

SAINTS JOURNEYING WITH US

✿ AN ON-LINE PUBLICATION OF THE HAGIOGRAPHY CIRCLE

vol. 1, no. 2

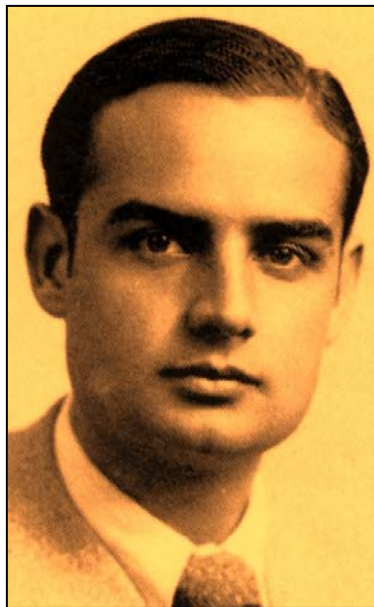
FRANCESC DE PAULA CASTELLÓ ALEU: ONE YOUNG MAN'S VALIANT TESTIMONY 1914-1936

At 11:00 in the evening, six men were led out of the city hall of Lerida. They were made to board a lorry. All six were still young - and all had been condemned to die. As the truck passed over the bridge over the Segre River, one of the doomed, a handsome chemist by the name of Francesc Castelló, requested the guards to allow him and his companions to sing. The guards were not against it. The evening stillness was pierced by the sound of their song: "I believe in God..."

It did not take long for them to arrive at the municipal cemetery. Of the six, Francesc was the most eye-catching. He was so tranquil that there was not a sign of fear on his mien. His expression was full of love and forgiveness.

WITH SOLICITUDE AND
FIRMNESS

Josep Castelló and Teresa Aleu were married at the historical Catalanian city of Lerida. In this same city were born Teresa and Maria, their first children. A few years



FRANCESC CASTELLÓ ALEU

With unflinching tenacity, this 22-year old Catalan confessed his faith before a judicial body that saw his religion as a parasitic and backward institution within Spanish society. For his stubborn fidelity, Francesc Castelló was condemned to die.

later, Josep was employed as an electrical engineer in a company at Alicante. He and his family moved there. On April 19, 1914, a boy was born to the couple. He was baptized at the parish of Sta. Maria d'Alacant. The name Francesc de Paula was given to him.

The joy of the family was to be short-lived. Three months after the birth of their only boy, the father succumbed to pulmonary congestion. Teresa was left a widow at the age of twenty-seven with three very young children. She decided to return to Lerida in July 1914.

Teresa had been a private teacher. Her marital obligations, however, prevented her from exercising her profession. These also kept her from taking the government examinations that would qualify her as a public school teacher. Her sister-in-law, Maria Castelló, came to her assistance. Thus, despite the emotional sacrifice it entailed, Teresa placed the three under

Maria's guidance while she spent her own time for study. After two years, she received her diploma.

As a public school teacher, Teresa depended on the government for her assignments. She was first designated to

work at the picturesque village of Vilamòs, which was near the border of Spain and France. Shortly, she was transferred to Serra d'Almos (Tarragona) where she remained for five years. Finally, in 1922, she was assigned at Juneda.

Wherever she was assigned, Teresa brought along her children. She was deeply conscious of her roles as mother and as the first teacher of her children. For Teresa, these were her primary obligations. She herself believed that "a mother begins to teach her children five minutes after she had brought them to the world." Equally, she raised them as strong and conscientious Catholics. With solicitude, firmness, and religious constancy, Teresa guided her growing children.

A MOTHER'S ATTENTION

Like any child, Francesc engaged in pranks and tantrums. However, his mother's attention was never lacking. She closely paid attention to his psychological and religious development. In this way, his conscience was well formed, "the result of an uncommon abnegation; the product of an exceptional education."

We know of one event during the family's sojourn at Serra d'Almos to illustrate this point. The young Francesc care freely and mischievously threw stones from the upper window of their house to the pavement below. In one unfortunate occasion, he hit and wounded the head of an impoverished young girl. Teresa took her son by one hand while she carried a roll of cotton and hydrogen peroxide with the other. She then guided Francesc's small and trembling hand and had him treat the wound of his poor victim. The event had a profound effect on him; he never engaged in such a harmful amusement again.

In another occasion, Teresa and her three children were spending a few days at Cornudella, her native town. One of her brothers gave to Francesc a peach. Teresa took it and divided it to three parts to be

distributed to all her children. Francesc felt it was unfair. He cried loudly, gave in to tantrums, and tried to get the share of his sisters. Teresa took him by the hand, brought him outside the house, and then locked the door. Outside, Francesc continued with his crying. Some neighbors tried to sweet-talk the boy by saying that he could go to their house instead. But young Francesc answered: "No, I don't want that. I want to be with my mother." Finally, Teresa opened the door and brought him back inside. That incident would never be repeated.

UNDER THE IMPULSE OF GOD'S GRACE

For Francesc, the most memorable event that took place in Juneda was his first communion. For two years, the child received preparatory catechetical instructions in the parish of the Transfiguration. Teresa constantly followed these developments and even gave him supplementary lessons. She was also meticulous in providing all that was needed for the occasion.

On May 4, 1924, Francesc received his first communion. It was an emotional and truly memorable event for the Castellós. This was for Francesc the beginning of a profoundly intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus. Until the end of his life, he was noted for the attention and reverence he rendered to the Blessed Sacrament.

One year later, Francesc left his family and went to Lerida to commence with his baccalaureate. He was enrolled at the Institut de Segon Ensayment but stayed as intern student at the Col·legi dels Germans Maristes at Plaça de Catalunya. Until the end of his secondary studies in 1930, Francesc consistently received excellent grades. He was, moreover, distinguished for his exemplary virtues. His spiritual director gave this assessment: "He was a pious student, admirable for his blameless life. Above all, he lived under the impulse of God's grace. He feared sin and was conscientious in preserving his rectitude. He showed a superior reasoning beyond his age."

On March 21, 1929, the school director informed Francesc that his mother was extremely ill. He immediately left for Juneda with an anxious heart. Teresa was at the final stage of her illness when her son arrived. She was no longer able to recognize him. A few hours later, the mother died. Although Francesc was the youngest of the three, he took upon himself the responsibility for his two sisters. He told them: "I will not abandon you. We are now orphans and we only have ourselves. God will not abandon us, although he had taken our mother with him to heaven."

IN A TUMULTUOUS PERIOD

Providentially, Maria Castelló came to the rescue of the three orphans. She remained in Lerida to take care of her feeble old mother and was already taking care of three other nephews. Still, Maria saw it as her personal mission to take care of the orphaned children of her youngest brother Josep. With whatever means she could provide, she was able to help Francesc to complete his baccalaureate studies in 1930.

A Jesuit friend of the family, Fr. Joan Calaf, discovered Francesc's inclination to the sciences. He proposed that the young man take the entrance examinations of the Institut Químic of the Jesuits of Sarrià, the most prestigious establishment of its kind in Catalonia and its neighboring regions. Francesc left for Barcelona in September 1930 and took up residence in a boarding house of the Jesuits.

1931 was the year when the Second Spanish Republic was installed. It was the beginning of what was to become the most tumultuous period in modern Spanish history. Those on the side of the Republicans were for the most part antimonarchists and anticlericals. Anarchist and socialist movements were coming out in the open as powerful and terrorizing forces.

Despite the commotion, Francesc was apparently not attached to any political movement. People remembered him more

for the regularity of his religious exercises and his dedication to his studies. Towards the end of his first year, in fact, Francesc and some of his classmates enrolled at the University of Barcelona for additional courses to obtain a civil title. Among the most relevant developments that took place in this period was the full development of his pride as a Catalan. Francesc began to collect poems and other literary writings in Catalan. He also preferred to correspond in his own language and encouraged his sisters to do the same.

* * *

The change in environment, however, effected a spiritual crisis in Francesc. His closest acquaintances noticed that his devotional practices began to wane. Although he did not fail in his Sunday obligation, Francesc no longer went to daily Mass.

At this crucial point in his life, Providence intervened through Fr. Román Galán. A native of Oviedo, the Jesuit priest was a fellow student of Francesc at Sarrià. He was older than Francesc by some years but they were indeed best of friends.

Fr. Galán also noticed the drastic change in Francesc and sought to remedy the situation. He invited Francesc to make the Spiritual Exercises from March 24 to March 29 at Rams. Francesc agreed and made the most out of the retreat. It was the beginning of another crossroad in his life. The satisfactory result could be discovered in this short letter he wrote to his sisters and aunt Maria: "I was not able to write to you during the past week. Fr. Román Galan, about whom I have written to you in the past, has offer to give the Exercises to me and my friends, all of whom are students of the Institut Químic. It had borne much fruit; no word could describe the experience. These have been days of great spiritual joy. I give thanks to our good Lord for having brought healing to my soul."

* * *

The Republic dissolved the Jesuits on January 22, 1932. For some weeks, the faculty and students of Institut Químic were forced to leave the compound. They continued to hold classes in the residences of some students until they were reunited in one house. They were able to return at Sarrià on October 17, 1932. The name of the institute was now Centro Estudio Químicos. The director of the school was still Fr. Eduardo Victoria although the government forbade him to use any religious title.

Because of the imbroglio, Francesc's studies at the University of Barcelona were unavoidably affected. The result was beyond his normal standard-only one subject received an excellent remark. In 1933, with the help of Fr. Galán, he transferred to the University of Oviedo to obtain a licentiate in chemical sciences.

Francesc completed his studies with outstanding marks. With such qualifications, it was not difficult for him to find a job. He was employed as a chemist at the factory of Abonos Químicos CROS, S.A., in Lerida. The factory stood at the highway that led to Barcelona and was about three hundred meters from the municipal cemetery where Francesc sacrificed his life.

* * *

Despite the demands of his studies, Francesc actively involved himself with apostolic works. He enthusiastically enrolled in certain religious organizations and gave his whole self to their demands. With the rise of anticlerical forces, involvement in Catholic ministries during that period was rather precarious. Despite of the situation, Francesc did not sway in his commitment. He was a militant Catholic, true to its meaning, and he strove to be true to his mottoes: "Always forward" and "To be better each day and the best in what I do".

Francesc was a member of the Marian Congregation of Barcelona. The sodalists of this association were under the direction and

influence of the Jesuits. Aside from their pious obligations, members were required to have a program of apostolic works. Outside school hours, Francesc worked with the Patronat Obrer de la Sagrada Família. He involved himself with catechism, youth animation and works of mercy.

During his vacations at Lerida, Francesc was able to continue the apostolates he began at Barcelona through his involvement with Catholic Action. The most notable of his contributions was his apostolate at Canyeret, the slum district of Lerida. Francesc willingly undertook this work despite his fine breeding, and it mattered little to him if he was studying in the finest school in Catalonia. Through the work of Maria Navés, another apostolic minded youth, a school was established in the slum area. It was so poor that the students had to bring their own chair if they wanted to sit. Maria gave lessons to the children during the morning while Francesc gave evening classes for the workers.

The association in which Francesc was most committed to was the Federació de Joves Cristians (FJC). With the approval of local church authorities, Francesc and his friends established the *fejocistas* in Lerida. His apostolates involved him more closely with the problems of the poor and the working class. Even when he was already working, Francesc continued to be an active *fejocista*.

These works of mercy were not limited to his involvement with the Church. He voluntarily gave free lessons in mathematics, physics, and chemistry to the workers of Casa CROS, S.A. He gave his lessons even beyond work hours. Francesc maintained a strong friendship with the workers. Knowing the hostility of some of them to religion, however, he was careful in injecting religious matters in their discussions.

* * *

Because of Francesc's religious activities and friendship with Fr. Galán, his aunt and

sisters thought that he would be joining the Jesuits. Not a few of his friends and associates shared in the belief of his relatives. That would not be the case however.

Many young women have surely been attracted by the attractive personality and fine bearing of Francesc. He, however, had not indicated in any of his letters during his college days if he was attracted to any of them. What is certain is that by 1936 he already had a girlfriend.

Maria Pelegrí, called Mariona by Francesc, belonged to a truly christian family. She was an active member of Catholic Action. Her family and Francesc's were good friends. Her personality was, however, quite the opposite of the young man's. Francesc possessed a jovial and extroverted character. She was more serious and withdrawn. Moreover, Maria was three years his senior. Despite these differences their mutual attraction developed.

A mature fiancé, Francesc loved Mariona with a pure heart, not for any sensual interest. "Our weapon is purity," he reminded his girlfriend. Many years later, Maria related how Francesc paid so much attention to her, loving her with undivided devotion and sweet tenderness while remaining a true friend to others.

Their relationship was formalized on May 30, 1936. On that occasion, Francesc gave Maria a golden scapular medal. Unfortunately, Francesc was to report for mandatory military service a month later. Their plans to get married had to be delayed.

* * *

On July 1, 1936, Francesc reported for military service. There could have never been a more unfortunate moment. The time was ripe for a wide-scale pandemonium. Preparations for a military uprising were completed. Political assassinations were becoming too commonplace. Anarchists and anticlerics had burned hundreds of churches and convents. Priests were forced to abandon their parishes to escape murder.

The entire political situation was in a confused state. As a result of the religious persecution that took place during the civil war, 270 members of the diocesan clergy of Lerida were mercilessly killed. Among them was Bishop Salvi Huix Miralpeix.

Francesc tried to be neutral as much as possible. He limited himself to the demands of his current state: reporting to headquarters, sentinel duties, and military exercises. The headquarters where he reported was once the Castell dels Templers. Because of his excellent performance in shooting practices, he was considered as a first-class shooter. Throughout this brief period, he continued to live with his sisters.

When it comes to his faith however, Francesc was uncompromising. During a class on tactics and theories, the military instructor unreluctantly inserted anti-Catholic sentiments in his lecture. Francesc energetically called his attention: "Sir, I demand that you limit yourself only to what you are obliged to do and that you stop hurting the feelings of those among us who believe. I ask you this by virtue of the laws of the Republic." The whole class was stunned by his action. Many feared its consequences. One of those present remarked: "Something very serious took place in class today. Dire consequences are bound to follow."

On July 18, a Saturday, the coup d'état exploded. Francesc was immediately given orders to report to headquarters. In the morning of the following day, he was sent to guard the provincial jail. In the afternoon, he was transferred to Ràdio Lerida. During that duty, he and his companions did not allow a military official to enter the building because he had no special permit to present.

The next day, the headquarters received notice that the uprising had come to Barcelona. All Republican soldiers in the region were given orders to quell the rebellion and prevent it from spreading throughout Catalonia. During the intense fighting, they fought side by side with members of the Anarchist party. A huge supply of weapons has fallen into their hands.

In a few days, the Catalan government would be taking orders from them and the fratricidal war would turn bloodier.

Francesc was somehow able to leave headquarters that morning. He went home to pacify his sisters. Afterward he proceeded to the convent of Sta. Teresa and advised the nuns to immediately leave their convent to escape slaughter. Then he returned to headquarters. During his sleep, Francesc was roughly awakened by a heavy blow on his head. It was the official whom he refused access to Ràdio Lerida. He and the other sentinels that day were held captives in the gothic cloister of the Castell that was serving as a prison.

* * *

For nearly two months, Francesc was imprisoned there. Most of the other prisoners were suspected of rightist leaning. The atmosphere was filled with tension and despair. Yet Francesc retained his joyful self. He remained serene, prayed, gave words of encouragement to others, and even said jokes. He also revealed his strength of character. On August 10, an explosion rocked the entire Castell. The imprisoned men inside were thrown into panic. Francesc cried out to them: "Be men in these moments! Instead of shouting and crying, the best that we can do is to prepare for a good death."

Toward the end of August, a young *fejocista* was put in the same prison. He informed Francesc that members of the Revolutionary Committee ransacked his house and his office at Casa Cros. Among the things that were taken from the office were his German and Italian textbooks in chemistry. Because of these items, Francesc was suspected as a fascist. Germany and Italy were openly supporting the rebels and, thus, were considered enemies of the Republic. There was also a strong possibility that Francesc's identity as a *fejocista* was confused by the committee as implying *feixista* (fascist).

Only one man was allowed to visit Francesc. Josep Claverol was his uncle and godfather. He was a leftist and a member of the Committee on Public Safety. Because of his position, he was given the unique privilege of frequenting Francesc. Josep loved him like his own son despite their differences in belief. He knew what was the sole accusation made against his nephew: "He is a church person and a Catholic propagandist." Josep therefore asked Francesc to declare that he was renouncing Christianity and that he was not a member of any Catholic association. Francesc firmly refused his offer: "Pepe, if this is the only reason why you have come, then you may leave. I am not going to do it."

* * *

On September 12, Francesc and some prisoners were transferred to the provincial jail. He occupied a cell marked "D 14". Here he stayed for several days. His lot was now in the hand of the popular tribunal. The court summoned him on September 29.

"What do you say to the accusations that you are a fascist?"

"I am not a fascist nor am I connected to any political party."

"But we have proofs. In your house and in the place where you worked were found books and writings that showed your contact with two fascist nations."

"What you found in my house and in the laboratories are books for my studies. I had to study Italian and German. Since there are no qualified chemistry teachers in Lerida, I took lessons broadcast by the radio in these languages. The broadcasters sent me these books. English and American stations would do the same thing. My only intention is to perfect my profession."

"Well, then, are you Catholic?" they followed up.

With clarity and serenity, Francesc replied: "Yes, I am Catholic." Without

hesitation, the death penalty was quickly passed.

It had become clear to Francesc that it was time for him to give witness to his faith. Thus, when told to make a final defense, he replied with a smile: "What for? If being Catholic is a crime, I am very glad to be guilty. The greatest happiness a man could have in this world is to die for Christ. And if I have a thousand lives, I will undoubtedly give them all for Him. Thus I am grateful to you for giving me the possibility of offering myself and assuring my salvation."

* * *

The execution was to take place on that same day. He had enough time to write three brief letters. To Mariona, he wrote:

Dear Mariona:

Our lives were one but God wanted to separate them. I offer to God, in all possible sincerity, the love I declare for you – my intense, pure, and sincere affection.

I feel your misfortune, not mine. Be proud: two brothers and your fiancé. Poor Mariona!

How strange: I am unable to feel any grief for my fate. An inner joy that is intense and strong entirely overwhelms me. I wanted to give you a sad farewell letter, but I cannot. I am completely enwrapped in joyful thoughts, a presentiment of Glory.

I wanted to speak to you about much that I would have wanted, about all the tenderness that I have reserved for you, about all the happiness that could have been. But for me, all is secondary. I am going to make a great step.

One thing I ask of you: get married, if you can. From heaven I will bless your union and your children.¹ I do not want you to cry, I don't want it. Be proud of me. I love you.

¹ Maria fulfilled the request of Francesc. She got married and had her own children. Maria died on June 17, 1976.

I have no more time.

Francesc

To Fr. Galán:

Dear Father:

I am writing to you this letter after having been condemned to death and while waiting for my execution.

I am peaceful and happy, very happy. I hope to be in glory within a few moments. I renounce all the bonds and pleasures that the world can give me and the affection of those I love.

I give thanks to God who has given me a death with so much possibility for attaining salvation.

I have a notebook in which I wrote down ideas that occurred to me (my inventions).

And to his two sisters and his aunt Maria:

Dearest Ones:

They have just finished reading to me the death penalty. I have never been as peaceful as I am right now. I am sure that this night I will be with our parents in heaven. There I will wait for you. The Providence of God has chosen me as a victim for the errors and sins committed by our people. I go to my death with joy and peace. Never have I had so many possibilities of salvation as I do now. My mission in this life has come to an end. I offer to God all my present sufferings.

I don't want you to cry – this is the only thing I ask of you. I am very happy. I am giving pain to you whom I love so much. However, I am offering to God this affection for all the ties I may leave in this world.

Teresa: Be strong. Do not cry.... I gained such an immense fortune as this that I don't know how to thank God enough. I have sung with exactitude *Amunt, que es sols lo camí d'un día* (Courage, the journey is only for a day). Please forgive the pains and sufferings I have unwittingly caused you: I have always loved you very much. I don't want you to cry, understand?

María: My poor sister! You also will have to be strong. I don't want this blow to hurt you. If God were to give you children, give each of them a kiss for me. From heaven, I will be their uncle.

Give my brother-in-law a big hug. I hope that he could take my place and be your comfort in this life....

Auntie: At this moment, I feel profoundly grateful for all that you have done for us. In a few more years, we will see each other in heaven. May it be known how much you have spent generously in every way. From heaven I will pray for all that you so much desire.

Give my regards to Bastida, to Señora Francisqueta, the Didos – the wet-nurse and her husband – to Pedro, Puig, López, those companions of mine from the Federació whom I am unable to name. Tell all my friends that I die happily and that I will remember all of them in the life hereafter.

To the Fernández family, to my uncles and aunts at Vallmol and Jardín, to Carlos, to those in Alicante, Pravia, Sarriá... give them all my love.

Before the execution took place, Francesc was able to make his last confession. He celebrated the sacrament with Fr. Josep Vallès. The young priest was unable to restrain his tears as he consoled the young man: “Be at peace, my son. An angel like you do not deserve to stay longer in this world.”

* * *

Late that night Francesc was led out of his cell. He boarded the lorry with five other men. Higinio Sánchez Gómez and Segundo López Díaz were seminarians. Joan Perelló

was a volunteer soldier. Josep Miret Balcells was employed in the railways. Paulí Gort was a university student. They were all too young to die.

The lorry arrived at the cemetery and the condemned were ordered to immediately go down. There was no need for any ceremony; everything had to be done quickly. The six were made to face their executioners. A witness recounted: “Francesc was at the middle, tranquil and serene, his hands were joined, one above the other, as was his habit. His eyes showed that he was fully conscious during that tragic moment.” Just a few moments before being shot, he was able to say to his executioners: “I pardon you all until the end.”

Gunshots broke the night’s silence. It was 11:30. A few minutes more and it would be another day. The fallen body of Francesc was approached. His heart was still beating, but not for long. His head leaned to the right. “His slightly opened eyes,” a witness described, “were sweet and angelic.”

* * * * *

THE DECREE ON THE MARTYRDOM OF FRANCESC DE PAULA CASTELLÓ ALEU WAS PROMULGATED ON 18 DECEMBER 2000.

HE WAS BEATIFIED ON 11 MARCH 2001.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Congregatio de Causis Sanctorum. *Illerden. Canonizationis Servi Dei Francisci de Paola Castelló et Aleu, Viri Laici (1914-1936). Positio Super Martyrio*. Rome: CCS, 1992.
- Díaz i Carbonell, Romuald M. *Francisco de Paula Castelló Aleu: Servidor de Dios Hasta la Muerte*. Barcelona: Editorial La Hormiga de Oro, 1992.
- Peraire Ferrer, Jacint. *Cantando Hacia la Muerte: Heroico Testimonio Martirial del Joven Francisco Castelló Aleu*. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2001.

COPYRIGHT 2002 © THE HAGIOGRAPHY CIRCLE.