

JMJ - Talk 3

August 13th, 2011 - Witnesses in the world - Malaga

The example of the 22 Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate who were martyred in Spain is a strong and brilliant witness to confession of faith in Jesus Christ. For the sole reason that these men were believers in Jesus Christ and had consecrated their lives to him, they were despised and brutally executed. They were young men, conscious and aware that a violent death awaited them because of their faith. They were made to suffer ruthlessly so that they would abandon their faith to save their lives. Heroically, they were faithful to Jesus and to the Catholic faith right up to their brutal deaths.

What do we learn from these witnesses? I would propose four qualities:

- 1 - The Spirit's gift of Courage and Strength
- 2 - Love for Jesus and for the Catholic Church
- 3 - The spiritual power of Love, Forgiveness, Prayer and Joy
- 4 - Gift of self: Oblation

The first thing we learn from the martyrs: The Spirit's gift of Courage and Strength to be faithful:

These young men knew what was happening in Spain at the time. They were threatened publicly with people shouting at them, "Kill those Brothers!" In the streets, people made gestures with knives cutting throats to indicate what should be done to religious men. From their residence, the Oblates could see the smoke of burning churches and convents destroyed by those who hated the Church. Among themselves, the Oblates talked about how they would escape from their residence if it were set on fire. Even in this climate of hostility, they went on faithfully with their prayers, studies and work right up to the time of imprisonment.

In the jail, they were treated mercilessly with scant food, humiliations, physical beatings, bitter cold, poor hygienic conditions for toilet needs and lice. Crowded conditions and the bitter cold forced them to sleep standing up at times.

The response of these men was unflinching courage and strength. They endured the conditions in the jail with a spirit of prayer. They remained closely united, caring for each other and encouraging one another and they maintained spirits of serenity and even joy, trusting in God.

The exact words of Clemente Rodriguez Tejerina, 18 years old, were recounted by his sister: "We are in danger and we fear that we will be separated; we encourage each other. But even if we have to die, I am ready, and I am sure that God will give us the strength that we need to be faithful." (p. 58)

The young Oblate martyrs of Spain teach us that God always gives us the Spirit of Courage and Strength to be faithful in the face of tremendous suffering.

The second thing we learn from the martyrs: Love for Jesus and for the Catholic Church: These men were made to suffer and were killed because they were Catholic priests and Brothers. To save themselves they only had to renounce their faith and deny their beliefs. What would it matter? Who would care? Why suffer so much? Why cause pain for their families?

In the suffering that led up to their execution before the death squads, they professed their faith in Jesus Christ, their love for the Catholic Church and for their missionary vocation. One of the martyrs, Publio Rodriguez Moslares, 24 years old, had given his mother a small crucifix and told her: "Kiss it frequently, and whatever happens, remember that everything we suffer for Christ, no matter how

great it seems, would be small compared to how much Christ loves us and suffered for us.” (p. 36). As they were executed they cried out their profession of faith: “Long live Christ the King!”

Gregorio Escobar Garcia, executed at 24 years of age wrote: “I have always been profoundly moved by the stories of the martyrs. Whenever I have read about them, I have been taken by a secret desire to have the same fate. This would be the greatest priesthood to which a Christian could aspire: to offer to God one’s own body and blood in sacrifice for the faith. What a blessing it would be to die as a martyr.” (p. 24)

Today we are rarely threatened with death for believing in Jesus and being Catholic, although it still does happen in some parts of the world. We can express our love for Jesus and the Church by faithfully living the Gospel with integrity. Following Jesus is not easy when I am truly committed to make the faith a living relationship with God that shapes everything else I do, how I relate to others and what I believe is right and wrong.

The young Oblate martyrs of Spain teach us that our faith in Jesus Christ lived in the Catholic Church is the most precious possession we have and that it should be our faith that most influences and shapes our lives.

The third thing we learn from the martyrs: The spiritual power of Love, Forgiveness, Prayer and Joy:

Father Francisco Esteban Lacal, the Provincial, executed at 48 years of age, received a coat from his family to keep himself warm in the cold prison. Not thinking of his own needs or comfort, he promptly gave it to another companion in prison who was suffering much from the bitter cold. (p.11)

Father Francisco was heard to have said to the guards: “We know that you are killing us because we are Catholics and religious; we are that. I and my companions forgive you from our hearts.” (p.8)

One Oblate that survived this tragic period said: “In our inner self, the thing that most stood out was the spirit of forgiveness time and time again... (p.55)

Relatives of those in prison heard that the Oblates tried secretly to pray the Rosary together when they walked in the patio and even in their cells. (p. 11).

Publio Rodriguez Moslares (24 years old), with one of the priests, entertained the seminarians in the jail with comedies in verse. A witness wrote about Publio: “He was able to endure the jails in Madrid with integrity and joy and when they gave him provisional liberty it was especially he who kept his companions who were suffering this Calvary connected to one another and to their Superiors, going from one place to another.”(p. 36).

Although they were aware of impending death, these Oblates chose to live the Gospel mandate to love their enemies, forgive and pray for those who persecuted them and to rejoice for being made to suffer for the name of Jesus. In society today, pleasure, ease and comfort are the ultimate goals of life. We see a challenging and prophetic message in the lives of these Oblates. They question the way we live and call us to be authentic witnesses of our Christian faith.

The young Oblate martyrs of Spain teach us that even in the face of torture, suffering and death, we are called as Jesus taught us, to forgive, to love our enemies, to pray for them and to rejoice that we are persecuted for the Name of Jesus.

The fourth thing we learn from the martyrs: The Gift of Self - Oblation

These men were Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The word “Oblate” means an oblation, an offering. Through our way of life we Oblates strive to offer our lives to God through Mary, the Mother of Jesus. We make a gift of ourselves to serve God’s people, especially the poor. The passion and death

of these 22 Oblates of Mary Immaculate, was the total gift of their lives for Jesus Christ, their Lord; it was the gift of their lives for the good of the people of Spain; it was the gift of their lives for the good of the mission of the Church and of the Oblates all over the world. Many of them were filled with Oblate zeal preparing to head to the missions that the Province of Spain had in Argentina and Uruguay. They did not reach their missionary destinations, but their violent execution was the complete oblation, the total gift of self offered to God for the good of Christ's mission.

One of the Oblates who was not executed gave this testimony: "What also stood out was the desire to offer our lives for the Church, for the peace of Spain and for those whom we thought were going to execute us. The only motive that guided us was supernatural since humanly speaking we had lost everything. (p.55). This is a perfect expression of oblation, offering oneself for others.

Another Oblate witness stated, "Their reaction in the face of martyrdom was that of great serenity, self-control and prayer to the Lord. They wanted to fulfill the desire to complete their oblation." (p. 63).

Each one of us is invited to offer our lives to God for the service of the Gospel, to live out our faith and to be witnesses. Because of our Baptism and Confirmation we are sent as followers of Jesus to be the light of God's love in the world. We are all called to make a gift of our lives, to be "oblates" within our families, at school, where we work, when playing sports and in all our relationships. Jesus showed us this so strongly when he washed his disciples' feet as a gesture of service and humility. That is the sense of being an "oblate."

The young Oblate martyrs of Spain teach us that our life has its deepest and most beautiful meaning when we live for others and make our life a gift, an offering, an oblation.

As we experience the communion of the saints in this land washed with the blood of these 22 young Spanish Oblates, may the Holy Spirit strengthen our hearts so that we, as young Catholics, also witness to our faith in Jesus Christ with a spirit of prayer, love, forgiveness and joy, making our lives an oblation to God.

God bless you all. Thank you.

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The page numbers are taken from the work: "*MÁRTIRES OBLATOS*" by Joaquin Martinez Vega, O.M.I., Postulator General, Roma