

## Spanish Martyrs

[*Editor's Note:* From September 1942 until December 1942, Brother John Perz, SM, of happy memory, offered four articles on the Spanish Martyrs for *The Apostle of Mary*. We reprint these articles so we can appreciate what the political and social climate of Spain was. These were written only six years after the deaths of our martyrs. We print here only the September, October, and December 1942 articles. They concern the martyrs of Ciudad Real and those of Madrid. They also provide a summary explanation of the persecution of the Church and the causes of the Civil War. The November issue deals with some of the brothers who were killed but have not been judged as yet to have died for the faith.]

September 1942

“Our Marianist Martyrs”

With the publication of a 75-page booklet, *Testigos de Cristo*, we have the first detailed account of the fifteen Brothers of Mary who were killed by the Reds during Spain's recent fratricidal war. We pass along this news to our readers whom we know to be interested in these new Marianist Martyrs of God's Church.

It is difficult for us in this country to understand the fury and fanaticism of the communist “militiamen” in their determination to exterminate both things and persons connected with religion. Churches and convents were everywhere set ablaze. Those that remained were put to ignominious uses. With diabolical cunning, the government, the radical labor groups, the Red militia, and ignorant and fanatical members of the lowest strata of society began to comb every nook and cranny in their feverish search for priests, religious, pious laymen and women, and other “fascists.” The possession of a rosary or medal incurred the death penalty. Indeed, even soft hands, clean feet, and the wearing of a collar and tie were sufficient to stamp an individual as an enemy of the proletariat. The number of churchmen and churchgoers shot or slain with the most fiendish cruelty far outnumbered the victims of the bloody battlefields in the fratricidal struggle.

In such an arbitrary and summary manner were these executions carried out that scarcely anything is known about the fifteen martyred brothers; little is known of the exact circumstances surrounding their deaths. Of three religious only, do we have precise information as to the place of their execution and the manner and place of their burial.

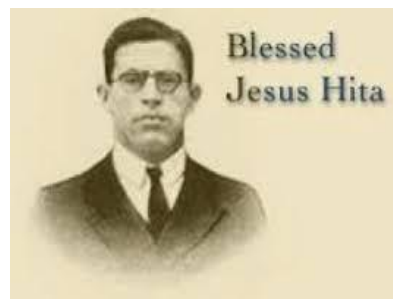
Some religious orders counted their losses by the hundreds. The Society of Mary fared much better in losing only fifteen brothers. This was due to several causes. A good number of the schools conducted by the Marianists are situated in territory that immediately fell into the hands of the Nationalists, who treated the religious with great consideration. In fact the religious enjoyed a liberty far beyond the restricted

freedom and cold tolerance accorded them during the liberal monarchy, which suffered from Free Mason control, and from the rule of anticlerical politicians.

Of those religious who had assignments in territories that remained under the rule of the Red government, many had fortunately left before July 18, for a summer's rest or for the annual retreat, and the advent of the Nationalist movement found them either in districts where the White forces gained immediate control or in the Basque country and in the province of Santander to the north. Here the local leaders were allied with the central government of Madrid because of promises of autonomy for the two regions, and several brothers suffered long periods of imprisonment under incredibly harsh conditions. Nevertheless, the majority of them, although enduring great hardships, lived in precarious safety.

Only the communities of Valencia and parts of those of Madrid and Ciudad Real were exposed to all the fury of the Red terror.

In this issue and the three which will follow, *The Apostle of Mary* will give to its readers an account of these men who died at the hands of their fellow citizens, even through the treachery of former students.



Brother Jesús Hita, SM, the first of the brothers whose stories will be related in these pages, was a member of the Madrid community. At the end of the regular school term, he was sent to Ciudad Real to teach during the summer. Recognizing the anti-religious character of the leftists from the very outbreak of the war, he left the school and took up his refuge in a boarding house, where he was joined by two Passionists, a priest of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary, and the chaplain to the Franciscan Sisters. On September 25, a well-known and much feared communist accompanied by several other militiamen “arrested” all five of them and drove them off in an automobile. When the communist returned to confiscate their possessions, he was questioned by the owner as to the whereabouts of the men he had taken. He replied: “We have sent them to America. What specimens you had in your house! They were all very dangerous fellows.” As nothing whatsoever can be discovered of their fate after leaving the house, the probability is that all were taken out and shot immediately—a not uncommon fate for religious and priests in those days.

The following account that was given by Dona Romona Navelon, the owner of the house in which he spent his last days, tells the story of Brother Jesús Hita; it is a real inspiration.

Don Jesús lived at all times like a saint and really longed for martyrdom. He came to live at my house on July 23 and spent almost all his time in prayer and penance. He left his room only at mealtime. When his companions invited him to seek a little distraction, he excused himself explaining he had to prepare himself to die. He spoke very little. In the morning he would take his rosary from the place of concealment in the wall and also a small prayer book that contained a novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He spent long periods of time on his knees in prayer while in the retirement of his room. We often found him prostrate in prayer. At two o'clock he would leave his room to take some food; after listening to the news report on the radio he would spend a short time studying on a map of Spain the progress of the Nationalist operations. After lunch he usually gave an hour to conversation with all the guests of the house. During the afternoon he made the Way of the Cross. Toward evening all the religious joined in a series of spiritual exercises. With arms outstretched and on their knees, they made a novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and another to Blessed John of Avila,<sup>1</sup> the patron of the province. These novenas were frequent, for they had to be prepared; death hovered continually around them, and they were uncertain of the day they would leave this world. Having finished their prayers in common, they retired to their rooms for their private devotions. After supper, Don Jesús again consulted his map to compare it with the latest news. According to the testimony of his roommate, he slept very little, using the hours of darkness for praying instead. He went to confession twice a week, and before retiring each evening he asked the blessing of one of the Passionist Fathers.

Thus prepared, Brother Jesús Hita certainly must have been ready to meet his namesake, the Lord Jesus.



October 1942  
“Marianist Witnesses of Christ”

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<sup>1</sup> [He was canonized a saint in 1970 by Pope Paul VI.]

In the preceding issue of *The Apostle of Mary*, we offered a short account of the last days of Don Jesús Hita, one of the fifteen Brothers of Mary whose lives were sacrificed on the altar of God and country in the course of the recent Spanish Civil War. Before proceeding to relate the story of the remaining confessors of the faith, it might be well to give a brief preview of the events that led up to that tragic period in Spanish history.

With the establishment of the *Spanish Republic of the Workers of All Classes* (April 14, 1931), there began a progressively pronounced persecution of the Church. Thus, the republican Constitution decreed the separation of Church and State; prohibited State or local governmental assistance to the Church or to religious institutions or associations; demanded the dissolution of certain religious orders, threatened the very existence of the remainder, and forbade them all to engage in the work of education. The radical followers of the government gave a riotous approval of these measures by the wanton destruction of churches, convents, and schools.

These intolerable conditions were considerably modified by the elections of November 12, 1933, which returned a parliamentary majority of conservatives. Dissatisfied with this result, the Leftists determined to produce conditions that would precipitate another election which, in the words of one of their leaders (F. Largo Caballero), they intended to win by ballots or by bullets. In February 1936, they regained power through an election that President N. Alcala Zamora called “the stolen election” because it was won by violence and fraud and not by the vote of a majority of the electorate.

The new government majority was formed by the left republican, radical-socialist, socialist, syndicalist, anarchist, and communist parties. The communist party, which rapidly increased in power, began immediately to put into effect the program of Moscow by stirring up violence and by promoting disorder. Controlled by fanatical mobs, the government lent a deaf ear to the warnings of patriotic statesmen who protested in vain against the disregard of all law and order on the part of the votaries of the radical parties. Recourse to constitutional means to cure the ills of the fatherland having proved of no avail, a resort to arms was found necessary to restore order and tranquility.

The leaders of the uprising of July 18, 1936, claimed that their “movement of national salvation” was not only a patriotic revolution but also a crusade for the restoration of a truly Catholic Spain. The government and its “loyalist” followers answered with a religious persecution so terrible that beside it the horrors of the French Revolution take on the appearance of a minor tumult. It is with good reason, therefore, that the Spanish bishops could affirm that “in the history of Western peoples, there is on record, no such phenomenon of collective savagery, nor any cumulus of transgression produced in a few weeks, and committed against the fundamental rights of God, of society, and of persons.”

In the light of these events, it seems rather astonishing that only fifteen of our brothers lost their lives. As soon as the government decreed the confiscation of the Colegio del Pilar, one of the glories of Madrid, our religious immediately sought shelter elsewhere. Three of them, Brothers Florencio Arnaiz, Sabino Ayastuy, and Joaquín Ochoa took up residence in a boarding house of the vicinity. This establishment was conducted by two sisters, Dona Eladia and Dona Pilar Bazan, who ran great risks by sheltering such guests, because anyone who was discovered giving aid or comfort to priests or religious was exposed to the rigors of the death penalty. After several weeks, the brothers were joined in their place of retreat by two Dominicans. The five religious had spent about six weeks together in almost continuous prayer, when at about five o'clock in the afternoon of September 13, four Red militiamen suddenly broke into the house. After searching the premises thoroughly, they ordered the five religious to follow them to a waiting automobile in which they drove away accompanied by three more militiamen. The next day the bodies of the religious were recovered in the vicinity of El Pardo, a suburb of Madrid, by the sexton of the local cemetery, who left an account of the circumstances under which he found them, of the objects discovered on their persons, and of the manner of their burial.

The disjointed account of the almost illiterate sexton contains the following items: the bodies of the five men were found on kilometer 7, on the right side of the Madrid Road, near the Bridge of San Fernando; they were tied together; they wore secular garb; on the bodies were found several crucifixes and medals, a baptismal certificate, a military form, an identification card, four small sums of money ranging from 14 to 27 cents in amount, a watch of little value, a key ring with three keys.

The sexton's account ends as follows: "They were photographed by the Office of Public Security. I buried them in a large grave in the center (of the cemetery) and there were fourteen and five equals nineteen and it was full. All the things that I found I handed in at the town hall."

The photographs of the slain religious were later located in the judicial office of the town of El Pardo. They show that the features of the dead were in a rather good state of preservation before burial.

A medal found on the dead was that of Our Lady of Aranzazu, patroness of Guipuzcoa, the native province of Don Sabino Ayastuy (1911-36). The condition of the medal shows that it must have been worn from infancy by Don Sabino. His mother had instilled in him the tender Marian devotion that distinguished him during his entire life. At the early age of 11 he entered the postulate of the Society of Mary and six years later made his first profession of vows. His companions in religion always found him a loyal friend and an ardent collaborator in every generous enterprise. As a teacher he displayed a conscientious if somewhat impetuous and vehement energy which, however, was held in restraint by a docile and profoundly religious spirit. One of his pupils writes of him as follows:

I can still see him with his attractive smile as he enters by the rear door of the study hall. Advancing to help us with our tasks, he whispers into our ears: *Filioli carissimi!*” We noted the supreme efforts he made to remain always serene and kind.... On our walks, during recreation, and above all in class, he spent himself entirely in our service. When imparting secular learning, he knew how to slip in an edifying word that betrayed his intense interior life of faith. He often repeated for us the words of St. Paul: “*Haec est voluntas Dei: sanctificatio vestra.*” (This is the will of God: your sanctification.) This was his preferred motto, and he used to write it on the board in colored chalk so that it might be better engraved on our minds.

The following quotation from a letter that Don Sabino addressed to the Superior General when requesting admission to the perpetual profession of vows has an almost prophetic ring:

Since the day of my first profession I have placed myself unreservedly in the hands of God. I ardently desire the moment of consummating my definite sacrifice. The difficult circumstances through which the religious orders are passing in Spain stimulate me to unite myself more closely to the Society of Mary, and persecutions will not make me recede, for God will give me the graces to derive from them the greatest benefits for my soul.

Like Don Sabino Ayastuy, his companion in martyrdom, Don Joaquín Ochoa (1910-36) had entered the postulate of Escoriaza at a very tender age, and in the year 1928 they made the temporary profession together. Don Joaquín’s educational efforts were devoted to the instruction of little children, whom he found somewhat difficult to manage. He was of a quiet and reserved nature, kind, unassuming, and almost timid. Perseveringly he worked at self-improvement in his religious and professional life, and at the time of his death he was concluding his studies for a master’s degree. His lifetime ambition may be summed up in the words he addressed to the Superior General in the letter containing his request for the perpetual consecration to God and the Blessed Virgin in the Society of Mary:

My only desire and my unalterable resolve consist in working with all my power under the standard of Mary Most Holy and to continue in her service until the hour of death.

Don Florencio Arnaiz, the third member of this group of martyred brothers, was born on May 11, 1909. At the age of twelve he became a postulant, making his first profession five years later. After obtaining his teacher’s certificate, he was commissioned to teach the tiny tots of the first grade. His simple and childlike character soon endeared him to the little ones. Desiring to improve himself professionally, he read, observed, visited schools, and noted methods and discussed problems with other teachers. His class, his pupils, his religious family were the three great loves to which he consecrated his life. Don Florencio, who since the age of twelve had lived entirely in the service of God and of his Divine Mother, ended his

career gloriously at the age of twenty-seven. Less than a decade of apostolic labor in the midst of little children, that is all that God had asked of him to merit the palm of martyrdom. Because he formed Christ in souls, God's enemies hated him; because he was a religious, they assassinated him.

Blessed is he who dies in the Lord, giving his life for his sheep!



December 1942  
Modern Martyr  
Reverend Miguel Léibar, SM

Aozaraza, a tiny Basque village nestling in the Pyrenees not far from our postulate of Escoriaza, was the home of three martyred Marianists. The region around Escoriaza is inhabited by sturdy peasants whose perspiring hands force even the reluctant rocks of the mountain side to yield an abundant harvest. They are a hardy race whose simple Catholic Faith has for many centuries been as firm and solid as their rugged mountains and whose tender devotion to the Mother of God is as sincere and trustful as that of a child.

From such ancestors, Father Miguel Léibar, one of the three martyr sons of Aozaraza, inherited the deep religious convictions that motivated his entire life. Father Léibar was born on February 18, 1885. Thirteen years later he entered the postulate where he soon distinguished himself by a lively intelligence, a love of study, and a sincere

devotion to prayer. At the time of his first profession and repeatedly thereafter, he offered to serve the Society of Mary in any capacity and in any place that the superiors might designate. In this offer he specifically included the missionary lands. His first active years in the teaching field were spent in the Colegio de Santa Maria of Vitoria, where he displayed a great firmness of character and taught with a clear and efficient method.

Up to the time of his perpetual profession, Father Miguel had made no request to study for the priesthood but accepted without hesitation the invitation to do so, “not considering any personal preference but desiring only to obey the call of the superiors.” The thought of the sublime vocation to the sacred ministry spurred him on to live a more intense life of faith. Convinced that only from the Prince of Teachers could he learn the high and delicate mission of directing souls, he loved to make the Way of the Cross which always remained the special devotion of his life. He multiplied his visits to our Eucharistic Lord. In that sublime company, he also found Mary. “When I visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament,” he said, “my devotion to Mary Immaculate also increases. Every afternoon on kissing the ring that reminds me of my happy consecration to the Blessed Virgin Mary in her religious family, I ask with all my heart for the grace to remain faithful unto death.”

Father Léibar was ordained in 1915 at Fribourg. After his return he fulfilled the duties of teacher and chaplain successively in a number of our Spanish schools. Twice he was entrusted with the duties of director. In both cases the earnestness with which he performed the mission of superior made serious inroads on his delicate health. The invigorating sea breezes and the mild climate of San Sebastian, where he was director of the Colegio de Santa Maria from 1925 to 1930, were insufficient to bring the desired alleviation, but he always was prepared to die. In this sense he once wrote to his superiors:

Ever since my consecration to God and Mary, I am not in the least worried whether I will die young, in middle age, or later. . . . Do not worry about this and if you should receive news of my death, you will know that I saw it coming with the sincerest smile of my life.

However, his superiors relieved him of the functions of director; from 1930 till the time of his death, Padre Miguel resided at the Colegio del Pilar in Madrid in the capacity of chaplain and teacher in the secondary department. A few days before the outbreak of civil war, he had assumed the direction of some twenty-nine religious who remained in Madrid after the rest of the community had left for the retreats or for a summer's rest. Because Colegio del Pilar was to be taken over by the government, the brothers immediately sought shelter elsewhere. Father Miguel with a few religious found room in the Provincial Administration, which was installed on the third floor of an apartment building at 21 Velasquez Street. The very day that the brothers arrived at this residence, several militiamen made a long and thorough search of the second floor of the building. Fearing that these vultures might exhibit their talons also on the third floor, two of the brothers consumed the Sacred Species in order to avoid a



possible profanation. Nothing untoward happened, however, and Father Miguel dared to celebrate Mass in the little chapel on the Feast of St. James (July 25). A number of the people from the neighborhood attended because all religious functions had been suspended in the parish churches. On the Feast of St. Anne, Mass was said for the last time. Two days later (July 28) at half past three in the afternoon, when most of the religious were fortunately absent, a large and noisy band of militia surrounded the building. The band consisted of men and women, the latter wearing trousers. All of them were well armed and carried pistols at their belts and guns in their hands.

“To the third floor,” they shouted and pointed their weapons at the porter, “we want to nab the priests that are hiding up there.”

“I do not know anything about any such priests,” replied the porter. “I think you are mistaken.”

“You lead the way,” they cried, “and do not answer back or you’ll be the first one to die.”

Menacing him with their guns, they followed the porter upstairs. The trembling hand of the poor man touched the button and a few moments later Father Léibar was at the door. Like a torrent, a horde of ten, twenty, or more Red militiamen and even redder militiawomen rushed into the apartment. After tearing the telephone from the wall in the corridor, they broke into the rooms. The first room they entered was the chapel. With Satanic fury they tore, broke, and destroyed altar linen, candles, sacred images, and anything else with a clerical appearance. The wreckage from the chapel and later from the rest of the building was thrown together into the street where it was soon to feed the flames of a huge bonfire that was lit to celebrate the “new freedom.” After an hour and a half of searching and destruction in all of the rooms of the apartment, some of the militia left taking with them Father Miguel and two servants, a man and a woman. The three were forced into an automobile, which, followed by another full of militia, drove off at great speed. The rest of the Red assault force remained to pillage and to quarrel over the spoils. When the two machines returned at about 6:30 in the evening, the porter dared to ask, “What happened to the three you took away?” “They have been liquidated. We shot them,” was the answer.

Father Miguel was of medium stature, not very strong physically but tireless in the performance of acts of duty and charity. He was modest, self-effacing, firm as a rock where principles were concerned, but otherwise kind and generous especially in his dealings with young people. For this reason, his fellow-brothers, his pupils, and their parents sought his advice in their difficulties. His presence was in special demand when sickness and death brought sorrow to the families of pupils and alumni. How joyfully his spiritual children in heaven must have greeted his victorious entrance into glory on the day of his martyrdom!