

A SAINT BY CHANCE

Fr. Evaristo Martinez
de Alegria, scj

**BIOGRAPHY OF BLESSED
JUAN MARIA DE LA CRUZ, SCJ**





The author

Father Evaristo José Martínez de Alegría Oroquieta, born in 1939, passionately cultivated his Dehonian religious vocation, which he combined with his love of history, literature, art, landscapes, and country. In Salamanca he carried out his ecclesiastical studies (1956–1964) and his civil studies in History (1966–1971). He completed his formation in Rome where he obtained a Licentiate in Liturgy and Archeology, a Diploma in Canon Law (1988) and qualification as Postulator in causes of beatification and canonization (2000). This last service was carried out between 1999–2012, when the beatifications of Fr. Juan María de la Cruz and Fr. León Dehon were proclaimed. He was also a postulator for the cause of Blessed Cristóbal de Santa Catalina Fernández de Valladolid, founder of the Hospital Sisters of Jesús of Nazareth from Córdoba. He died in Salamanca, at the age of 81, on December 5, 2020.

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“A saint by chance”

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Presentation

It is somehow a bit difficult not to be overcome with emotion while starting these few lines I've written. To evoke the character of this biography is to also evoke the biographer. About the former, I will let Fr. Evaristo speak to us. The author, who left us last December 5th 2020, nostalgically appears in my memories both in the maelstrom of preparing for the beatification of our protagonist, and in Rome during the Great Jubilee year of 2000. Fr. Evaristo was installed as Vice General Postulator of the SCJ Congregation only one year short of the March 11th, 2001, beatification date, with the commitment to do whatever it took going forward. In this context this small book is born that presents the figure of Blessed Mariano *Juan Maria de la Cruz* Garcia Mendez (1891-1936), a dehonian since 1926, after 10 years of priestly ministry the Church of Avila. His martyrdom was included in the group of 232 martyrs from Valencia, headed by the Blessed Jose Aparicio Sanz.

The author presents us with a classical biographical approach, but with its peculiarities. Perhaps the most notable is, in addition to giving voice to many witnesses and ordering the narrative, he builds it according to the great foundations of our dehonian spirituality. It is obvious that our path of spiritual life and dedicated apostolate leads to sainthood, the normal goal of every baptized life.

In those previously remembered days there were those who showed surprise at part of the work's title: A saint by "chance". They understood the phrase as if his martyrdom was an accident, a

mere chance. I haven't stopped thinking about this objection for some time and I still believe that it isn't the correct interpretation. Above all, martyrdom always originates from an exterior circumstance that puts the Christian in a situation to give testimony, as long as he is capable. In this manner, the "chance" freed Blessed Juan Maria from believing that what was about to occur was something sought or prepared by him. That would be an imposture of an immeasurable caliber! On the contrary, "chance" welcomed his leap, a leap that took him far beyond those repetitions in life that gives us a sense of security and of being ourselves. A leap that doesn't lead us to a fall, but that offers us an authentic handle to grip. The one that gives us truth puts Blessed Juan Maria in our world once again to illuminate it with the light that it reflects: the light of Crist. The miracle may also be how the Lord makes the martyr capable of giving testimony.

Hopefully the reading of this new edition revised and updated by the Provincial Delegation for the Causes of Beatification and Canonization, will also serve that purpose: to enable us to take the leap that, held by the hand of our Lord, he asks of us in our little stories, which may be called to form a part of the great story. May Blessed Juan Maria de la Cruz intercede for us all. Let us pray, at the same time, for his prompt canonization.

Fr. Juan Jose Arnaiz Ecker, scj
Provincial Superior Spain



One of many stories about saints

Highlands surround the city of Avila, between large blocks of granite raised like worn hands open to the sky, in trimmed horizons with strong summers and merciless winters. This plot of old Castilla has been the birthplace of “songs and saints”. Saint Teresa de Jesus and Saint Juan de la Cruz are the prototypes; this is the land of strong Christians. The numerous families of farmers and ranchers will be the cradle and furrow, on one hand of so many ordinary, austere and anonymous believers and on the other, of figures that the events of life itself make grow as God’s gift to his church, becoming the gospel made into reality daily.

Our protagonist, Fr. Juan, was born in San Esteban de los Patos (Avila), on the 25th of September of 1891. He was the first of fifteen brothers and when christened was given the name of Mariano. They gave him the same name as his father who, accompanied by his



wife doña Emerita exerted themselves in giving him a solid and sure Christian education through a living faith and a committed Christian life.

His family cared for the church and his father, as he came back from his labors in the fields in the evenings, lead novenas and rosaries because there wasn't a priest in their small community. Because of this, one of his brothers tells us, that very soon our Lord's calling would be answered by the one that everyone knew as Marianito. It was at the age of ten that he made the choice: to respond with all generosity to the vocation that he deeply felt towards the priesthood.

First it would be his parish priest who taught him his first letters. Then he was an external student at the Avila Seminary. Later he would enter the seminary to study Philosophy and Theology. His life in the Seminary, as remembered by his classmates and Superiors, was exemplary, because he was

“a role model in everything, distinguishing himself because of his profound humbleness, also being a young man of extraordinary talent”

One of the characteristics that accompanied him during his whole life was that despite an austere, sacrificial life of prayer and hard work,

“he was very jovial, he would have fun with everyone never breaking the harmony between classmates. He was a little saint”.

But he had one worry: it wasn't that he was not clearly determined to serve the Lord, but that he was looking for a life of greater interiority and dialogue with HIM. It seemed that parish ministry was taking him further from his ideal. He would have his first experience knocking at the door of the Dominican Fathers of Santo Tomas de Avila “where he could not stay very long due to his poor health”. It was the course 1913 – 14. So, he kept looking.



A good priest in tough towns

On the 18th of March in 1916, he was ordained a priest in Avila. The prayers of that day said “imitate the thing you treat” and thus, following the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth, he dedicated many years of his life to parish ministry in small towns of the province, where, despite the passing of time, there are still memories of that priest, “insignificant” physically, but a man of God in the middle of the Castilian people, punished by poverty, the political situation and the lack of horizons.

The parishes of Hernansancho, Villanueva de Gomez, San Juan de la Encinilla, Santo Tome de Zabarcos y Sotillo de las Palomas were the small part of Gods people that the church of Avila entrusted to him. They were poor and sparsely populated, yet, rich in Christian roots.

But in the decade of the 1920s there was a storm forming that would devastate the people and land of Spain, so violent that the church would be battered and disarmed as it lost, as witnesses of their faith, countless children of the church, an innumerable amount of lay Christians along with some 6.832 more bishops, priests and nuns. To be recognized as a Christian in those days you would pay a high price, almost always with your life.

On the 23rd of May, 1916, Fr. Mariano would take road to Hernansancho. A few months earlier Bishop Joaquin Beltran y

Asensio had ordained him priest. There he would develop an intense pastoral labor. It was based on a humble simple presence, of prolonged prayer and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament during the freezing nights of Avila, through corporal mortification and sleeplessness to awaken in his parishioners faith, worship, and, above all confession, Eucharistic and Marian devotion, and refraining from blasphemy. All were framed within charity and exquisite service.

We have already said it many times. They were very poor people in those desolate moorlands. And the village priest lives with what his parishioners give him. His former parishioners, now very old, remember that Fr. Mariano never asked for anything, he would not even pass the basket. His parishioners thought he was strange. He would answer:

“it would be something like turning the church into a bank”

His Door was always open, day and night, for the needy, the ill, whoever needed him...

It is told in the town of Hernansancho that, on a certain occasion, there was a fierce fight that end in bloodshed. The murderer left several people on the ground. The parish priest, Fr. Mariano, came to assist the injured in the middle of the gunfire. The attacker told one of his friends in Peñalba, a neighboring town, in a wedding banquet that was being celebrated:

“I have left some goatlings on the ground in your town. I didn't feel like killing the priest because he is a saint”.

San Juan de la Encinilla, would turn out to be the largest of the small

towns confided to his pastoral efforts, where very soon his congregation and, especially his sister who attended to him noticed the “style” of priest that by luck had fallen to them: A man of prayer, nights of worship before

the Blessed Sacrament, of corporal mortification, of preaching, catechesis and personal encounters, of simple humbleness like so many village priests who have quietly served, educated and accompanied their faithful.

Church of Hernansancho



Detail of the altarpiece,
San Juan de la Encinilla

Parish Church of Santo Tomás de Zabarcos



Spiritual Horizons

The black clouds of violence, blood, unreason death started to appear on the horizon. Amidst the “shooting”, poverty, hunger and brutality; the calling to God was still making itself present in Mariano’s life. He was looking for another answer.

A priest friend of his, whom he would often see, commented:

“He was an exemplary priest..., but he often repeated to me: ‘I am happy, but I confess that I am living outside of my center, parochial life weighs heavily on me. And on the other hand I am so annoyed by my illness, that if it weren’t for obedience I would have taken a different road: my irresistible inclination is the religious life’”.

In his search he ended up in the Victoria diocese (1921-1922), where for almost a year he served as chaplain for the Brothers of the Christian School in Nanclares de Oca. While there he asked the Bishop if he could enter the Order of the Discalced Carmelites. He was accepted and began his Novitiate in Larrea (Vizcaya).

Once more his health betrayed him. He doesn’t resist the demands of a life that, at that time, was very ascetic, very harsh, but which he wanted to embrace, an intimate contemplative life.

He went back to Avila. For two years (1923-1924) he was in charge of the parishes of Santo Tome de Zabarcos and Sotillode las Palomas. His stay here was

brief, but the footprints he left there were very fruitful.

Fr. Mariano lived with profound love and devotion towards the Sacrament of the Eucharist. For this reason, he took advantage of every chance he had to visit the churches tabernacle in every town or city he passed through.

He would visit frequently the church of the Religious Sisters Reparatrix in Madrid. One day, in 1925, he met Fr. Guillermo Zicke there. This religious was the founder of Priests of the Heart of Christ in the province (Padres Reparatrix) in Spain. They became friends and Mariano told him about his search, the concerns of a heart that didn’t rest, that didn’t find the place to which God was calling him. Fr. Zicke spoke to him about his Congregation, the one of Fr. Leon Dehon, of the project that inspired him, about his way of life... The fact is that Mariano entered the small family in which Fr. Guillermo was the “father”... Becoming a Religious Reparatrix he turned into our Fr. Juan. More precisely Juan Maria de la Cruz. Thus in his new religious name he recalled two of his great loves: Santa Maria and San Juan de la Cruz, from Avila like he was.

On October 31st, 1926, the solemnity of Christ the King, Fr. Juan made his religious profession in “spirit of love, oblation and reparation”. This project, inspired by the attitudes, words and deeds of Jesus, would encourage and illuminate him in the last ten years of his existence, his apostolic work and ministry.

Founding the Congregation, Father Dehon had first given it the name “Oblates (Victims) of the Sacred Heart”. Fr. Juan María de la Cruz would celebrate this vocation he found as Oblate-Victim, in the supreme sacrifice on August

23, 1936, and that his life, as a religious reparador, would be a hidden and serene *via crucis*.

Fr. Guillermo left us this testimony about Fr. Juan:

"I can assure you that while I was Superior in Puente la Reina I admitted him as an postulant in our Congregation. Being already professed, he showed a desire to improve himself further in the contemplative life, requesting his own admission—with the consent of his superiors—in the Order of the Trappists. And as a test he spent time in the monastery of Cobreces, from which he came back to the Congregation shortly after due to health issues".

He spent a year in Novelda (Alicante) after his Novitiate under the guidance of Fr. Maestro and the community that accompanied him. There, in our school, the only school that remains of those founded in the time of Fr. Dehon, he held the position of Professor of Religion and at the same time attended the needs of the adjacent church in his priestly ministry.

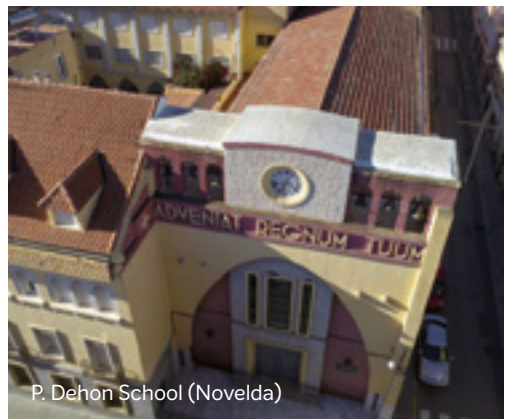
He was a man of profound inner life and in love with the saints particularly the martyrs. In 1927 he had the opportunity to visit Rome. In that visit the catacombs of S. Calixto and other historical places that conserve the memory of martyrs caught his attention. It was hard to pull him away from there, as years later one of his companions who vividly remembered the holy Spanish father testified.

On the way back, he had the opportunity to pass through London and the joy of approaching the Grotto. Mary was his other great attraction. For her he

was able to travel many roads and pass through not always easy paths in search of sanctuaries and chapels devoted to the Virgin so widespread throughout all the Spanish geography. These were some of the things he would tell the seminarians at Puente la Reina, when he came home after his travels in search of help and vocations.



Novelda Church, Alicante (before 1936)



P. Dehon School (Novelda)



Gothic crucifix of Puente la Reina

In search of bread with much love

“My ways are not your ways”. This is Fr. Juan’s dilemma as he starts living the spirit of oblation and immolation in which he made his religious profession a year earlier. In his new community of Puerto la Reina, that slow intimate and profound preparation will be accomplished through the Holy Spirit shaping his life..., and his death in that bloody and fratricidal August of 1936.

His task consisted in leaving his house, spending long periods of time away, and renouncing the “safety” of a regular and fraternal life in a religious house.

The Seminary of Puente lived moments of hope because they had many seminarians, but there was extreme poverty because of the lack of resources. Fr. Guillermo knew Fr. Juan very well and thought was the right person, as a man of God, zealous in his

apostolate and clever, to set out on the roads of Navarra and the Basque Country in search of collaboration and economic aid. Fr. Guillermo also had the objective of creating a network of friends for the Seminary to better serve the Church and future missions like the one he served in Cameroon but had to abandon due to being expelled for being German during World War I.

Once more his Superior, Fr. Guillermo, tells us:

“What can truly seem like a contradiction, here became a reality because of the mere fact is that Fr. Juan was a man of holy obedience putting in practice the spirit of self-denial and sacrifice which is characteristic of the Priests of Sacred Heart of Jesus, immolating himself, day by day, for the sake of pure love for Our Lord and for the souls that are dearest to Him”.

And to show nature of this “frailico” as they said in Puente la Reina, he continues recounting:

“So that a life of hustle and full of distractions would not make a dent in his religious life and union with God, sought above all to draw up a life plan, or a particular rule, and so that everything was subjected to holy obedience, and this way be deserving of heaven, he present it before leaving to his Superior, in order for him to seal it with his signature and approval”.



Seminary in Puente la Reina

Footprints that lead to God

Many have been the religious who have asked for handouts, aid, money, door to door, town to town, so to feed and educate so many children in their seminaries. Many times, in the eyes of men, they would be rated as uneducated or weird. But they live for God and brought God to the people. They were humble Lay Brothers many of whom have been canonized or beatified for their charity and love of the Lord which they shared with rich and poor, wise and ignorant. Men of God, known, regarded and in certain moments expected as they passed through the towns. Beggars for God's sake, brothers who shared the Word and prayers with everyone.

Our Fr. Juan also left a trail of the “good odor of Christ” among those who had the opportunity to know him: priests which he helped during his priestly ministry (he was a very good preacher and he liked to celebrate the ministry of reconciliation –penance), religious (he stayed in their houses whenever he could and there his humbleness, his spirit of prayer and mortification could be observed) and many lay Christians with whom he shared the charity and tenderness of the Heart of Christ in their problems and needs “as a flame of living love”. They always had the same memory: “He was a saint”.

During his travels, he worried a lot and was always on guard against what would be offensive to God and to good manners. Several times in hostels and

inns he would ask that bawdy paintings be removed. He would buy them, not worrying about their value, and then make them disappear.

One of his closest colleagues tells us that:

“He did not lose his passion on these trips at all, but on the contrary took advantage of the opportunity to carry out his apostolate, spreading devotion to the perpetual and real Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, as well as devotion to merciful Love”.

And another adds his concern for vocational animation:

“He favored vocations towards our Institute, in such way that many

Fr. Juan Maria with two students



Fathers of our Congregation owe their vocation to this servant of God”.

Despite a hectic life of travel, meeting so many people and diverse characters:

“He always conserved the initial passion from his Novitiate. And because of this he would do the impossible and participate in his community’s retreats every First Friday of each month, showing his Superiors his efforts. It could be said that the Servant of God was a providence for the Congregation. In his time free from seeking help he would recollect himself before the Lord and do his practices of piety”.

This is what everyone who knew him attests to, especially the men and women religious from different Institutes.



Through dark ravines You guide me

On April 14, 1931, the Republic of Spain was proclaimed. The black clouds seen on the horizon turned into a storm. Finally the storm is unleashed in the big cities and industrial centers. A moderate change in society and politics was sought. But things got out of hand and gave way to the harshest closed radicalism from both left and right ideologies.

The Spanish Church would turn into a fundamental enemy to combat. Perhaps it was the easiest because it didn't offer resistance. Anarchists, socialists, communists, intellectuals and anti-clerical leaders blamed it, along with businessmen and the army, for all of the problems with the social situation regarding workers and peasants, as well as the evident delay with respect to an open plural and developed Europe.

It wasn't easy to walk amongst that society in which laws and propaganda tried to relegate the priest to the sacristy. The mockery towards the church was brutal. The difficulties and situations that they encountered were very harsh even in the areas where Fr. Juan moved, Navarra and the Basque Country given the radicalism, and the laws everyone was compelled to obey.

Nor is it strange that, in the Christian and religious environment ideas such as "crusades" or "martyrdom" would come up. This is how, in fact, many religious people and priests lived, including Fr. Juan who expressed himself in this

manner when talking to his community or students about this subject, commenting on what he had to go through in those days.

One of his students tells us of a case that illustrates his conviction and enthusiasm for martyrdom.

"It happens that a son of my grandmother, a Capuchin monk missionary in China was taken prisoner by the communists. Knowing of my grandmother's displeasure, God's servant lost no time in going to her house to encourage and console her, and I remember that his words were those of congratulations, more or less that: 'Your son is a martyr. ¡Oh! How I wish I was so lucky to be persecuted and die for Christ'".

The years preceding July 18, 1936, the date the Civil War started, were going to be "harsh" for a man like Fr. Juan who followed, imperturbably, his priestly and religious ministry and a quiet work as an educator in the Seminary and among his companions.

Fr. Zicke tells us:

"Being of a speculative character and endowed with spiritual gifts, he had given proof of an uncommon doctrinal preparation. In meetings with parents so to resolve moral and dogmatic cases, 'he would leave everybody amazed by the complete quotes from the Holy Fathers which he knew by memory'. It is true, he added, that he didn't have much practical sense to be the boys' professor, especially to keep his young students disciplined and interested. Nevertheless, they were happy with him because in recess and field trips he would tell them

interesting stories, in a very lively and close way, and he taught them funny songs”.

His time at the Seminary among the students left a memory of a man of admirable piety and fervor. You could find Fr. Juan in his room or in the chapel. The celebration of his masses always

had the danger of boring his young and restless altar servers, which is why, on many occasions, like Saint Philip Neri, he would ask to be left alone with the Lord, in that silent dialog of adoration and love, characteristic of those who profoundly live the mystery of Love enclosed in the Eucharist.

Oil on canvas. The martyrs of Valencia 1936-1939
Valencia Cathedral



An ill-fated Betania

The dark year of 1936 goes by. In one of his trips he has the occasion to visit his mother, one of his brothers and his sister in law. She remembers that:

“Once, at home, speaking with me, his mother and my husband, he predicted the next revolution and expressed his desire to die a martyr. He would say to my husband: ‘Look, Victor, happy is he who is fortunate enough to shed his blood for our Lord!’”

“And these are the circumstances, where the guiding hand of God is shown, that led Fr. Juan, precisely in that crucial year, from the tranquil and safe place of Navarra to the region of Cuenca, where danger quickly threatened and presented itself”. This is pointed out in the *Positio super martyrio*, the best documented source for this small history, from which we have gathered texts and testimony through these pages.

Cuenca has an unforgettable name in its highlands, the Garaballa Sanctuary. It was abandoned by the Trinitarians and the Padres Reparadores received it from the Bishop of that city as the headquarters of the future Novitiate and a place of rest and repose.

This is the place where, at the beginning of July, Fr. Juan arrived restore his fragile health and to rest from his work and travels, enjoying the tranquility and peace of those remote sites almost forgotten by the “mundane noise” as Fray Luis de Leon said.

“But the town people, even though tough and uneducated in matters of religion, at first were not ill-behaved with the newcomers, but as things developed that year, became more and more indifferent and cold, until after the second elections of May (1936) they turned openly hostile, with few exceptions”.

This was the state of “rest and tranquility” which Fr. Juan found... Even so, in this short period, there were moments he manifested zeal and courage towards the things of God, not having any problem, as things stood, to reproach a peasant for his blasphemies, or to open a church on a festive day, sounding the bells and celebrating the Eucharist, because the priest fled or was hiding. In the air strongly resounded the psalm that says: “The zeal of your house devours me...”



Let us go up to Jerusalem

Church of Santos Juanes, Valencia



Circumstances also forced Fr. Juan to take the road to Valencia. On July 18, the so-called National Uprising took place that triggered the Civil War and with it "a religious persecution that led to extermination."

Seeing how things were, alerted by friends and by the passing of troops and militia through their area the superior of Garaballa that same day gathered his religious and told them that they should part immediately in different directions to protect their lives.

Father Juan took the road to Valencia. He left the robe and put on a large used jacket. Because of this he would be known by his fellow prisoners with the affectionate nickname of "P. Chaqueton" (Big Jacket).

¿Why Valencia? There he was not known to anyone, so they thought he could go unnoticed in the foreseeable "hunt for priests". And there was such "hunt" which was ruthless and cruel. In August, in all of Spain, there were a total of 2.077 murdered, including ten bishops. One of the leaders of this unjustified barbarism, Jose Diaz, boss of the Spanish section of the III International, clearly stated in Valencia:

"In the provinces we control, the Church no longer exists. Spain has greatly surpassed the work of the Soviets, because today the Church in Spain is annihilated".

In Valencia, of 1.200 diocesan priest, 327 would be murdered. Without having foreseen it he had ended up at the riskiest place. This is what one of his companions tells us:

"I dealt with him in 1936 and I know the feelings of the Servant of God, prepared to accept whatever God wanted for the salvation of our homeland. He had blind faith in the triumph of Gods cause, even if he had to suffer great punishment for the social sins. He would communicate his enthusiasm and his faith to all who approached, encouraging them in the face of the great dangers they would have to bear".

He tried to contact Fr. Lorenzo Canto's collaborator who lived near the church of Santos Juanes, as a point of reference as he fled.

This church, located next to Lonja (an extraordinary model of civilian gothic) and of the Central Market (a remarkable modernist work of iron, crystal and ceramics from the twenties), is one of artistic monuments characteristic of the city since the dawn of the Reconquista. Its walls and nave contain traces of the passing of the centuries and of art. Its decoration is baroque and its frescoes, were painted by Palomino, today practically gone due to the fire.

"The Servant of God found himself having to pass in front of it, while it was in flames, the fire burning sacred objects piled up in the building's center. As many witnesses remember, the zeal of the Servant of God was known to all, in union with his strong and impulsive temperament, which wouldn't allow him to stand idly by in the face of the offences against God and the desecration of the church".

“Between briars and thorns”

A curious and poorly dressed stranger. Not even a gardener. One of many who fled to the city in search of accommodations in those days, the last days of July 1936, approaches and gets in the crowd to see; apparently one of many.

And he is heard muttering aloud that what is happening is too much.

A Lawyer, a companion while in jail, recounts this:

“It was the last days of July of the year 1936 when Gods servant was taken to jail or the first days of August; he was locked up in a cell in the fourth gallery if I remember correctly.

I knew him for this reason: they told me that they had incarcerated a priest recently, because he had publicly protested because of the fire in the church of Santos Juanes.

This awoke my curiosity and I wanted to find out directly from him, because it was hard for me to believe that, someone would have so much courage or be so naïve so to assume these such drastic consequences.

In fact, I asked him, and he told me that, when he saw the fire in the church of the Santos Juanes, talking

to himself said out loud these or similar words:

*-¡What horror! ¡What crime!
¡What sacrilege! –*

When they heard these words one of those who perhaps participated in the fire or was happy about it, said to him:

-¡You are a “priest”!

An expression equivalent to: ‘You are a right-winger or a traditionalist. To which the Servant of God answered:

-I am a priest.

For that reason, they proceeded to arrest him”.

He would write, from jail, on the feast of Saint Lorenzo, to the SCJ General Superior, Fr. Philippe, congratulating him on his name’s day and informing him of his arrest:

“Here I am, Most Reverend Father, detained for almost three weeks, for uttering some phrases in protest against the horrendous spectacle of the burned and desecrated churches. ¡Blessed Be God! ¡In all things may his divine will be done! I am very happy to be able to suffer something for Him, who suffered so much for me, a poor sinner”.

A day before he wrote to the mayor of Garaballa:

“From the first day I arrived in Valencia, I find myself detained in this city’s Model Jail, with many other priests, religious and lay people. But thank God I am tranquil and resigned to what the Divine Providence wills for me. I occupy cell 476, fourth gallery”.



Without Palm Sunday

Cell 476, fourth gallery... almost the title of a movie. A film with little white and a lot of black, filmed at a fast pace, with an oppressive Valencian summer weather, in the overcrowding of events and people that the hatred of war and of fratricidal brutalization will fill the cells, galleries and yards. Every evening, a prostituted announcement of ¡*Liberty!* left empty spaces that everyone knew were going to be occupied in the many mansions of eternity.

Fr. Juan, or Fr. Chaqueton, wasn't going to go unnoticed. The direct testimonies "give us a very precise idea of the fidelity of the Servant of God during his detention, to his priesthood and the very practices of religious life the he wanted to prolong in the painful days of his incarceration".

We have a silent testimony, but one of extraordinary significance, a precious inheritance: the small diary that was found in a pocket of his pants the day his remains were exhumed. Full of bullet holes and stained with the blood of Fr. Juan, it kept the annotated schedule he had written as a daily life schedule: *the 'schedule that he followed in prison and in which all the acts prescribed by our Rule are shown* (it began at five in the morning and finished at nine at night). Going through it, it surprises and highlights Fr. Juan's fidelity. He does not allow himself to be conditioned by the bitter reality of imprisonment and the tragic forecast of a nearby death, getting closer to becoming normal, each afternoon a dark

ritual of prisoners who are made to leave their cells without ever returning.

It occurred to him to draw a "*Via crucis*" on the walls of his cell. It almost cost him to be sent to the punishment cell. This event speaks, on one hand, of his fidelity towards the little details and customs of his religious congregation and, on the other hand, of a shared meditation with the cross on his shoulders in reparative oblation to the Father, during the long hours of solitude and uncertainty shared with the crucified Christ to give Life and defeat death.

We know he did absolutely nothing to hide his identity as a priest. He was clearly aware that he wasn't imprisoned for his political ideas, but for being a priest and he knew that if he was going to be shot it was for this reason. So, in the short time of his captivity he started to manifest, simply, plainly and courageously, among his fellow prisoners that he was a Religious and a Priest. They believed he was taking a risk.

And so we could see him in the prison yard leading the Rosary aloud,

"...and since we are guarded by sentries with rifles, who insulted and threatened us, it was advisable not to say the prayer to avoid provoking them. One priest –which could easily have been him– said that nothing could have been better than to die praying, and thus we continued with our prayers..."

I remember seeing him every day in the prison yard praying with his prayer book, for an hour or an hour and a half. He was seen praying so much that someone said: 'Someday, they are going to kill Fr. Chaqueton, like a little bird'.

You might think that this was a type of insolent challenge, but as another fellow priest, also in prison, says:

"I have no information of him trying any method to regain his liberty and in relation to this assumption I'm convinced that he wouldn't do anything incompatible with his priestly status. While incarcerated there was nothing insolent or provocative that could justify his death".

And another witness of those days would say:

"He practiced his ministry with whomever asked, encouraged everybody, but this made him understand that moderation was intrinsic to his priestly character. Absolutely no one can say that he made insolent gestures, rather the contrary".

Even the prison plumber was incarcerated. It was he who prevented Fr. Juan from going to the punishment cell. This was the image he had of the Servant of God:

"He always behaved as a worthy priest. If he was in the yard and heard the bells chime on the hour, he would pray with who ever wanted to pray. Something that on many occasions surprised everyone. In other moments I personally saw him praying in his cell. I never saw him being rude with anyone".



Witnesses in the heat of the night



A letter exists from the religious redeptorist Fr. Tomas Vega, a cellmate, that Fr. Guillermo Zicke includes in a biography he wrote about his congregational brother that, among other things, evokes those days in prison and that of the figure of the Servant of God, “*glorious martyr of Jesus Christ, Reverend Fr. Juan Garcia, my cellmate*”.

“... I was lucky to know and deal with him, shortly after the Servant of God entered prison, on July 22, 1936. He edified us all from the first day on through his piety and devotion. We would pray the breviary together during the first month of incarceration, when we had three hours of recreation in the morning and three hours in the afternoon in the courtyard, where the prisoners from the fourth gallery had recreation. He was with Reverend Fr. Recaredo de los Rios (companion in the beatification ceremony, but named Ricardo de los Rios Fabregat) a Salesian who was also a martyr and a Servant of God as well. We had already seen with what great religious fervor he prayed. It was very common to see him kneeling in the center of the courtyard, although there was always someone, because of circumstances, who would advise him not to show those external signs of devotion. He would answer that there was no need to respect humans but more than ever he had to confess Christ, and that it was necessary to imitate the martyrs from the first centuries, who praying on their knees, prepared for martyrdom.”

We joined with a good number of prisoners around eleven in the

morning to pray the Litanies of the Saints, and on festive days pray and read the Holy Mass in public (which we didn't have the luck to celebrate in prison); Fr. Juanito, as we called him, never missed.

In the afternoon, each priest would gather a group of prisoners to pray the Holy Rosary; Fr. Juanito had a select group, and not only did they pray the Rosary but also other prayers and did spiritual readings, He would go from one group to group when the common prayers were finished and encourage everybody in the virtues and love of God. He was truly zealous.

One day going down to the courtyard, he told me that he had a great joy: that morning he had received Jesus in the Sacrament. A professor from the Seminary had arrived and brought the Blessed Sacrament with him; but Fr. Juanito didn't stop until he received

Holy Communion. Even more: he convinced the professor to leave him the Blessed Sacrament one day, and for him that was a heavenly day.

After a month of being incarcerated we were confined to our cells and were only allowed out in the courtyard by sections, one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon. As I lived on a different floor than his, I could no longer accompany him, but he left a deep impression on all of us of his great holiness and virtue.

A few days later we learned out that he had gotten out of prison: we did not know he had been released to be martyred. He was one of the first from the Model Prison of Valencia to give his life for God and for Spain. Blessed is he who achieved the crown of martyrdom. ¡Blessed his Congregation that today feels glorified by such a great martyr!..."



He was happy to suffer for Jesus

When he founded the Congregation, Fr. Dehon named it “Oblates of the Sacred Heart”. Fr. Juan María de la Cruz would celebrate his vocation found as an Oblate by giving his life on August 23, 1936. His life, as a religious reparator, was very similar to that hidden and serene “*via crucis*” that a certain Jesus traveled two thousand years ago.

We are, therefore, on the night of August 23, 1936. The Father was going to accept the total oblation of Fr. Juan in the fields of Silla, in a farm called “El Sario”, in the place known as La Coma. It resembled that garden of Gethsemane, full of olive trees, that Jesus knew. Witnesses to what was going to happen were the stars of a summer night, the other nine murdered companions, and the lights from pickup trucks that illuminated the irrigation ditch and along the wall. In a classical ritual that has happened hundreds of times, the victims were lined up, mistreated and shot. This is how the medical testimonies denounce what happened as the remains of Fr. Juan were identified, exhumed and transferred to Puente la Reina in 1940, so that he would be among those seminarians to whom he had dedicated a large part of his life, of apostolic service and ministry.

Let it be Fr. Lorenzo Canto, his first superior in Garaballa, also incarcerated in Valencia (he had already experienced in Mexico the same situation, during the persecution of Calles from which he was able to flee and return to Spain) shortly after him but set free, and being able to practice his ministry in that Church in the catacombs, that tells us about his encounter with the remains of Fr. Juan María de la Cruz:

“I presented myself to the municipal judge, asking if on August 23, 1936, ten prisoners had been executed in the municipality Silla. The answer was affirmative, adding that he was required to take charge of ten bodies that appeared on the road to Madrid, in the territory of Silla, and were transported by their own executioners to the municipal cemetery. He told me more. There was the intention of photographing the corpses, but fear stopped him. I wanted to be absolutely sure, so I described Fr. Juan and how he was poorly dressed. The Judge told me that he had indeed been shot on the indicated date. He added that when the gravedigger buried Fr. Juan, all the executioners agreed that it was the body of a priest and that he had



replied that for them they were all priests”.

And another of the witnesses, Father Ignacio Belda, tells us:

“I would like to add that I am among the few witnesses to the exhumation and that, as a sign and strength of its value, the fact



that in the remains were found the Profession Cross and the scapular of the Congregation perforated with two shots. Also, an agenda, also pierced by several shots, in which the time he was in prison is written and in which all the acts prescribed by our Rule appear.

A saint for today?



All times and places have “their saints”. There are always figures of life and holiness that are particularly eloquent when you want to hear the light breeze that moves by your side, despite the countless noises of postmodernism we live in.

On occasions they are voices screaming in the desert, of those who live their faith boldly amidst the conflicts of the times; and become fearless, paying with their own lives in a testimony of truth that does not leave the believer of yesterday nor today in peace.

There is a text by Elie Wiesel, a victim of the Nazi concentration camps for the mere fact of being Jewish, who speaks of the prophet. In our case we can perfectly apply it to so many thousands and thousands of witnesses, from all latitudes and Christian denominations,

whom John Paul II fervently asked that their memory not be lost:

“He is a mirror of its time, and certainly lives outside of time; he is always awake, always watchful; he is never indifferent, least of all in the face of injustice, divine or human, at any time or in any place where he may nestle. Messenger of God together with man, he sometimes acts as man’s messenger before God. Restless and unsettled man, he always waits for a sign, a call. Frequently, persecuted, he finds himself alone, even when he addresses the masses, when he talks to God or to himself, when he describes the future or evokes the past. We think of the various martyrs of Nazism and fascism, of the dictatorial regimes of Latin America, or of the countries subject to Stalinist communism. They are the ones who have the audacity to travel untrodden paths without any pride, aware of their fragility and the risks they run, strong in their faith in the Truth that sets them free.”

Fr. Juan walked the paths of his spiritual religious and priestly experience, apparently serene until the moment of his martyrdom, like many other religious and priests of his time. But they were also aware of what was taking place for the Church and for them in Spain.

Along these lines we have highlighted his style and way of life that made the halo, the reputation of “saint”, grow around this well-known humble figure.

His objective was to serve God, according to the design that was revealed to him throughout his life until the definitive choice of service in religious life, in a Congregation that, by project

and charism, corresponded to his lively and burning desire of “love, immolation and reparation”.

His behavior in his spiritual life is described very well by Fr. Zicke:

“I can say from my personal knowledge that his piety shone with an extraordinary love for the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin (...) The favorite topic of his

preaching and instructions was the Sacred Heart’s merciful love.

He visited the Virgin’s Sanctuaries even at the cost of great sacrifice. He recited the Breviary with extreme scruples. (...) In the celebration of Holy Mass he spent more time than usual, particularly at the moment of the Consecration. (...) On many occasions he manifested his zeal for the glory of God”.



They recognized him when breaking bread

Two characteristics distinguished his faith and his love: his devotion to the Eucharist and to the Blessed Virgin. On the other hand, his vocation towards the religious life in the Padres Reparadores finds its proper context in his love for Eucharistic adoration and for Reparation. Moreover, we know that during his trips as a “beggar”,

“If a religious function was being held and he wasn’t a preacher, especially on the festivities of the Holy Virgin, at the request of the Community (in which he was staying) he would propose himself. And it would happen that, without any preparation, he would move the listeners with great admiration from all. Once they pointed out his ease with words from the pulpit. He used to say that when you love the Virgin Mary a lot, you don’t need great preparation. In Rome they still remember him for his love towards Holy Mary where, without even knowing Italian he spoke and preached about her”.

A Sacramentine Father, who met him on a trip to his community, after recalling so many uplifting examples said:

“Now, after getting news of his martyrdom I realize that Fr. Juan was a priest that you could say – according to the well-known Pauline

phrase – you could say it wasn’t him, but rather it was Christ who lived in Him”.

A memory is like a photograph. Another testimony of his last hours is offered to us by his Superior and companion in the Garaballa Shrine in the month of July 1936, in the serenity of solitude while dark clouds were gathering:

“The enthusiasm with which he talked about martyrdom was admirable, clearly foreseeing what was approaching, invigorating all of us in such a way that from then on nothing other than martyrdom was talked about”.

It was Christ who lived in him, that was preparing him to testify to the truth and to go out carrying the cross, walking to the walls surrounding Silla, to be crucified like the Master, outside the city. Not in the light of day but in the light of headlights, that, between olive trees, blurred his long shadow on the wall.

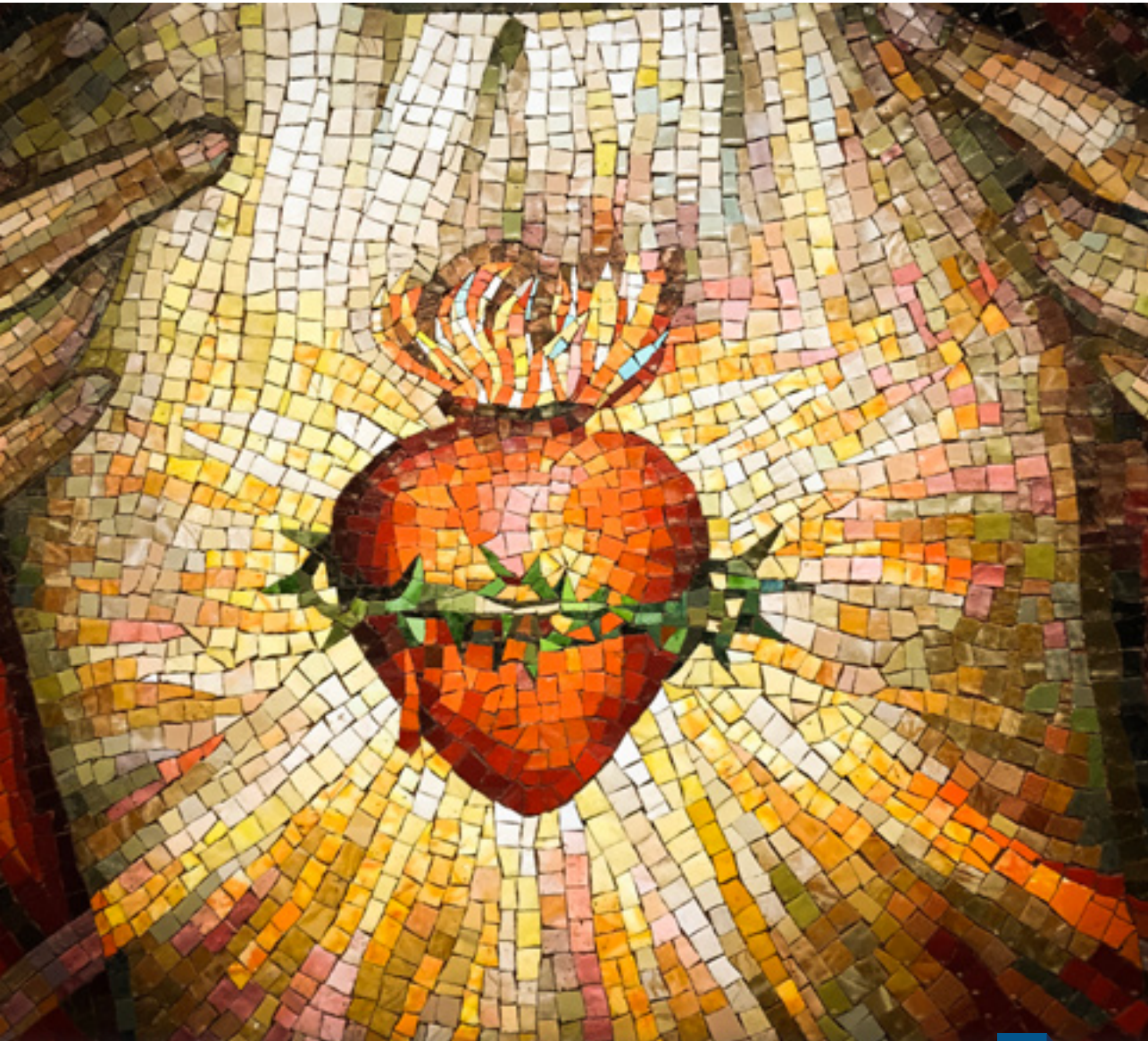
To remember these witnesses of faith is to put, in the midst of our society, which has surrendered to a disillusioning materialism and a growing agnosticism, clues along the road that speak to us of the possibility of living the values of the gospel and building God’s reign, “the reign of the Heart of Jesus in souls and in societies” as Fr. Dehon, founder of the Padres Reparadores

(Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus) would say.

The great and inhuman religious and political persecutions of the 20th century (there is no shame in calling things as they are) have left so many sad memories throughout the earth of so many brothers, Christian or not, humiliated, crushed and murdered. It is up to us to cry out: "Never again!" and make them present, imitate their

faith, share their strength, live their love, believe and hope, because the Lord will be with us until the end of time.

The saints are the living presence of the mystery of Christ in the Church; examples and witnesses of a lived and committed faith. Furthermore, they remind us that, as friends of the Lord, together with Him they continue to intercede for us. Such are the saints, as is our Blessed Juan María de la Cruz.



Epilogue

Saint Pope John Paul II declared Fr. Juan María de la Cruz blessed on March 11, 2001. In that celebration in Saint Peter's Square in the Vatican, he was recognized among 232 martyrs. Most of them gave their lives in Valencia during the tragic Spanish civil war. Among the many pilgrims who joyfully attended Rome were relatives of Fr. Juan María and others who knew him in life. Together with the Dehonian Congregation, they shared the emotion for the first beatification of one of their sons.

Before reaching that moment of great joy, the beatification–canonization process went through different stages. Since 1959, when it was officially initiated in Valencia, it passed through the diocesan stages first and then the Roman stage, the study of the writings of the Servant of God in 1963, and the official recognition of the martyrdom in 1999 that definitively opened the door to the long-awaited beatification.

With this public declaration of holiness, the Dehonians began to have a liturgical memory for Fr. Juan María de la Cruz, which occurs every September 22. The Archdiocese of Valencia celebrates it on this same date, together with the rest of those beatified that day. The diocese where he was born, Ávila, commemorates Fr. Juan María on the anniversary of his martyrdom, on August 23.

We should acknowledge the commendable labor of Fr. Antonio Aguilera Álamo, who was able to see start, who could see that his good work had borne fruit. We also want to emphasize that our blessed is the Protector of Dehonian Vocations. This is how he is invoked by our Congregation, which recognizes his tireless work on behalf of the seminarians of Puente la Reina for nine years, as well as his ability to now

intercede before God.

For Puente la Reina, the place of his grave, the beatification meant the relocation of Fr. Juan's relics from the school chapel to a more prominent place, the Church of the Crucifix. In this manner, the memory of the Seminaries guardian angel remains and is visibly strengthened for all those who come there.

The inspiration that the testimony of the saints implies, whether they are canonized or just beatified, whether they are martyrs or not, that their life deserves to be disseminated to all Christians. As Pope Francisco reminds us in his apostolic exhortation *Guadete et exsultate*, “we have an enormous cloud of witnesses (Hebrew, 12, 1) who encourage us not to stop along the way, they encourage us to continue walking towards the goal” (n.3). For Dehonians these witnesses who encourage us are the Servants of God, Fr. Dehon, Founder; Fr. Andrés Prevot, one of the first novice masters in our Congregation, Fr. Martino Capelli, martyr; Bishop Wittebols and Fr. Bernardo Longo, martyrs; as well as others who also gave their lives in a violent manner in World War II or in wars in Cameroon and Congo. The study and knowledge of their biographies brings us closer to their experiences and encourages us to offer our own testimony. God calls us every day to be saints with the help of his grace. Participation in the life of the Church makes it possible for us to transmit the faith, which is only communicated from heart to heart. In this biography beats a love that drinks from God and quenches everyone's thirst with words and works of love.

Fr. Alfonso González Sánchez, scj
Provincial vice–postulator

Prayer for the Canonization of Blessed Juan María de la Cruz, martyr

God, our Father, You are rich in goodness and mercy,
Grant us that through the intercession of your servant
Blessed Juan Maria de la Cruz, dehonian martyr,
we may imitate his generous life
and commit ourselves to the fullest in the service of vocations.
May we always be witnesses of your love
among the poor and the humble.
In your heart, grant our desire
to see him glorified in the Church.
We hope that, through his prayers,
we can obtain the grace we ask for ...
To you who live and reign forever and ever.
Amen.





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