

The Spanish Civil War

I am Fr. Juan Postius, a Claretian missionary. I experienced and suffered firsthand the events of the civil war that broke out in Spain in July 1936. I want to help you understand, in a few words, what occurred here in Barbastro in the summer of 1936. It is not an easy task after almost 90 years; how could such fury and hatred against priests, religion, and everything that represented religion, unheard of in our history, come about? How can we explain this iconoclastic and vandalistic whirlwind that tore down altars, altarpieces, and temples, burned images, staged gross pantomimes with sacred ornaments, and eliminated all traces of Catholic worship in the Republican zone? These were not isolated cases, and the perpetrators were not unbelievers or atheists but Catholics to a greater or lesser degree. What happened so that more than 7,000 people, including bishops, priests, and Religious and lay Catholics in the Republican zone, were killed for being mere Catholics? What happened in those days of August 1936 in Barbastro and other places cannot be understood in all its historical depth and breadth without referring to a long process of misunderstandings, confrontations, and hatred between Spaniards in which religious conception was a fundamental ingredient.

With the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Republic, the confrontation between two opposing ways of understanding Spain came to the forefront. For the radical Republicans and left-wing groups, the dominant role of the Church in the life of Spain was the fundamental cause of social, political, and economic backwardness. For Catholics, Spain could only be understood from the Catholic unity of the nation. To be Spanish and to be Catholic was the same thing. I must say that when in April 1931, the Monarchy fell and the Republic was proclaimed, the Spanish Church, in its great majority, accepted the new system without excessive mistrust. The Spanish Bishops accepted the new regime without enthusiasm but with sincerity and expectation. The Holy See hastened to recommend submission to the established powers.

On May 5, 1931, I wrote to the President of the Republic to express our respect and allegiance to him in the name of the Congregation. Four days later, my good friend Niceto Alcalá Zamora responded me, indicating the extraordinary delight the adherence I pledged to him aroused in the Government. This attitude contrasts with the secularism of the Parliament and the anticlericalism of the street. Less than a week after my letter, convents, and Churches were burning for three days in Madrid, Valencia, Alicante, and

Seville... without the government lifting a finger to control the outrages. No Church or convent was worth the life of a Republican, as Azaña declared at the time.

The Second Republic could have been a propitious moment to attempt Spain's cultural, economic, social, and political modernization without traumatic ruptures. Once again, there was lack of dialogue and tolerance on all sides. Unfortunately, the Republic did not know how to take advantage of the excellent disposition of the majority of the Bishops, supported and encouraged by Rome, and dedicated itself to the promulgation of legislations that attempted to uproot ecclesial presence in the society, thus provoking the resentment of sincerely republican Catholics, beginning with the President of the Republic himself, and preparing the atmosphere that would inevitably lead to the civil war.

These troubled waters came from afar. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, a robust anticlerical sentiment was growing among Spaniards, fed by two distinct and independent currents but convergent in their aims. On the one hand, a secularist intellectual ideology despised the Church as the enemy of all forms of progress. The Church in Spain was not a force for change but a deterrent and a hindrance. On the other hand, there were the socialist and anarchist movements, which saw the Church as legitimizing the established order because of its alliance with the economic oligarchy. This current was very emotional and passionate, capable of violently raging against everything that could represent the Church: people, places, or religious symbols. Both currents converged after the triumph of the Popular Front in 1936.

I believe that many politicians hid their ineptitude in solving the significant problems of the state with easy recourse to anti-clericalism. Faced with people needing social and economic reforms, they presented the Church and the clergy as the main obstacle to be eliminated. There was an editorial avalanche that made religion and its ministers the target of their fury with titles such as “¿Qué haría usted con la gente de sultana?” (What would you do with the men of the cloth?); “Origen nefando de los conventos” (Loathsome origin of the convents) and other overtly anti-religious editorials such as “Dios, padre pedrusco o Jesucristo, mala persona” (“God, rough stone father, or Jesus Christ – bad person”). They even created a publishing house dedicated to publishing anti-clerical and anti-religious works: La Biblioteca de los sin Dios (The Library of the Godless).

As you can see, the civil war between these two ways of understanding Spain had begun long before mid-July 1936. The ideological extremes of both warring sides used

the same language. If the newspaper “Solidaridad Obrera” launched the slogan: “The Church must be uprooted from our soil. The bishops and cardinals must be executed”; the Falangist bulletin – “No Importa” concluded laconically: “Ya no hay soluciones pacíficas (“There are no more peaceful solutions”). Looking back after almost 90 years, it is difficult to say whether that bloody catastrophe - a war between brothers of the same nation - could have been avoided. After July 18, 1936, neither the State had managed to subdue the military coup nor had the military rebels been able to take over the government quickly. The support of the trade union organizations for the government of the Republic meant that the coup did not triumph everywhere. The consequences of this popular support were felt. The Republican government decided to give arms to the people. This favored the uncontrolled, indiscriminate, and bloody repression that began on July 19 without any control by the central government. This clarifies many things apparently inexplicable.

The price paid by the Church was immense: in the diocese of Barbastro alone, almost 90% of its clergy were murdered. In six other dioceses, the number of victims exceeds or is around half of the local clergy. Fire devoured thousands of Churches. Works of art, libraries, and religious ornaments of immense value were destroyed. From Sunday, July 19, public worship disappeared in the Republic-controlled area.

I should point out that the Church also had its share of responsibility in the conflict. Its conscience concerning social justice was minimal. Before 1936 some voices had pointed out the distancing of the Church from the working classes in the cities. Our young Religious, like the vast majority of the murdered Religious, were as poor, if not poorer, than those who executed them. The oft-repeated fact that it would be enough for them to leave their cassocks to save their lives does not speak of resentment against them but against what they represented.

Some have argued that the widespread hatred against the Church was due to its complicity with the military coup. Some explain the massacres of priests and Religious as retaliation for the brutalities committed by Franco's troops. There is no evidence that the ecclesiastical hierarchy participated in the military uprising. Initially, the rebels did not invoke religious motives but strictly political and social ones. A good part of the military rebels was not characterized precisely by their piety or ecclesiastical sympathies, while on the Republican side, there was no lack of sincerely Catholic soldiers. Similar atrocities were also committed in the rebel zone. Falangist groups carried out reprisals with methods identical to those of the anarchist militia. Franco's army was not deterred

by the cassock when it came to executions, although they were isolated cases. The most notable and controversial was that of the 14 Basque nationalist priests (one of them a Claretian, Fr. Otano).

However, the massacres of priests and Religious in Barbastro and other places occurred in the first weeks of the war, when the lack of communications made it impossible to know what was happening in the region. Therefore, it is impossible to postulate retaliation as the explanation in the immense majority of the cases. Amongst the extremist Republicans and the socialist or the anarchist trade unions, the anti-religious decisions were already taken long before July 1936.

As you may have noticed, this is not a story of good guys and bad guys. Jacques Maritain rightly described our civil war as a collective sin. The more we distance ourselves from 1936, the more evident this diagnosis of the French philosopher who experienced the war becomes. One of the victims of that violent repression asked himself: "Do they reject the ministers because of Jesus, or do they reject Jesus because of his ministers? The first hypothesis is very flattering, but the second is also possible".

In the complexity that we discover in analyzing the historical facts of the Spanish civil war and the persecution against the Church and its members in many of the areas under Republican control, there emerges, however, a clear testimony, authentically Christian and, therefore, of permanent relevance and interpellation. These are the words of the young martyr of Barbastro, Faustino Pérez, in the name of his brothers a few hours before being executed: "may the blood that comes out of our wounds not be vengeful blood".

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