

★ *lasalliana*

17 - 4 - B - 84

THE MARTYRDOM OF THE BROTHERS OF TURON

Article 15-7-B-76 gave the biographical details of the 8 Brothers and the Passionist priest martyred in Turon. In view of their approaching beatification, we should like to devote this article to giving some details of their martyrdom.

* * *

The political and social situation in Spain in 1934.

1934 was an eventful year in Spanish political life. For many groups that were anxious to seize power, the Russian Revolution provided a model. Socialism and communism were spreading rapidly, and meetings and publications openly incited the masses to revolt and wreak their vengeance on all their oppressors. Hatred and the spirit of revolt were stirred up by many politicians and the leaders of leftist movements. Their utterances were generally characterised by attacks on religion and religious symbols.

The atmosphere was such that it was obvious that, sooner or later, revolution would break out and an attempt would be made to seize power. It was felt also that included in this there would be a fierce attack on Catholics and especially on priests and religious. The leaders of this revolution decided they would have a trial run in Catalonia and Asturias: if this proved successful, the revolution would be extended to the whole of Spain. Asturias, in the north of Spain, was a mainly mining area with a large population of immigrant workers who had been uprooted from their native provinces. In such a setting leftist groups were solidly organised.

The revolutionary trial run

The beginning of the Asturias Revolution was planned for the month of October, and would start with the proclamation of a general strike. Plans that had been prepared at a national level by the groups and movements concerned had been implemented: revolutionary committees had been set up in each locality, and weapons had been secretly distributed to their members.

On October 5th, a national general strike was launched and with it, in Catalonia and Asturias, the revolution. It was hoped their example would be swiftly followed by other regions.

In Catalonia, however, the attempt at revolution lasted only a few hours. In Asturias, on the other hand, it went on for a fortnight. Its beginning was timed for midnight and it

would be announced by a certain number of dynamite explosions in various places. Such explosions would not arouse suspicions as dynamite was regularly used by miners.

The Asturias Revolution

When the signal was given, each committee put into operation what had been planned: they took over the barracks of the forces of law and order, confiscated weapons, occupied the principal buildings, took charge of the population, assumed responsibility for food supplies, and imprisoned all the dangerous people which included priests, religious and leading Catholics.

Although in general the revolutionary leaders tried to control the situation, things got out of hand and many crimes and excesses were committed. They probably had not intended to go so far as to put consecrated people to death, but local groups in many cases took things into their own hands.

The fact remains that, in the course of the 15 days that the revolution lasted, 33 priests and religious were executed in Asturias. Of these, 10 were secular priests, 6 seminarists, 8 Brothers of the Christian Schools, 3 Passionists, 3 Paulists, 2 Jesuits and 1 a Carmelite. The oldest was 71 and the youngest, a seminarist, only 16. Most of these murders were premeditated, and in certain cases, were carried out in an incredibly cruel way. Numerous priests and religious, including Brothers from other communities in Asturias, were able to escape and take refuge with friendly families or flee to the mountains. In addition to this, 17 churches were destroyed, 7 of these at Oviedo, the regional capital, and 10 in various other places.

The Brothers of Turon

Turon is a small mining town near the valley of the Aller, some 20 kilometres from Oviedo, and 6 kilometres from Mieres, another mining town, but much larger. For some time, the Brothers had been running 12 free schools in the area. Of these, some –those at Mieres, Ujo and Bustiello– were very near Turon. Most of their pupils were the children of miners. At Turon, there were 8 Brothers, one of whom worked in the kitchen. Four of them were under 26 years old. The Director, who was the oldest, was 46. Six of them had been at Turon for a year, one 6 months, and another only 20 days.

The local socialists, communists and Freemasons had already attacked the school on several occasions because of the apostolic work and the Christian training that the Brothers were giving to the children and young people, not only during class but also after. It was their greatest ambition to destroy this good work.

Imprisonment of the Brothers

The Turon revolutionary committee began its work at midnight, October 4th. By 5 o'clock next morning, the manager and the management personnel of the Turon coal mine were all in detention. At 6 o'clock, the three local priests were arrested, and shortly afterwards a number of persons whose Catholic convictions were well known.

The Brothers had got up and were getting ready to start their community prayers. With them there was Fr. Inocencio,

a Passionist from Mieres, who had come the day before to hear the pupils' confessions and to prepare them for the first Friday of the month. The sister-in-law of one of the arrested priests ran over to the Brothers immediately to warn them that the revolution had started and that they had imprisoned the priests. Her advice to the Brothers was to leave as soon as possible, as they would be coming for them also. That is what she said to the Brother who was preparing the altar in chapel for Mass. He went up immediately to warn the other Brothers. Somewhat scared, they decided to have Fr. Inocencio say Mass immediately, and to do whatever was necessary afterwards.

They had reached the offertory when they heard shouting at the school entrance. A group of revolutionaries, armed with rifles, were banging on the door, demanding to be let in. Seeing what was happening, the priest suggested they consume the sacred species in the tabernacle so as to avoid any profanation, and this they did. Meanwhile, the shouting and the banging was still going on. One of the Brothers went to open the door, and the leader of the group said they wanted to search the house for weapons. The Brother replied that he would go and speak to the Director, but the whole group pushed its way in and began searching all the classrooms. Then they went upstairs to where the Brothers were already in their rooms. They made them come out and searched everything thoroughly. They did not find any of things they were looking for, but only the list of members belonging to the Catholic Youth group which met at the school. This did not prevent them from doing a fair amount of damage during the course of their search. When they had finished, they told the Brothers they were under arrest, and without allowing them to take anything with them, led them off to what was called "The People's House" where they met other people who had been arrested earlier.

Their imprisonment lasted four days. The first day, they were left alone in a room and were given nothing to eat. The following day, food was brought to them: it had been prepared outside at the expense of the Director of the "Hulleras" factory. The three priests joined them in their room. From the very outset, the Brothers had realised they were going to be killed. There were moments, however, when they still hoped they would be set free.

They spent their time in prayer, either together or by themselves. On the third day, convinced they were going to die, they made their confession to the priests. In the meantime, close by, the revolutionary committee made the decision to kill them. One of the leaders, who got on well with the parish priest, objected to killing the local priests. The sentence was to have been carried out the following day, but various revolutionary activities prevented this, and they had to wait an extra day. That evening, two revolutionary leaders came to "see how the prisoners were getting on". Among other things, they wanted to know if the Brothers' cook was also a religious or only an employee.

The martyrdom

October 8th came to an end and they lay down to sleep on the ground as they had done the previous nights. The Brothers had kept their serenity much to the astonishment of their guards. At one o'clock in the morning, two leaders came into the room and ordered them out so they could be taken to the front. However, they made them leave all their things behind. They took them out into the street, and they found themselves facing a group of revolutionaries with their rifles trained on them. They were joined by two other prisoners, policemen from Oviedo. The leader of the revolutionaries, Silverio Castañón, asked them if they knew where they were going. One of the Brothers answered: "Wherever you

like. We're ready for anything." "Well, you're going to die", the leader replied. He ordered them to start moving, and they made their way to the cemetery. The two policemen went first, then the Brothers followed by Fr. Inocencio. The execution squad followed behind.

The evening before, a trench had been dug in the cemetery. It was nine metres long and quite deep. There had been rain on the preceding days. That night it was quite cold. On their way there they did not talk: they prepared themselves for the sacrifice. It took them ten minutes to reach the gates of the cemetery. They were locked. The leader sent someone from the village to go and find the gravedigger who arrived a few minutes later with the key.

The squad leader told the Brothers to line up in front of the trench. Facing them stood the squad of armed men with their weapons aimed at them. The order to fire was given. There were two volleys, and then the leader and his second-in-command went around finishing them off with their pistols. Someone finished the Director off with a sledge-hammer and his head was separated from the body. The corpses were thrown into the trench and the gravedigger was forced to fill it in with earth. Then the group of revolutionaries returned to the village.

The other prisoner heard the volleys and realised the sacrifice had been offered. It was the morning of October 9th 1934.

Witnesses to Christ

From the very beginning, everyone considered the Brothers and Fr. Inocencio to be true martyrs. The only reason why they were murdered was because they were religious. Everyone was quite clear about this, including their murderers.

The evidence gathered for the beatification cause is incontrovertible. The revolutionary leader who was arrested after these events said, when he was in prison, that, when they were being taken to the cemetery, "they walked with much recollection and prayed to prepare themselves for their sacrifice", and that "they showed much determination and courage". An eye-witness of the execution and a fellow prisoner made a written statement, saying: "he did not hear them complain at any time or say anything, both on the way from the People's House to the cemetery as well as during their execution by firing squad or while waiting for the coup de grace". He added that "their death was the work of a number of villains, because the local people would never have allowed their children's teacher to be murdered, and that is why they did it at night, forcing those who had to execute them".

Here are the names of the martyrs: Brother Cirilo Beltran (46), Marciano Jose (33), Julian Alfredo (31), Victorino Pio (29), Benjamin Julian (25), Augusto Andres (24), Benito de Jesus (23), Aniceto Adolfo (22) and Fr. Inocencio de la Inmaculada (47). The remains of the Brothers were transferred to Bujedo on February 26th 1935.

The District of Valladolid has recently published a detailed account of these events as well as a biography of these martyrs in a very well documented book entitled "Testigos de la Escuela cristiana - Mártires de la revolución de Asturias". It contains 487 pages of text and illustrations and is the work of Brother Pedro Chico González. Copies of the book can be obtained from the Valladolid District Secretary, Arcas Reales s/n, 47008 Valladolid. Spain.

Brother José María Valladolid