

**THE BROTHER MARTYRS
OF ALMERIA
(3/3)
2 - THE MARTYRDOM**

Brother Jose Maria Valladolid

News of the uprising by elements of the Spanish army against the Republican Government soon reached the remotest corners. Many people looked on the uprising with relief, whilst others feared it, but nearly everybody thought that something really had to change, because the political and social situation had become impossible.

On the 18th July, a multitude of communiqués and instructions were being received from everywhere. The Popular Front, which was the party in power, recommended each locality to set up a committee to put on trial all the enemies of the revolution.

In Almeria, a province entirely controlled by Republican elements and Free Masons, they simply enforced their committee, since it was already in existence. This committee consisted of Socialists, Communists, Republicans, Anarchists and Trotskyists, all presided over by the Anarchist Juan del Aguila Aguilera.

Their first decision was to arrest all elements not supporting the revolution, especially priests and religious.

The three following days, 19th to 21st July, worry became widespread, because rumour had it that lots of people were to be sent to prison. In some places, there was talk of fleeing, hiding, escaping from the city... The Brothers actually spent three days in their school, awaiting events. Then came news of searches, raids, arrests and even the burning down of buildings.

On the 22nd, Father Martin Salinas, Chaplain, went to the school, and fearing the worst, they all decided to consume the hosts in the tabernacle. It was fortunate they did this, for a few hours afterwards, a noisy rabble from the Popular Front lined up opposite the Brothers' school. One of their leaders knocked on the door, which a Brother opened. The fellow said he had come to search the school for arms, which he knew were hidden there. Of course there weren't any; it was just an excuse. They took the Brothers they found to the municipal buildings, from where they were marched and locked up in the Hotel Central. A socialist member of parliament, Gabriel Pradal, who was well known and lived near

the school, told the hotel manager: "Make sure these men stay here; they are not to be moved without my orders".

But the order was useless, because that evening at 6.00, a gang from the Popular Front went to the Hotel demanding that the Brothers be handed over to them. With insults and abuse sounding round their ears from people in the street, they were taken to the Town Hall, then to the headquarters of the Revolutionary Committee, finally to prison.

Brothers Teodomiro Joaquin and Evencio Ricardo were arrested in the street the same day, 22nd, when they were going to post some letters to their families. They were taken to the barracks, where they were locked up in a cell.

That was the beginning of the journey to Calvary for the seven Brothers, which would end up in martyrdom.

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Brothers Edmigio, Amalio and Valerio Bernardo were kept in prison until 12th August, in very primitive conditions, with crowds occupying a very small space and with everything missing, except the annoying, ironical guards.

They kept calm, though they were convinced they were going to be killed. The Brothers gave a fine example to the other prisoners, keeping up their spirits and telling them to ask God for his blessing.

On the 12th, they were taken to a coal ship called "Astoy Mendi", which had been converted into a prison. There they were kept until the 30th; that night, they were called out again, with all the other prisoners. This time it meant death.

They were taken by van to the outskirts of Tabernas, where there were several dried-up wells more than 150 feet deep. At the mouth of one of these, called "La Lagarta" (the Lizard), they were killed one by one by a shot in the head, after which, they were thrown down the well, where they fell among rocks, soil and undergrowth.

When, months later, the bodies were brought up, it was seen that they all had their hands tied behind their backs. Doctors believed that Brother Valerio Bernardo was thrown down the well still alive, and that in the fall, he broke both legs. Brother Amalio had an arm broken.

As for Brothers Evencio Ricardo and Teodomiro Joaquin, after they were arrested that 22nd July, they were taken to the barracks and kept in a cell for 44 days. One of the policemen, Meliton Puerto by name, who was their prison warden, made them suffer untold miseries. When time came to bring their food, he would shout: "I'm going to feed the dogs". He let them out of their narrow dungeon for just a few minutes each day. Their health therefore began to fail and especially Brother Teodomiro, who lost a lot of weight and became deathly pale. Fearing that he would die there and then, the soldiers took him to the infirmary. But knowing that Brother Evencio was also ill and alone, Brother Teodomiro asked to be taken back to the cell with his friend. Some days later, they both asked to be transferred to the prison ship Astoy Mendi.

That day was the 4th September. When they made their request, one of the revolutionary chiefs, called Garrido, with other militia, came along. They took the two Brothers outside the city by car. On a cliff overlooking the sea, at a place called "La Garrofa", they ordered them to kneel. The militia boss, pointing the revolver at them, began to ask about their

connivance in the military uprising, threatening to throw them over the cliff. As a result of the interrogation and questioning, both the chief and his followers were convinced that the two Brothers had had no inkling of the uprising. But that did not matter; they were told to get into the lorry to be taken to another prison. En route, the militia stopped for something to eat at the "Venta Eritaña" café, leaving the driver to guard the prisoners. A short time afterwards, along came a van with some more militia, who, learning that the prisoners were religious, shouted that they should be killed on the spot, which the first group would not allow, saying that they were the ones in charge. So the martyrdom was put off for a few days. On arrival in the city, they were taken to their new prison, the ship "Astoy Mendi", where the other Brothers were, with some priests and a crowd of Catholics.

They remained there only four days, because on 8th September, in the middle of the afternoon, their names were called out. This time, they were taken to the Roquetas de Mar Road, where, when they had reached an isolated spot, they were told to get out. They were marched away from the road itself and shot, their bodies left where they lay. Some kindly folk from nearby respectfully buried them.

Brothers Aureliano Maria, headmaster of the secondary school, and Brother José Ceciliano had been arrested in the school, as we have said, on the 22nd, then, after a few hours in the Hotel Central, they ended the day in prison.

They spent four days there, until the 27th, when they were let out to finish off arrangements for the new school building, but they were free only two days, because, on the 29th, they were again arrested and taken to the police station, where they were kept until the 8th August.

That day they were separated. Brother José Cecilio was taken to Adoration Convent, transformed into a prison; whereas Brother Aurelio was taken to the harbour to a boat called "Capitan Segarra", which was a floating prison.

He was there only three days, at the end of which, he also was taken to the Adoration Convent, where he joined his friend Brother José Aurelio again. They were in prison with lots of other prisoners until 12 September, when they were taken out and led to another prison, the Brothers' own secondary school. There they were joined by crowds of other prisoners from various areas. But the two Brothers were locked up only a few hours in their own house, for that night they were taken by van to their martyrdom to a place called "Venta de Los Yesos" (Chalk Inn), on the boundary of Tabernas, where there were also some waterless, abandoned wells. On the edge of one of them, the "Tahal", they were shot and their bodies thrown down the well. No trial, no charge...they were guilty of the serious crime of being religious.

In the final days of their life, Mgr Diego Ventaja Milan, Bishop of Almeria, and Mgr Manuel Medina Olmos, Bishop of Guadix, were together with one another and with the Brothers of the Christian Schools, prisoners like them.

In Almeria, on 24th July, three members of the revolutionary committee went to the Bishop's palace and ordered him out, because they were taking it over as headquarters of the local Civil Government.

They took the Bishop to the barracks of the Assault Guards and invited him to leave his diocese, which he refused. Mgr Diego Ventaja had to stay in the Vicar General's house.

In Guadix, a group of people rushed into Bishop Manuel Medina's palace and arrested him. They treated him roughly, tearing off his pectoral cross and his sash and tore his soutane. After searching the whole place, they pushed him into a car to take him to Almeria.

That night, he was able to stay in the same Vicar General's house as Bishop Diego Ventaja.

Guessing the danger that threatened the Bishop of Almeria, some English naval officers visited him and offered him the chance of escaping from Almeria on their ship. The Bishop again refused the chance of escape: he wanted to be with his flock.

On 5th August, the militia took the two bishops to the police station, passing through streets where they were insulted and threatened by the mob. On 12th August, at 11.00 at night, they took them from the police station to the Adoration Convent, the temporary prison, where the Brothers and some priests were already. At first, they were kept alone, but on the 25th, they were put with all the other prisoners and told to take their soutanes off.

On 28th August, they were taken to the prison ship Astoy Mendi, and on the 29th, in order to humiliate them, they were taken to the battleship Jaime I, where they were ordered to do loading, to scrub the deck, to load coal into the hold and then to serve the sailors' food, all of this amidst the laughter and jokes of the militia and the sailors. After that, they were returned to the Astoy Mendi.

On the night 29th-30th August, together with 15 other detainees, they were loaded onto a minibus and taken along the Motril Road to a place called "Barranco del Chisme" (the Gully of Gossip), between Felix and Vicar, where they were ordered off and lined up to be shot. Bishop Manuel having asked to be allowed to speak, according to one of the executioners, said: "We have done nothing to deserve death, but I forgive you, so that Our Lord will forgive us. May our blood be the last to flow in Almeria". The leader interrupted him and ordered his men to fire.

The latter then poured petrol on the bodies and burnt them. The burnt corpses were left as they were, a lot of people coming to see them, until some peasants from nearby buried them. When the Civil War was over, the remains were disinterred and transferred to the Cathedral of Almeria. ●