

★ *lasalliana*

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I KNEW

BROTHER JAIME HILARIO

I lived with him and had the privilege of seeing him each day and to come to appreciate him. Therefore, I can today bear witness which may contribute both to the joy of seeing him beatified and to the simple and heroic life of virtue which he led. May he come to my assistance.

His childhood

Manuel Barbal Cosán was born in Enviny, in the region of Pallars Sobirà (Lérida) in the diocese of La Seu de Urgel on January 2, 1898. His family was profoundly rooted in the Christian tradition: grace before meals, the angelus, and rosary in the family life, helping the poor and keeping Sunday as the Lord's day.

"My father is a good Christian with a gift for going out to people and he has a lot of common sense. He is an optimist with a wonderfully positive outlook filled with hope." "My mother is a saint. She believes that love must be everywhere. There are some people whom God places as trailmarkers to show us the way to heaven. She was one of these." Manuel passed his childhood amidst the hardships and joys of a mountain village. Work in the fields, the grand scenery of the Pyrenees and the rugged mountains, all became a part of his hard-working, serious, sincere and poetic personality.

Desire for the priesthood

In January of 1908, he went to the boarding school of the Vincentian Fathers in Rialb. He made his First Holy Communion in May of 1909. Soon he felt the stirrings of God's call to the consecrated life, initially to the priesthood. The family was overjoyed. A religious vocation is a blessing from God.

October, 1910 saw Manuel in the seminary of La Seu where he received excellent commendations. However, a progressive deafness became an obstacle to an ecclesiastical vocation. He went back home but the hidden stirrings of God's call did not diminish. He met a Brother of the Christian Schools who spoke to him about his institute. "I like that" he exclaimed. From that moment he sought for a way to follow a Lasallian vocation.

The novitiate in Irun

Before entering the novitiate where only French was spoken, he went to Mollerusa for three months to begin to learn that language. "The Brothers have a gift for KINDNESS", he wrote. The Director of Novices in Irun was Brother Junien Victor, the future Superior General and an eminent formator. A month after his arrival he received the holy habit and with it the name Brother Jaime Hilario.

A thumbnail sketch of this novice would say: young, tall, rather thin, brownish hair; quiet of manner, bright, courteous, simple and direct, unassuming, very tenacious both in work and study and always in good humor. He was uncommonly mature for his 19 years. He lets us into his interior life by writing: "Little by little God is becoming everything for me: father, guide, support, light, strength and joy". Socially, his zeal became very concrete: "The greatest work of mercy in a community is to encourage, create enthusiasm and to spread joy".

Successive assignments

Between 1918 and 1926 he served in several places. First, there were five years in Mollerusa. At the end of his first year, both Brothers and students agreed that: "Brother Jaime is a great teacher and a holy man". Quite a compliment for a beginner. In 1923 we find him teaching latin in Manresa..., unfortunately, his hearing deteriorated drastically and he had to give up the classroom for the garden and the orchard. The following year he returned to Mollerusa. Oliana became his new community the next year, following which he went to the boarding school of Ste. Germaine de Pibrac, Haute Garonne, France. He remained here for quite some time.

Final vows: August of 1927

Among his personal notes, we find this statement which we think is very significant: "If God had revealed to me the difficulties I would have to face as a Brother, I would have been afraid and I would never have entered... But now I would not give up the robe for all the gold in the world, nor my way of life for all the land in Enviny". Even the Founder at the end of his life said something similar. Pibrac would be his home for 8 years, on the "staff of the Novitiate". He was well prepared culturally and spiritually and with his firm convictions and determination, he was a role-model and an encouragement to the young men in formation. In 1932, it was suggested that he try his hand as a recruiter in vocational work. He started by sending pamphlets and other information on the religious life to the neighboring towns with fair results... However, his deafness became more pronounced until finally he had to return to work in the garden as he had done as a boy in the fields of Enviny... In the silence of his labors he found the opportunity to speak with God and to accept the action of Grace which was steadily preparing him for his ultimate testimony.

I knew brother Jaime Hilario when I was an aspirant in Cambrils (Tarragona) in 1934.

At about this time, both the Spanish Brothers and the schools which belonged to the French Districts of Beziers and Toulouse had in Catalonia were transferred to the District of Barcelona. The aspirants from Pibrac came to join us. One day Brother Jaime Hilario came to visit his former students... This gave me my first flash of insight.

I was on my way out to mid-morning recreation when I noticed this little group from Pibrac surrounding a Brother. They were tightly pressed around him and hanging from his every word. Brother was listening them with total concentration (only later did find out he was almost deaf) to their questions and comments. His answers were accompanied with a smile. As a detached observer, I found this charming. Meanwhile, Brother Leoncio, another man of great faith and subsequently a martyr also, came into the courtyard and when he realized who was the center of interest of the small group, threw up his hands (I can still see him) as he passed by and exclaimed: "Dominus (sic) non sum dignus". I was impressed.

Another incident. When I was already a novice in San José of Cambrils, I found Brother Jaime Hilario working in the orchard. As usual, the novices were rapt in observing and cataloging. We all admired his recollection and sense of the presence of God as he expertly went about his work... We also saw him alone before the Blessed Sacrament, deep in adoration... We likewise knew that he was contributing to the publications of the diocese of La Seu... We never spoke to him (in those days we were not supposed to communicate even between communities existing within the same house) but we novices had decided that "he is a saint".

The revolution of 1936 took Brother Jaime Hilario by surprise in Mollerusa while he was on the way to Enviny.

He was detained and placed under house arrest with a family of friends (the Badia family) who tell of the way they were edified by his total abandonment to the will of God, his intense prayers, his charisma as a catechist for the children of the house. Transported to the prison at Lérida, he was placed in cell 31. Since he was a native of Cambrils, he was taken to the Commissariat of Tarragona and interned in the prison-ship "Mahón". This was in December of 1936. His trial was fixed for January, 1937. A friendly lawyer, Mr. Montañés suggested: "Just declare that you work in the gardens of the community... that you are not a Religious... and you will be free to go. Later, Brother Jaime said to Brother Eusebio: "We are not going to get along with this lawyer... I cannot pretend that I am not a Religious..." This amounted to signing his own sentence. That much was very clear.

The trial in Tarragona before the people's court

To help Brother Jaime, Brother Sorribas sat next to him so that he could repeat the questions of the Court

for him. The opening statement of the defense attorney was a classic in logic and profundity: "This monk has studied latin (sic) and poisoned the minds of children. If we do not kill him, he will kill all of us..." Then he tried to present him as a poor man, a stranger to politics, a laborer in the monastery. He then asked Brother Jaime to corroborate his statements. "No," said Brother Jaime, "I am a religious, a Brother of the Christian Schools". The presiding officer interposed: "Let the accused explain the difference between a gardener and a monk." "No, there is no contradiction. My deafness prevents me from being an educator". That was all. After a semblance of discussion, the Judge condemned him to death. Once they were alone, Brother Jaime asked what was decided. Brother Sorribas rubbed the back of his neck and asked, "When?" He had not been told. Bro. Jaime asked for paper and wrote in pencil to his sister and his nephews: "I have just been condemned to death by the Tribunal. Do not be ashamed of me and do not weep for me. I have done nothing wrong. Pray for me as I do for you. Good-bye until we meet in heaven..." Perfect spelling, no sign of nervousness.

The martyrdom of Brother Jaime Hilario

Two days later (it was decided to act quickly to prevent a possible indult of pardon, which in fact arrived on January 18th, effective immediately) at three-thirty in the afternoon, Brother Jaime was taken into the woods on a small hill "la Oliva" near the cemetery. While they were waiting for the arrival of the official, some members of the platoon asked him: "Don't you realize we are going to kill you?" The reaction was typical of the testimony of every martyr in this situation: "To die for Christ is to reign!" They placed him near a dry waterfall and the platoon took its place about 10 feet away. Brother Jaime, facing the soldiers had his arms folded and his pale face raised toward heaven... "Fire!" Brother Jaime remained standing. Not one bullet had hit him. Furious, the captain repeated the order: "Fire!" Brother is still standing. Frightened, the platoon dropped its guns and fled while the cursing captain fired his pistol into the temple of the victim who thus entered the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

"I would not give up my Brother's garb for all the gold in the world!" This is not just melodramatic literature. He confessed Christ when his life was at stake; but "he who loses his life for My sake, keeps it unto everlasting life". Brother Jaime Hilario was already there... Together with his Brothers of Turon who, like him, had given their youthful lives for the same crime of "having poisoned the minds of youth".

"We follow the footsteps of saints" and "uncommon holiness" are Lasallian principles. May they also be ours.

Brother Manuel Olivé