

**Blesseds Carmen, Rosa and Magdalena Fradera  
Fr. Joaquin Masmitja  
And the Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary**

The scene opens in Spain during the Spanish Civil War of 1931-1939. A wide-scale persecution of Catholics, referred to as the Red Terror, ran rampant across the entire country. Individual clergymen and entire religious communities were executed by leftists, which included communists and anarchists. In the course of the Red Terror, the death toll of the clergy alone included 13 bishops, 4,172 diocesan priests and seminarians, 2,364 monks and friars and 283 nuns, for a total of 6,832 victims. This does not include the thousands of lay faithful who were also executed because of their faith. The terror has been called the "most extensive and violent persecution of Catholicism in Western History, in some way even more intense than that of the French Revolution."

As convents were closed, the religious were told to go to the homes of their parents or other family members. They were not allowed to continue to wear their habits, but were ordered to dress in secular clothes. In July of 1936, three religious Sisters of the Daughters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Sisters Carmen (age 41), Rosa (age 36) and Magdalena (age 34) Fradera, who were also blood sisters, returned to the home of their parents in Gerona. For two months the Sisters continued to follow their religious life best that they could, following their practices of piety, praying the Little Office, continuing to make their meditations and doing spiritual reading, while helping with the tasks at home.

On September 25, 1936 a few armed militants come to the family home to finalize a "registration" of the family and to get a donation for "a contribution to the war." For the Sisters, this was their first warning. They knew what had been happening all over Spain, and they were not naive to think that they would be left alone. They knew it was only a matter of time before they would be "arrested" like so many others. They prayed, preparing themselves for what lay ahead.

This scene dissolves and we move back 92 years in time to 1844 Spain. With the death of Fernando VII, a dynastic war broke out, resulting in a government with strong anti-clerical positions. A series of decrees between 1835 and 1837 suppressed all the religious community of men and many of the convents of women. Fr. Joaquin Masmitja, a 32 year old priest, was appointed pastor of the parish church in Olot, his home town,

due to the removal of the previous priests because of their political beliefs. In August of 1844, Fr. Anthony Claret, a very popular missionary priest, preached a month-long mission in Olot. It was on this occasion that the two priests got to know each other and established a friendship that lasted all their lives. They found that they were two souls united in all that referred to the love and glory of God, a tender devotion to Mary and dedication to the full good of their brothers without exception. In a sense, their lives were two different expressions of the same objective: the growth of the Kingdom of God under the protection of Mary.

Three years pass by. Fr. Masmitja was deeply concerned about the social problems in Spanish society, especially the plight of women. Due to the Industrial Revolution, large numbers of men and women were flooding the city from the rural areas. Most were uneducated and illiterate, and the work in the newly founded factories was little better than slavery. Many of the women were forced into prostitution as a means of survival. While praying before a sculpture of the Sorrowful Mother, Masmitja conceived the idea of founding a religious congregation for the apostolate of education and prayer. The plan seemed reckless and imprudent given the anticlerical laws of the time and women's place in society. Nonetheless, having seen the "painful and extraordinary abandonment of the poor girls in Olot", and their need for education and spiritual formation, Fr. Masmitja was sure that his inspiration was from the Holy Spirit and that he would be given the strength and means necessary to accomplish the work. With encouragement from Fr. Claret, Fr. Masmitja surrendered himself and the work to God's providence.

For the beginnings of this little community, he chose seven young women from among his penitents, in honor of the seven swords that pierced Mary's heart. When he met with them in December, 1847, he was joyous in seeing himself surrounded by his courageous and dedicated penitents; however, in explaining his plans for the new institute he wished to establish, he did not hide the difficulties that would be encountered. The women responded with determination and enthusiasm.

On July 1, 1848, the Daughters of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary officially began with a simple intimate ceremony. Communal life started on September

17, the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. Why did Fr. Masmitja choose to put his fledgling community under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary?

Fr. Masmitja was deeply influenced by the Arch-confraternity of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary established in Our Lady of Victory in Paris. This arch-confraternity was essentially an association in which its members prayed to the Heart of Mary to obtain the conversion of sinners. Many conversions, some of them extraordinary, were being obtained through the prayers of the association. Fr. Masmitja was confident in the power of prayer to the Immaculate Heart of Mary for the conversion of sinners. In addition to catechesis and education, he committed his Institute to the ministry of prayer through the invocation of the Immaculate Heart.

In the Forward of the Constitutions he wrote that the goal of the Arch-confraternity, and so of his community as well, was “to bring men under [the Immaculate Heart’s] protection and through her merits to draw them to her divine Son, Jesus, and the adorable Trinity, in order to obtain from the Divine Mercy the conversion of sinners”

What was unique about this community was the combination of the devotion to the Immaculate and the Sorrowful Heart of Mary. Fr. Masmitja was raised in the devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows by his father, a member of the Third Order of the Servites. He explains the relationship between the devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows, represented by a heart pierced by a sword and that of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the Forward of the Constitutions: “This Institute of the Immaculate Heart meditates on the cruel sword of sorrow that pierces this Heart at the sight of sinners renewing the passion and death of her Son and despising the merits of the blood shed for them with so much love. It seeks especially, through prayer and other pious practices, to obtain from the Divine Mercy an interior grace for sinners, so that, abandoning the state of sin, they will turn to God, the center of all happiness. Likewise, it sees in giving a solid education to girls an apt means of introducing and spreading, in all classes of society, true devotion to God and a holy fear of Him, so that others may not fall into sin.”

The apostolic spirit and educational mission of the community derives from the contemplation of the Heart of Our Lady cooperating with Christ in the redemption of man. The Sisters would meditate on an eighth sword that pierces the Heart of Mary at the sight of sin. However, instead of committing themselves to reparation for sin, as other

communities did, the Sisters would attack the roots of the evil by praying for the conversion of sinners and by working for the evangelization of society.

In putting together the Sorrowful and Immaculate Heart of Mary, Fr. Masmitja focused on the role played by our Lady in the paschal mystery. Through her suffering endured in union with Christ, Mary was associated with the work of redemption. For a religious community, devotion to the Immaculate Heart has to be lived in the context of a life completely dedicate to God's service through the following of her Son; a life committed to hearing the Word and putting it into practice; of an existence consecrated to spreading the Gospel. The Sisters were formed in the Heart of Mary: a heart aflame with charity for God and for others. That love would suffer at the sight of sin, so offensive to God, and desired to respond to Him in love. The love of neighbor did not lead the Sister to reject the sinner, but to strive to bring about their conversion. The Immaculate and Sorrowful Heart of Mary is no "cushy" place, but one strengthened by the practice of virtue, especially fidelity and fortitude in the midst of suffering and trials. The Sister's meditation on the Seven Sorrows of Mary's Heart would have formed in them a disposition to imitate her in cooperating with her Divine Son in the redemption of the world, bringing them to the foot of the Cross with her. There they would see what true love is – Love offering himself completely for love of the Father and for us. As Mary's "fiat" brought her from the Annunciation to the foot of the Cross and beyond, so too the Sisters, formed under and united with Mary's Heart, would pronounce and live their own "fiat".

It may have been these thoughts that strengthened Sisters Carmen, Rosa and Magdalena on the night of September 27, 1936. Right before dawn, the militia, armed, surrounded the home stating that come looking for "those" in the name of the Committee of Gerona, to interrogate them. The Sisters' parents and siblings argued with the militants to intercede for them, but their efforts were in vain. The three Sisters told their family: "If they came for us, we embrace it; we are willing to die for Christ." They got themselves ready "to present ourselves before God," then added: "We go contentedly to give our blood for our God."

The Sisters said goodbye to their family. Surrounded by the militia, they were put into taxi, driven to a location in an oak forest, and there after many humiliations and

brutalities, but defending and preserving their fidelity to God and consecrated virginity, the three were cruelly and viciously murdered.

On Sunday, October 28, 2007, by mandate of the Pope Benedict XVI, the 498 Martyrs of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Spain were beatified, including three Religious Sisters of the Daughters of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary from Gerona.

Immaculate and Sorrowful Heart of Mary, pray for us.

Queen of Martyrs, pray for us.

Blessed Carmen, Rosa and Magdalena, pray for us.

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