷

For Aurelio Boix, martyrdom was not only a reason of joy for himself, but it also had to be so for his family. Therefore, he expresses to his ‘Venerated Mother: I am delighted just to think the worthiness to which God wants to raise you to, transforming you into the mother of a martyr’.⁶⁸ In a similar way, Luis Escalé wrote to his father on a handkerchief that he should be calm ‘because you have a martyr son’. The martyrdom transcended the individual sphere to become a collective identity that included the family, the religious order and even the Catholic nation.⁶⁹

In the letter addressed to his brother, Aurelio Boix insisted on his happiness, ‘the revolution is winning, the victims are countless, but they are just another pearl in the crown of Christianity, of the religion (...) let me know, otherwise, how can we explain, if not metaphysically, that serenity, that exultation, that eagerness with which they receive

⁶⁶ Campo Villegas, *op.cit.*, p. 36. Some of these objects are nowadays held at the Museum of the Claretians Martyrs in Barbastro.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Pérez Alonso, *op.cit.* p. 180.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁶⁹ Vincent, ‘The Martyrs and the Saints’, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

death with'. For him, the arrival of martyrdom was 'a dream' and because of that, he asked God to be given such a 'grace'.⁷⁰ We find similar expressions of joy in different letters addressed to their families. On August 10, Claretian Ramón Illa wrote to his family, telling them that he is happy to bear the 'palm of Martyrdom' and he asked them to praise the Lord for this grace.⁷¹ In the farewell to their family engraved in a footstool at the prison, they expressed their joy. Manuel Martínez told them: 'we all die happily in Christ and his Church and for the Faith in Spain'. Juan Sánchez Munárriz expressed himself in a similar way: 'my heart is filled with holy joy' and 'I die happily'.⁷²

When the Claretian Faustino Pérez said goodbye to Hall and Parussini, he asked him to: 'make the General know that I will be the captain of the last expedition, and I will encourage everyone. We will go through the entire journey, singing and cheering'.⁷³ The parish priest in Torres de Benerrés (Zaragoza) was then doing his military service in Barbastro when he overheard from a young revolutionary that he had been told that 'when the friars of El Pueyo were instructed by the militiamen to the firing squad, *iban a la muerte como a una fiesta* (they walked towards their death as if to a party)'.⁷⁴

By the end of August 1936, *L'Osservatore Romano* reported on the 'forty Claretians, smiling and singing on their way to the death, singing the praises of Christ the King'. This news was based on the testimonies of Hall and Parussini that have just arrived to Rome after being released in Barbastro. They described the atmosphere of the prison in hagiographical terms: 'we prayed, we often went to Confession as if we were about to die, we read the *Acts of the Martyrs*; we were all filled with an immense joy as we were eagerly waiting to die for Christ'.⁷⁵

By autumn 1936, this image of clergymen singing before their death became an iconic image of Martyrdom during the Spanish Civil War. On September 1936, Bishop of Salamanca, Plá y Deniel issued his famous pastoral letter *The Two Cities*, legitimating the military coup in

⁷⁰ Pérez Alonso, *op.cit.*, p. 183.

⁷¹ Museum of the Claretians Martyrs in Barbastro.

⁷² Museum of the Claretians Martyrs in Barbastro.

⁷³ Campo Villegas, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

⁷⁴ Gil Imirizaldu, *op.cit.*, p. 125.

⁷⁵ *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29.08.1936

religious terms. The tale of the martyrs of Barbastro was described as a ‘spectacle worthy of the heroic first centuries of the Church’ because they ‘went to martyrdom singing the *Miserere*’.⁷⁶

Around the same time, by the end of August 1936, others Martyrs expressed their joy in a similar ways. In Lerida seventy four clergymen executed on the night of August 19 sang the *Ave Maris Stella* and the *Magnificat* and shouted ‘Long Live Christ the King’ on their way to death. We find analogous examples of these songs among the nine Carmelites nuns killed in Cullera (Valencia), the seventy people killed in front of the *Puerta del Cambrón* (Toledo) or the inmates of the prison hulk ‘Rio Segre’.⁷⁷

Lastly, it is important to highlight that this identity of martyrdom was seen as something apolitical, the religious persecution was the consequence of the simple fact of being religious, as those exerted in the Diocletian times. For instance, the Claretian José Bregaret wrote down before passing away ‘I die innocent; I am not affiliated to any political party; our rules forbid us to do so; we comply with any legally established power’. However, the same writing was headed by the claim ‘¡Viva Cristo Rey!’ and stressed that he was offering his life in the name of ‘the Congregation and Spain’. In a stool located in the room where they were guarded, hand written, the Claretian Manuel Martínez said, ‘we have not been found to have made any political offense and without any form of a trial, we happily die in the name of Christ, his Church and the Spanish faith, for all the martyrs’.⁷⁸ In the official farewell of the forty Claretian missionaries, written up in a chocolate wrapper and saved by the Argentinians Hall and Parussini, claims to the ‘Catholic Spain’ (José Ormo), to the ‘Pilarica, saint patron of my town’, ‘Catholic Catalonia’ (Francisco Roura), and ‘Catholic Barbastro’ (Manuel Buil) could be read.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Quoted in Antonio Montero Moreno, *Historia de la persecución religiosa en España, 1936-1939* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1961), p. 690.

⁷⁷ Antonio Montero Moreno, *op.cit.*, pp. 243, 246, 309 and 510

⁷⁸ The idea pointing out that they are killed only because of their religious beliefs is also observed in the text found in the pocket of the Salvador Piegem corpse, that highlighted « Nos matan por odio a la religión » [They kill us because they hate the religion]. Museum of the Claretians Martyrs in Barbastro.

⁷⁹ Museum of the Claretians Martyrs in Barbastro.

Therefore, these kinds of statements around ‘Catholic Spain’ demonstrates the will of Catholicism to regain control over collective life, transforming its moral into the inspirational force of the legislative framework, if not into the legislative framework itself. They embodied the grief of the Catholics when they envisaged their religion disbanded by the secularising policies. Notwithstanding this, for the Catholic Church this commitment did not entail getting involved in politics, but rather responding to the interference of civil power as a spiritual matter. In fact, as Mirabeau pointed out during the French revolution, the biggest trouble is that ‘the dissidents call «spiritual» what the Assembly calls «temporal»’.⁸⁰ Furthermore, evoking highly politicised devotions, such as the Sacred Heart and Christ the King, was not a harmless issue and let alone after the strong authoritarian nature that both cults acquired during the pontificate of Pius XI and the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.⁸¹

This political dimension helps us to better understand the experienced moments before the shooting. When the Barbastro missionaries were boarded on to a truck, to be taken away and executed, missionaries cried ‘Long Live Christ the King!’ and they started to sing, even when they were beaten up with rifles to be forced to shut up. The same claim was repeated before the firing squad.⁸² Similarly to the ‘Long Live the Republic!’ repeated by those executed at the other side of the front, ‘Long Live Christ the King!’ became a symbol; the last political expression in light of the approaching bullet.

Agency, Pain and Death.

Learn now to die to the world, that then you may
begin to live to Christ

Thomas de Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*.

⁸⁰ «Car toute la difficulté, s’il pouvoit y en avoir, seroit que les dissidens appellent *spirituel*, ce que l’assemblée appelle *temporel* ». These are the words of Mirabeau during the 1st of January of 1791 session regarding the priests’ oath included in *Collection complete des travaux de M. Mirabeau l’Ainé, à l’Assemblée Nationale. Tome V*, Paris, 1792, p. 248.

⁸¹ Daniele Menozzi, ‘La dottrina del regno sociale di Cristo tra autoritarismo e totalitarismo’ in Daniele Menozzi and Renato Moro (ed.) *Cattolicesimo e totalitarismo. Chiese e culture religiose tra le due guerre mondiali (Italia, Spagna, Francia)* (Brescia : Morcelliana, 2004), pp. 17-55, p. 54.

⁸² Campo Villegas, *op.cit.*, pp. 47-50.

For a large part of the western population, the secularisation of death implied the promise of a life hereafter banished, as well as the loss of the core values explaining the tragic fate of mankind. Even though, the martyrs and the heroes have not disappeared completely, the 'modern nationalism can only promise symbolic immortality through the secular mechanisms of memory'.⁸³ However, vis-à-vis this secular interpretation of death, other religious views of life, to which death was only the beginning, have endured.

The Barbastro Martyrs case lets me assert the existence of a Catholic agency that transformed death and suffering into redeeming factors and performative acts. This martyrdom culture was embedded in Spanish Catholicism prior to the coup d'état and the propaganda used by Francoism. The grief became the ground to cultivate individual virtue, as well as an agent to foster social change. In the sacrifice, it was the compensation of the Spanish reconquest for Catholicism. The suffering moved from being a passive experience to be an active practice.⁸⁴ Death became a political declaration; the sorrow grew into a public rhetoric. The Martyrs wanted not only to proof their religious faith, but also to regain the public space for it. They embodied the pain and the mourning of all the Catholics in Spain.

This predisposition to martyrdom was translated into a highly ritualised suffering and an on-going preparation for death. All the missionaries' gestures during their captivity were devoted to complying with the hagiographic canon and to epitomize the Passion of Christ. Under the control of their fellows, there was no room for feebleness, only the euphoria of dying in the name of Christ. During their confinement, the martyrdom performance was accomplished with the intervention of the executors that tempted them and verified their strength trying to push them to renege on their faith, as if their lives were embodying those of the Martyrs. Within this grim performance, the indifference of the Martyrs constituted their biggest triumph.

⁸³ Beit-Hallahmi B. 'The return of martyrdom: Honour, death and immortality', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 4:3 (2003), pp. 11-34, p. 25.

⁸⁴ Talal Asad, 'Agency and pain: an exploration', *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1:1 (2008), pp. 29-60, p. 43.

One can legitimately wonder if there were also moments of doubt or weakness that were not included in these self-writings. Besides this rhetoric of a joyful martyrdom, we could probably affirm that they were afraid, sad or even angry during their captivity. But it is unquestionable that they tried to show strength and conviction in their last words, they wanted to communicate their willingness to become martyrs. In doing so, they performed martyrdom during their own martyrdom. Finally, they were also speaking to an audience, making one last statement. 'Martyrdom is not simply an action. Martyrdom requires audience (whether real or fictive), retelling, interpretation, and world- and meaning-making activity'.⁸⁵ The theatre act closed with their very last political declaration: Long Live Christ the King!

⁸⁵ Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, *op.cit.*, p. 34