



Prot. N. 00824/15

 Curia Generalis
Fratrum Minorum
Capuccinorum

READY TO GIVE IT ALL

Circular Letter on the Occasion of the Beatification of twenty-six Capuchins in Barcelona on 21 November 2015

TO ALL THE BROTHERS OF THE ORDER
TO THE CAPUCHIN POOR CLARES

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

News of Christians being killed reaches us almost daily, especially from the Middle East, just because of their belonging to the Christian religion. These events horrify us. We ask ourselves how it is possible that such things still happen in our days. It is something truly unacceptable, but perhaps we forget too easily that something similar happened, for example, in Spain, less than one hundred years ago and that among the victims of that persecution many Capuchin friars also figured.

2. The Order participates with and is very close to the friars of the Capuchin Province of Catalonia in the celebration of the beatification of twenty-six of its sons, killed in odium fidei during the civil war (1936-1939). This coming November 21 in the Cathedral of Barcelona at 11:30 a.m., the Church will proclaim blessed Br. Frederic of Berga and twenty-five companions in martyrdom. Let us rejoice and give thanks to the Lord!

The historical context

3. The Province of Catalonia held the provincial chapter from July 13-16, 1936. Already during that

chapter there was talk of the possibility that some kind of revolt could blow up, with the burning of churches and killing of priests, as had already happened in other places. They sought to safeguard the most precious furnishings and holy things with friends. Each friar, then, had a list of people close to the friars, ready to receive them. Thus, when the persecution began, right away after the Civil War exploded, the friars dispersed and were received by family and friends. The places where the friars found refuge could give safety for some days or at most a week. It was thought that this could be the length of the troubles; certainly not the two and a half years, as the duration of the hiding, persecution, and the hunting for priests and religious would last.

4. It was not the authorities of the Republic that persecuted the friars. In those first months of the war, the republican rear guard remained under the power of revolutionary anarchist committees which made themselves masters of the streets without anyone being able to stop them. Our friars, in general, had always maintained an attitude of dialogue with the Republic. Furthermore, in Catalonia they were particularly loved for their friendliness with “la Renaixença,” the movement of the end of the XIX century and of the beginning of the XX that sought to rediscover and give new value to the Catalan identity. Nevertheless, this very thing was aggravation for some revolutionaries,

who considered the Republic and the love of one's own land and culture as bourgeois characteristics that had to be uprooted just like religion.

5. The persecution was not simple acts of uncontrolled persons. There were very precise instructions to find and suppress the religious. Many private houses were searched. Some of these martyrs had to flee from one house to another, without being able to find a secure refuge. In the case of Br. Martí of Barcelona, an historian who studied at Leuven and author of studies on St. Francis and Raymond Lull, the revolutionaries captured his whole family and, under threat of death, made them reveal where he could be found. Others, as Br. Vicenç de Besalú, had to sleep out in the open for many days.

6. The list of Capuchin friars who martyrdom has been recognized and who will be beatified:

Fr. Frederic of Berga (Martí Tarrés Puigpelat)
Fr. Modest of Mieres (Joan Bover Teixidó)
Fr. Zacaries of Llorenç del Penedés (Sebastià Sonet Romeu)
Fr. Remigi of Papiol (Esteve Santacana Armengol)
Fr. Anselm of Olot (Laurentí Basil Matas)
Fr. Benigne of Canet de Mar (Miquel Sagré Fornaguera)
Fr. Josep of Calella de la Costa (Joan Vila Colomé)
Fr. Martí of Barcelona (Jaume Boguñá Casanova)
Fr. Rafael Maria of Mataró (Francesc de Paula Soterias Culla)
Fr. Agustí of Montclar de Donzell (Josep Alsina Casas)
Fr. Doroteu of Vilalba dels Arcs (Jordi Sampé Tarragó)
Fr. Alexandre of Barcelona (Jaume Nájera Gherna)
Fr. Tarsici of Miralcamp (Josep Vilalta Saumell)
Fr. Vincenç of Besalú (Julià Gebrat Marcé)
Fr. Timoteu of Palafrugell (Jesús Miquel Girbau)
Br. Miquel of Bianya (Pelai Ayats Vergés)
Br. Jordi of Santa Pau (Manuel Collellmir Senties)
Br. Bonaventura of Arroyo Cerezo (Tomás Díaz Díaz)
Br. Marçal of Penedès (Carles Canyes Santacana)
Br. Eudald of Igualada (Lluís Estruch Vives). The youngest at just eighteen years.
Br. Paciá Maria of Barcelona (Francesc Maria Colomer Presas)

Br. Àngel of Ferreries (Josep Coll Martí)
Br. Cebrià of Terrassa (Ramon Gros Ballvé)
Br. Eloi of Bianya (Joan Ayats Plantalech)
Br. Prudenci of Pomar de Cinca (Gregori Charlez Ribera)
Br. Félix of Tortosa (Joan Bonavida Dellà)

A closer look at some of these friars

7. **Br. Frederic of Berga**, who is the first on the list, had been guardian, missionary in Central America, and Provincial for a triennium. The bishop of Vic had said of him that he was "the most apostolic preacher" in his diocese. At the beginning of the revolution he was guardian in the friary of Arenys. After hiding himself for some days in the mountains, he arrived in Barcelona and participated actively in the clandestine network of the Church that was forming. Shortly before death, in February 1937, he calculated that he had distributed Holy Communion, always in danger for his life, about 1200 times. He celebrated the Eucharist in private homes, where small groups of the faithful gathered, making use of the permission of the Holy See to celebrate the Mass without decorations or sacred vessels. He was discovered in the search of a house where he was staying.

8. **Br. Eloy of Bianya** is perhaps the most beloved figure of the whole group of martyrs. He was the brother porter in the friary of Sarrià. The father of a current friar, who knew him, has said that he was "the man who said least to me and communicated to me the most." He was welcomed into the house of Mr. Maurici Serrahima, a neighbor of the friary, who in his memoir left this beautiful description: "Much is said of Br. Eloy, and with reason. [...] He had on his face a smile that was nice and at the same time sweetly ironic. [...] He was a pleasant man to see and to get to know. The sympathies that he awakened at the door of the friary were immense, and everyone knew him. He smiled and knew how to make a joke at the right time. But in him there had to be a very intense interior life, from which must have come his composure in everything. He wasn't bothered and didn't make noise. He didn't speak and they didn't speak to him. And when he did speak, he did so with a gentleness that wanted only to be discreet and often made an impression. Not a word of complaint or of protest. During his stay in our house, he never spoke of revenge nor even of getting justice. 'These men (he said, referring to those who had thrown themselves into the madness of fires and murder) are good people."

They have suffered much, they have passed through distress and humiliation. I am sure that they have been faithful to their wives, have struggled for their families. What they are doing now is their first wickedness. And they do it because they are convinced that by doing so they will improve the lot of the poor. We will meet them in heaven....' I cannot be sure that he said these words to the letter. But with certainty I know that this was what he meant to say when he spoke to me." Br. Eloy was arrested in the railroad station together with three other friars when they were trying to travel to their hometown.

9. Among the young students that were killed we can highlight **Br. Marçal de Vilafranca**, the youngest of four brother friars. He was nineteen years old. After two searches by the revolutionaries who were looking for his older brothers, the family decided to move to another neighborhood, but a neighbor followed them and reported them to the committee of the area and they were arrested. Say goodbye to his mother, Br. Marçal said, "Mamma, don't suffer for the sake of what could happen to me. My conscience is in peace with God."

10. **Br. Modest of Mieres** and **Br. Ángel of Ferrieres** were an older theologian and a young lay friar who took refuge in the house of another friar, near the friary of Sarrià. The house was subject to several searches, during which the friars passed themselves off as members of the family. Br. Ángel could have been able to escape, but he did not want to abandon Br. Modest and another friar who was sick and bedridden. Br. Modest composed a prayer that they recited together every day: "In this moment and certainly in the hour of death, if I should find myself in the right circumstance, with the help of the divine grace that I humbly trust you will grant me, I accept, O my God, willingly, in a way that is pleasing, humbly and with whole heart, the death that you wish to send to me. Whatever it should be, I unite my death to the most holy death of our Lord Jesus Christ, that in this moment is being renewed in the holy sacrifice of the Mass, and so united I offer my death to you, O my God, beseeching you humbly that you would condescend to accept it kindly, despite my wretchedness and misery, joined as it is to the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the remission of all my faults and sins, and of the faults and sins of all people." In the end, reported on by some neighbors, they were arrested and executed in the neighborhood of the friary.

11. Some of the new martyrs were missionaries: Br.

Anselm of Olot and Br. Benigne of Canet were in Caquetá (Colombia); Br. Zacaries of Llorenç finished his studies in Pasto (Colombia) and was ordained priest in Bogotá; Br. Remigi of Papiol was in Manila (Philippines), in the vicariate of Bluefields (Nicaragua) and in Costa Rica; and Br. Frederic of Berga was in Costa Rica.

12. Of the twenty-six that will be beatified on this occasion, seventeen died between July and August. After that the persecution began to lose intensity. The last to die was Br. Frederic of Berga on February 16, 1937. In May of 1937 the government of the Republic took control of the situation in Barcelona and the killings practically ceased. Nevertheless, the Church continued to live in hiding until the end of the war in 1939.

The role of family and friends

13. Together with the heroism of the martyrs, it is important to note that of the families that welcomed them and others that survived the persecution, in their houses, at the risk of their own lives. There were cases of people killed for having received a priest or religious into their house, though not among those who took in our friars. In some cases the members of the families that received the friars were certainly arrested for some hours or days, but in the end they were freed. At first, these families were of people very close to the friaries. But later the friars had to have recourse to other friends or friends of friends, who also took them in generously, for love of the friars and of the Church, giving a welcome despite the awareness of the risk of life that went with it. Sometimes in these families the children were taught to call a friar 'grandfather' or 'uncle' whenever a stranger would come. There was a case in which an anarchist leader took a friar under his protection after he was arrested for the simple fact of praying his rosary discretely in a public place.

Ready to give it all

14. These brothers of ours were aware of what could happen to them. They sought protection here and there, keeping in mind what Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew: "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next" (10: 23) but when the moment of trial presented itself seriously, they did

not turn around but gave their highest witness. I ask myself if we today as Capuchin friars have the same awareness and willingness to give, if necessary, our life for Christ, should what Hans Urs von Balthasar called “the serious case”¹ present itself.

15. It seems right to me to ask this question, for all of us can run afoul of the danger denounced by St. Francis in Admonition VI:

“Let all of us, brothers, consider the Good Shepherd Who bore the suffering of the cross to save His sheep. The Lord’s sheep followed Him in tribulation and persecution, in shame and hunger, in weakness and temptation, and in other ways;

¹ Cordula oder der Ernstfall, Johannes, 1987

and for these things they received eternal life from the Lord. Therefore, it is a great shame for us, the servants of God, that the saints have accomplished great things and we want only to receive glory and honor by recounting them.”²

16. Let us rejoice in the gift of these twenty-six new martyrs that the Church proclaims and with the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin, Patron of the Order, let us ask for ourselves, Capuchin friars, a renewed commitment to following Christ in joy, announcing the mercy and the peace of God.

² FA:ED I:131

Fraternally!


Br. Mauro Jöhri
General Minister OFMCap

Rome, 4 October 2015

The Solemnity of St. Francis of Assisi

