

Ismael de Tomelloso

“IN SILENTIO...”

Blas Camacho Zancada

Translated from Spanish by
Rosanna M. Giammanco Frongia

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*To the ministers of Jesus Christ,
may they be faithful servants and witnesses
in their deeds and in their lives, for all of us;
may they be Christ himself,
together with Our Lady the Virgin Mary.*

THE FIRST AND SECOND EDITIONS WERE WRITTEN IN THE YEAR
OF GRACE, CROSS AND HAPPINESS CALLED BY H.H. BENEDICT
XVI ESPECIALLY FOR THE PRIESTHOOD.

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by Valentín Arteaga

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Introduction to the Silence of a Soul

This is the brief history of an interior life. It is the biography of Ismael Molinero Novillo, better known to the Spanish Catholic Action youths as Ismael de Tomelloso since death took him on May 5th, 1938 at the Saragossa Doctors' Hospital. His was a "life" without the great events, brilliant anecdotes or outstanding deeds expected by today's utilitarian, pragmatic mentality. Still, it behooves us to linger once in a while, even if only briefly, on small happenings and take note of them, particularly in our times when there seems to be no interest in them. Modest, unpretentious adventures of little note barely get any attention at all, particularly when they are small matters of silence and meditation, the pure work of God's Grace and man's generous, quiet, accepting, startled reaction. Any man's. For example, those of Ismael Molinero Novillo.

Undoubtedly, Ismael's is an unusual "case." His biography fills just half a page. There's no room to let one's imagination soar in a land such as was Ismael's, where imagination is the order of the day and the artist finds his inspiration by interrogating the maze-like landscape, its lore, its fantasies. Ismael de Tomelloso's brief, none-too-visible life could be told in the time it takes to recite the Creed or for a peasant to chat with a neighbor about the hot weather in the land of the Shrine to Our Lady. Ismael didn't think of keeping a diary or confiding his spiritual thoughts to a notebook. He was fighting at the front, and what he wrote were standard letters to his family: I am fine, Mother; don't worry about me. Here we're freezing. All my best to the family...

He was just a country boy. He came from a far-off, out-of-the-way town. A town lost in the La Mancha expanse. An island in the vast plain. The town with its typical dwellings, its flocks, its vineyards, its broad sunlit streets, its recesses and projections, the Plaza, the Club, the Church... One fateful, gloomy day the terrible wind of hate began to blow, and the accusations began: *Those on the other side of the square are enemies; don't trust what they do or say; they attend the novenas, listen to the priests... and so forth.* Those were bad times. Hate is an awful company that never says yes. Ismael was one more boy to whom one day (because God pretends to just bump into the humble hearts, the simple people) some boys his age such as Miguel and Pedro—bold and brave young fellows in those trying times—talked to him about the Church and about a happiness that he had never suspected could exist. The boys had joined the recently founded Catholic Action Youth Center, headed by Fr. Bernabé Huertas. *Ismael*, Miguel, Pedro and the others said to him, *you can come over to the Center if you like. It will be worth your while, you know?—Who, me?—Hey man, of course you.* And he replied, *All right then.* Since then, a light began to slowly make its way in that wide open landscape, that vast plain that was Ismael's soul. With time, the light began to outline his thoughts and his intentions, and new poems, and much happiness poured forth from deep within his being. He gave these gifts to the poor, the elderly, to young children and lonely neighbors, to the simple womenfolk who shopped at the dry goods store where he worked. *I am of God and for God*, he would often say. Despite the tense, heavy atmosphere that engulfed the town, he noticed in himself an immense desire to make everyone happy: his parents, his siblings at home, the people he crossed in the Plaza early in the morning while on his way to work. He would slip into Church as quietly as possible to pay a visit to the Holy Sacrament. *I want to be a life example*, he'd often say.

At the Old People's Home he was happy whenever, on Sundays especially, he could strum the guitar and sing jotás [traditional

Spanish dances] to entertain the institutionalized guests who were old and homeless. He would read poetry, organize dances for them or improvise skits. Often, while conversing with one of the Sisters or with Fr. Bernabé, or Miguel or Pedro, he would open up and, impulsive and naïve as he was, blurt out: *I want to be good, but I don't know how*. But yes, he did know. Ismael was naturally good. Good like the air one breathes. Like someone who tells a joke or something funny to make the sad guests smile because, you know, those poor wretches... *I wish I could be a priest some day*, he dreamt. He had taken a Spiritual Exercises course at the Ciudad Real Seminary and had become attached to the Father who led the exercises and to the seminarians... He was so devoted to the Holy Sacrament that whenever he could he would stand and gaze at the Tabernacle. More than once he commented: *I'd like to be a priest*. Thanks to the example Ismael gave with his life, other young men would be encouraged, over time, to take up the vocation. As we know, the Spirit of the Lord blows where it will and when He wills it. Our boy would have made a great priest. He had the aptitude and the talent, according to his biographers. And he had hope, an enthusiasm that sprang from deep within his soul. In the final stretch of his life, when his body was ravaged by tuberculosis, he confessed to the chaplain who assisted him: *Father, I feel very happy*.—*Perhaps you'll get well*, the priest replied encouragingly.—*I want nothing from this world*, the boy continued, *If I die, I will belong all to God. If I don't, I want to be a priest. A good priest. Like the ones who serve God for free*.

Indeed, the life and death of Ismael de Tomelloso were a life and death lived “free.” A completely free offering to God. Given quietly. It is amazing how the seed of God’s grace that the Catholic Action youths from his town had sown in the heart of Ismael took root and grew. He easily allowed the Spirit to work in him, enveloping that work in modesty and silence. Somehow almost concealing it. We could say that silence was the one outstanding feature of Ismael’s spiritual experience. It is difficult to imagine

how such a naturally outgoing, friendly young man who was bursting with life could find the willpower to face the lot he drew in life, which was to step aside and pass unnoticed from this world. Far from him the desire to lionize significant events or deeds worthy of public recognition and applause. During the war, especially from the time that he was forced to fight at the front until he delivered his life up to God in Saragossa, Ismael lived as if shrouded in a truly heroic self-effacement. There was never a time when he didn't walk as if on tiptoes through the land of silence. Without attracting attention. Without anyone guessing the torrent of love that leaped inside him and flowed to God. "All of God and for God." And "to be silent and to suffer." Someone has said that silence is the deepest truth. It was singularly so for Ismael.

It is a truth that he had discovered almost unconsciously. Like praying. Like drawing laughter from the guests at the Old People's Home. Like loving Our Lady. Like treating the customers at the store where he worked with tact and affection. When the '38 class, his own, was drafted on September 18th, 1937, and he had to march with his knapsack and bedroll to the Teruel front with his mates, he had been fairly warned: *Tell no one what you think or what you feel, or about Catholic Action or church matters, or about the other kids, or the nuns... Therefore—he must have mused—we must keep quiet and pray; and help whenever we can, if the chance arises, or sing a song softly, for it's precisely those who believe in God who sing.* When the Battle of Alfambra erupted in early February 1938, he offered his silence to God in exchange for peace. It was war-time and he was so poor that he had nothing else to offer. And besides, why should one reveal one's membership in Catholic Action? Even if they take you prisoner and you go to the other side and are finally free to talk, it is still better to keep quiet and go straight, almost without a sound, to God's mansions.

And this is what happened. Pierced by the agonizing pain of the tuberculosis he had contracted during that terrible winter, after the battle he was taken to a prisoners' camp at Santa Eulalia and

later to San Juan de Mozarrifar: *How lucky, my God, to be finally able to take Communion.* He asked for it in a whisper, a plea as soft as a petal! but as if it didn't matter much to him. But the chaplain probably forgot about it. For who could have known how much the frail twenty-year old prisoner who was quickly reaching the end of his life and whose eyes shone like the lamps of the Holy Sacrament in church, wanted to be a saint. The Lord always amazes us and has his ways to make anyone fall in love with Him. Ismael Molinero Novillo delivered his soul to God on May 5th, 1938. On his deathbed, his silence broke like a bottle of perfume. Everyone around him: the chaplain, the nurses, the members of the Saragossa Catholic Action, praised God and gave Him thanks. And soon, the young people of Spain were putting words to the silent testimony of Ismael de Tomelloso. Over time, minor histories can turn out to be very eloquent.

Valentín Arteaga

PREAMBLE

The life of Ismael Molinero Novillo, better known as Ismael de Tomelloso, was a life bursting with congeniality, happiness, and good cheer, even as he lay in piercing pain, ravaged by tuberculosis, in the final months of his life.

Here are some of the most vivid memories we have of Ismael:

- When we were children, they spoke to us of Ismael as a nice, cheerful, brave young fellow, a member of Catholic Action who had fought as a militiaman in the Civil War and died of tuberculosis in Saragossa.¹
- In 1950, when they moved his remains from Saragossa to

1. Some information about Catholic Action (C.A.) is in order. This lay organization, founded by the Church in the mid-nineteenth century, sought to organize faith-based activities by lay people in Europe.

During the reigns of Pius IX, Pius X and Pius XI, its sphere of action remained vague. Under Pius XII, the organization could have been enriched by a broader network of lay ministry groups and initiatives, but historical and political circumstances forced it to somewhat alter its objectives in order to avoid its disappearance under Italian Fascism. In fact, the Church was pressured into stating that the objectives of Catholic Action were simply those of the Church, thus identifying them with the interests of the church hierarchy. In this way, the regime didn't dare touch an institution that claimed to be the "long hand" of the apostolic activity of the hierarchy.

In Spain, Catholic Action was born out of the 1926 reorganization achieved thanks to the possibilist, conciliatory personality of Ángel Herrera Oria who was Central Board president at the time of the Republic. It modeled itself on the 1931 bylaws of Italian C.A. In that year, in Spain alone the C.A. Youth Association had 200 centers with 10,000 members. Herrera also founded the National Propagandist Catholic Action [ACN de P] and the Colegio Mayor San Pablo.

Tomelloso, it was the Holy Year of the Eucharist. In attendance were Msgr. Emeterio Echevarría, Bishop-Prior of the Military Orders, hundreds of Catholic Action youngsters from Saragossa and Ciudad Real, and the local and provincial authorities. At the funeral oration he gave on the occasion of the removal, the bishop recounted Ismael's valuable life and recalled the words he had spoken to His Holiness Pius XII in November 1947 during his "ad limina" visit. He said: "I personally believe in Ismael's holiness. Because although his was a short life, in those few years he undoubtedly reached the highest peaks of spiritual perfection. Let us ask the Lord to raise Ismael to the altars, and meanwhile, let him be a role model and an example to all youngsters!" The oration was published in the May 20th, 1950 issue of *Signo*.

On July 18th, 1936, when the Civil War broke out, the evolution of C.A. took a crucial turn, since the possibilist direction of Spanish Catholicism was cut off. The war dramatically affected the C.A. Youth groups that were divided by area, effectively erasing the organization. It would take a few months before it could regroup itself as an organization with headquarters in Burgos. During the three-year war the C. A. Youth forged a style and goals that prevailed until their pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Planned before July 1936, the pilgrimage took place only in 1948: it marked the end-point of that historical phase. At the pilgrimage, the slogan "A New Beginning" was introduced to signify that after the Civil War, Catholic Action would try to build a presence not just in the churches, but in all religious and civil life.

After 1970, C.A. was active in channeling the general apostolic activity of Christian lay men and women, although some later movements that focused on culture, charity-social work, religious teaching, and socio-political activities (at the expense of strictly missionary, apostolic work) saw periods of peak and decline.

Important church institutions such as Spanish Caritas, Manos Unidas and grassroots cultural centers, among others, were enriched by Catholic Action; still, the initial ambitious drive failed to launch in old Europe, given the changed circumstances. Currently, it looks as if the Spanish Episcopal Conference is committed to relaunching Catholic Action.

We wish to pay tribute here to all the Catholic Action men and women, young and old, who gave their lives to God: some were war martyrs; others, such as Ismael, offered their lives in happiness and in health, in sickness and in pain.

– Catholic Action youths paid tribute to Ismael’s fame of holiness in many towns, particularly in Saragossa in 1940 and in Tomelloso in 1956, when thousands of young men and women attended.

– Every time we passed his house (his father and some of his brothers were blacksmiths and had their shop on the ground floor) we would stop, attracted by the light of the fire, the bright red of the iron, the loud, high pitch of the forging hammers and the sparks that flew everywhere.

– When we visited the cemetery on All Souls’ and All Saints’ Days, we liked to stop before Ismael’s grave because it was the most important one.

Everything we later learned about him comes from the biographies written in the nineteen-forties,² from letters, articles and other publications or from what his siblings María de la Cruz, Luis and Martín (and others who knew him) have told us, as well as from the research conducted until now. For this reason, we decided to transcribe literally most of the passages that narrate his life, because we wanted to emphasize from the outset that this biography

2. They are:

- Fr. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, “Ismael Molinero Novillo: el Miliciano Santo” [Ismael Molinero Novillo: The Militiaman Saint], in the Dominican review *La Vida Sobrenatural* [The Supernatural Life] (Year XXII, Vol. XLII, Nos. 257-258, May-June 1942), AGC-IT.

- Fr. Florentino del Valle, *Ismael de Tomelloso. La lección de su silencio* [Ismael de Tomelloso. The Lesson of His Silence], in the review *Entre bromas y veras* [Between Jokes and True Facts] (Bilbao: El Mensajero del Corazón de Jesús, March 1947, No. 412), AGC-IT.

- Fr. Alberto Martín de Bernardo, *El miliciano que murió como un santo. Vida heroica de Ismael Molinero Novillo* [The Militiaman Who Died Like a Saint. The Heroic Life of Ismael Molinero Novillo] (Zalla-Bilbao-Madrid: Ediciones Pía Sociedad de San Pablo, 1949), AGC-IT.

- Fr. Manuel Liñán Carrera, *El miliciano de Amaponte, joven modelo de Acción Católica* [The Militiaman from Amaponte: A Young Catholic Action Role Model], written and performed in the nineteen-fifties (Álora: Imprenta Castilla S.C., 2005), AGC-IT.

is the shared undertaking of all of us who are eager to divulge the facts of Ismael's life.

As we gradually delved deeper into his life, we thought it appropriate to only write about what we were able to confirm beyond any doubt, since some facts cannot be easily comprehended, especially the simple, spontaneous offering to God of his life, which he made under extremely trying conditions, cheerfully and in silence, and without losing his smile.

As a child and a teenager, Ismael was a simple, ordinary village boy. He continued to be so at the battlefront in Teruel and at the San Juan de Mozarrifar Concentration Camp, where for the first time he broke his silence to ask Fr. Ignacio Bruna Peribáñez, the prison chaplain, to hear his confession and give him Communion the following day, and at the Saragossa Doctors' Hospital, where he died. The priest who confessed him kept the confessional secret, but was so impressed that he went back to visit Ismael at his bedside, and in the conversation that ensued, Ismael told him his life's secret: ***"I am of God and for God. If I die, I will belong all to God in heaven. If I don't... I want to be a priest!"***



The chaplain captured the conversation on a few sheets of paper that he entrusted to Aurora Álvarez, the nurse who had cared for Ismael at the hospital where he died a prisoner of war, and she delivered them to Fr. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, a diocesan priest who in turn published them in an article he mailed from Tucumán (Argentina) to the

*Fr. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez,
diocesan priest.*

review *La Vida Sobrenatural*, under the title *Ismael Molinero Novillo. El Miliciano Santo*. This is how the article began:

«When fame with its golden pen will engrave the names of the elect, we shall add the name of a Republican, a Red with a white heart and soul: Ismael Molinero Novillo. He was a saint and died a martyr. When the time comes to write his biography, we shall learn about the saintly child, the exemplary teenager, the resigned militiaman, the suffering prisoner, the martyr in the broad sense of the word. But for now, in his memory and as an example to the Catholic youth, let us contemplate the flower without pulling its petals. Soon God will give us the opportunity to unseal the vase of his saintly life and glorious death and revive the world with its delicate fragrance. He was a plain, modest, selfless, devout young man, a role model with a great spirit of self-sacrifice. I do not dare award him a certificate of holiness, for that is beyond my reach, but I believe I can say that he was walking in the path of the Saints. And while I don't know that he ever received amazing revelations, or performed talked-about miracles, I will say that as far as I am concerned, the most a saint can do when performing his or her duty is to keep the compass always pointed at his/her ideas, and the bow taut without doubling it. Resurrecting the dead and working wonders pertains only to God; but living in the thick of things, weapon in hand, stepping on sharp needles and smiling while the heart bleeds, is a very worthy accomplishment of human nature, even if eased by Grace. This was Ismael's miracle. When those of us who knew him will make public the events of his life at which we were present, the world will cry in unison: He was a Saint.»³

Ismael's devotion had the straightforwardness of common sense and the restrained congruity that binds reason to faith because, as Benedict XVI says, "reason always stands in need of being purified by faith... [and] religion always needs to be purified by rea-

3. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 219.

son in order to show its authentically human face.”⁴ The example that Ismael gave in practicing the virtues to a heroic degree will not die, but will live on in all those who are eager to know him.

Because happiness was the distinctive feature of Ismael’s life, the mystery of his silence is even more dramatic. He began to practice it as a teenager, when he reined in his witticisms and jokes, or shut his eyes at the movies and covered his ears to all things that didn’t bring him closer to God. His silence became deafening in the final months of his life after he was taken prisoner, when he hid his position of Catholic Action treasurer⁵ that could have gained him immediate release. Since 1956, the silence over his memory has lasted for more than half a century.

The title of this biography, the Latin words “IN SILENTIO...” [In silence...], is from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: “*In silentio et in spe erit fortitudo vestra*” [In quiet and in trust your strength lies].⁶ We need silence to enter into our selves, listen to God and keep up our hope and our strength in order to live and die happy, just like Ismael did.

Alberto Martín de Bernardo, the author of a biography of Ismael, has written:

«When later we see him suffer and bear pain with that uncanny silence, someone will ask: “Still... where did this boy learn to sacrifice himself so much? Where did he draw the strength?”

I dare to answer, almost without fear of making a mistake, that he learned the lesson that Jesus taught him: To suffer... and remain silent, during his visits to the Holy Sacrament when he saw Him so lonely, but not complaining, so forlorn, but not leaving his loving prison to look for souls!

In those meditations he plumbed the depths of the silence of

4. Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), 56.

5. Although some documents state that he was Catholic Action secretary, Ismael was actually appointed treasurer and later was a board member, as reported by Fr. A. Martín de Bernardo, 40.

6. Isaiah 30:15.

Christ and learned His lesson. From this intimate, loving contact with the Lord, he drew the strength to bear his cross without complaining, just like his God. It was in those visits to the Tabernacle, in the solitude of that chapel, that he learned to be “Host”—a sacrificial victim.»⁷

This reality leads us to ask some questions to which we’ll try to find an answer, though each one of us will have to draw his or her own conclusions.

The first question is, Why did we have to wait more than fifty years, until the twenty-first century, to rescue the memory of Ismael de Tomelloso from oblivion?

«*Why?*» asked Fr. Valentín Arteaga, the Postulator, in the prologue to the letter we sent to Rome in January 2008 petitioning for the “Nihil Obstat” to the canonization cause. «*Why? What happened such that, more than half a century later, a Catholic Action boy from before the Spanish Civil War again jolts our hearts and makes us die from the yearning to be saints?*» He answered: «*No doubt it’s the working of Providence, for we know that the Lord follows his own timing and his own plans and, as the Gospel says, a candle is not made to be hidden under a bushel.*» And he concluded: «*Let us give thanks to God for this new current that reapproaches us to Ismael. He could be a wonderful model of the spiritual life for today’s youth. His festive feeling for life, his modesty, his power of sacrifice, his silence, his attachment to prayer, his devotion to the Host, are all keys to everyday holiness that the world today desperately needs. We live in times of dire spiritual poverty that cry out for role models such as Ismael de Tomelloso.*»⁸

Why? asked Miguel Montañés, a former president of Catholic Action and the friend who had introduced Ismael to the Advisor, Fr. Bernabé Huertas Molina, in a letter he wrote to Ismael on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death. The letter, published in

7. A. Martín de Bernardo, 81.

8. AGC-IT.

1963 in *Luz de Tomelloso* is entitled *Carta de Ultratumba* [Letter from the Beyond]:

«Dear Ismael:

I don't know when you'll receive this letter, but on this day, May 5th, when traditionally men like to pay tribute to those among their dead who distinguished themselves, I offer this small, private homage to your memory with these lines, in the anniversary of your death and in memory of what keeps us united and in contact every day.

I don't know if, as you deserve and is owed to you, there is something organized in that respect, and in what hands your worthy cause, in which I fervently believe, now rests.

Please don not smile: I know all too well that you are now beyond praise and censure, beyond what inflates the vanity and hurts the pride of us mortals. The definiteness of your state of blessedness—for I truly believe, subject to the Magisterium of the Church, that you are enjoying God's beatific vision—places you beyond our tributes or our forgetfulness. But even if nothing more can be added or taken from you, nor can the simplicity and modesty that informed your human life make you blush, it still behooves us to pay tribute to you, speak about you, tell the world who you were and how you lived, a celebratory duty that will always accrue to the glory of God.

Paradoxically, you are both well known and well forgotten. There

Miguel Montañés.



were times when your cause seemed to soar like an eagle swiftly reaching all corners of Spain and even beyond our national borders, and other times when both your death and the death of our remembrance silently shrouded everything that referred to you.

Our human vision, of necessity short-sighted, cannot glimpse what is in God's plan, whether the time for exalting you before humankind is not at hand yet, or whether humankind—by its apathy, lethargy, resignation and its betrayal of the duties of friendship, association, confessional membership and doctrine—is delaying it.

I know that if you were to continue in your human nature and think with human faculties, you would tell me—for I know you, or rather, did know you—that there was nothing special in you that was worthy of praise. But you also know, because you now also perceive with other faculties—and truth is modesty—that it's precisely that which is praiseworthy: your simplicity and spontaneity, your human progression, your pastimes, idle pursuits, diversions, fits of craziness and good cheer... You were one of so many, like a man without a clear idea of where he is coming from or where he's going, who met Him and said, enough! And without stopping to be his everyday self, he purified his intentions and his essence and began to be someone else, though he still looked the same. He thus created a mode of being, that although not visibly different in everyday life, predisposes one to choose, when the right time comes (and all it takes God to put you on the spot is one instant) between the reproachable and the heroic. Your moment came in the concentration camp and was fulfilled at the hospital in Saragossa.

Recently a good person with excellent human qualities, a small pioneer in the walk towards God, and with a bigger heart than one would suppose, was asking me about you. He found nothing extraordinary about you, said you were just a man like so many others. They hadn't been able to explain your beginning and your end to him. He then came to know you and fell in love with you. Now this is what matters, this is what we must stress and divulge:

the fact that you are so similar to all those men and women who are just waiting for their marching orders like ready, empty shells waiting to be filled with God's spirit so that they can begin to know and to be simple heroes when the time comes. Show them how your path was similar to theirs, without unusual education or upbringing. And as we begin to sketch and fill in the nuances of this regular life of struggle and challenge, discouragement and fall, filled with eagerness to rise above their station, we see them get up and march on, and still looking like everyman, live their ordinary lives in an extraordinary way, which is the most heroic mode of living, whether or not in the end their heroism is acknowledged by humankind.

This was you, Ismael. For this reason, publicizing your life is a necessity for many, just like the tributes and memorials honoring your life. So that in knowing you, in seeing you so accessible and so much like them, they may be encouraged to follow in your heroic footsteps. Being quietly heroic, passing unnoticed before the eyes of humankind, but still with the bold courage to ingratiate themselves in the eyes of God, before whom no hero remains anonymous.

Love. Miguel.»⁹

*Why? Asked Fr. Florentino del Valle, who wrote the first biography of Ismael entitled *Ismael de Tomelloso. La lección de su silencio*.¹⁰*

The following incident is worth reporting in full. On May 18th, 2009 we called the Jesuit Writers' House in Madrid to inquire about other possible writings by Fr. Florentino del Valle. We spoke with Fr. Javier Ilundáin who informed us that Fr. del Valle was alive but being a centenarian, he didn't know his health condition. If we would call back, he would inquire and let us know. We were pleasantly surprised and moved at the news,

9. AGC-IT.

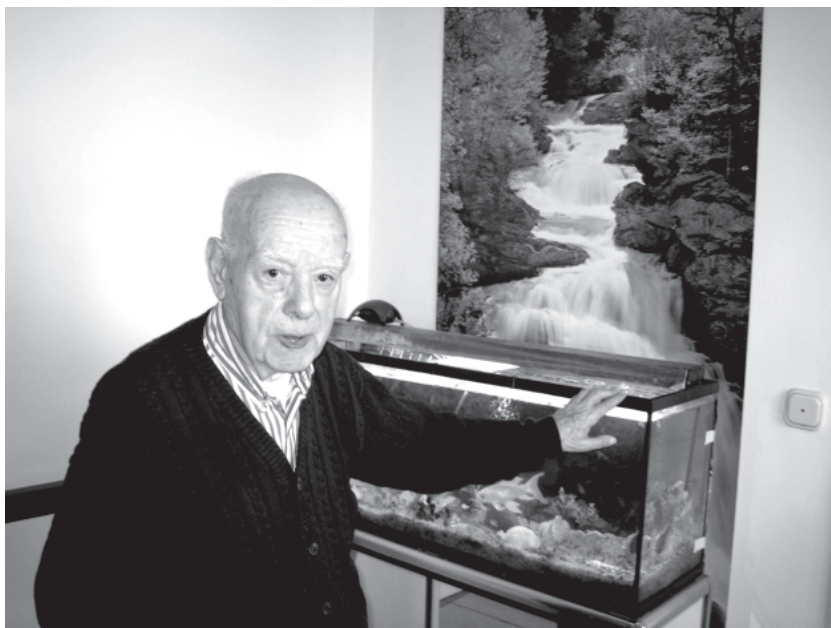
10. AGC-IT.

because we had heard that Fr. del Valle had died more than thirty years ago. When we called back in the afternoon, we were given his telephone number. After a few minutes we were talking with him. In a strong, clear voice he said:

«I would be so happy if Ismael were canonized. We are going to ask the Lord for it, but we also must do our part, I mean pray and trust in the Lord, knowing full well that we hold this wonderful reality in our hands. Why the process took so long, I have no idea.»

Without wasting any time, the following day, May 19th, we visited him in Villagarcía de Campos (Valladolid). While there, we planned a visit to the Ecclesiastical Tribunal for June 19th, the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus which was also the opening day of the Year of the Priesthood.

On June 19th, after he finished his deposition and signed his secret testimony before the Tribunal, in the conversation that



Fr. Florentino del Valle, May 19th, 2009.

ensued Fr. del Valle began to say out loud, with a faraway look on his face:

«I did ask myself... why Ismael chose silence, and that mode of silence. Why? There are also some details, something at bottom that, as I understand it, is not totally clear. Why this imposition? Why the silence? Why did he impose it? Why? Up to now, I don't think there has been an exhaustive, complete explanation.

There must have been a break in Ismael's life, something that shattered, that slipped out, and then the silence... the whys of the silence keep growing.

I still do not understand... this is the mystery of Ismael's silence. Perhaps he believed, or the priest believed, that he had to keep quiet so as not to expose himself. And later, when he was a prisoner, he was able to soar above his condition, the illness that would be fatal to him. Therefore, this "martyr of silence" says a lot. It looks as if it was he not only forced himself to a heroic silence, but also imposed it on the chaplain, the nurse, his friends from town, and the Saragossa Catholic Action fellows who visited him at the hospital.

Still, we ask why. If everyone was anxious to have him receive better treatment, more medical care, why did they leave him in the prisoners' ward? The only logical answer is that it was Ismael's iron will wanting to accomplish, as he did, what God was asking of him, which was to suffer in silence.

Nor can I understand why silence engulfed his life after his saintly reputation had spread to all of Spain and beyond, and after he had received tributes. I find no explanation, it's as if God himself had willed it, but I don't know why.»

We asked him if the oblivion could be due to the circumstances surrounding Catholic Action. He firmly rejected the suggestion, because he had followed the events closely and was sure that Ismael's silence and the silence about his life were going to set an example to the young generation who would want to learn about him, irrespective of any situation. And he added:

«The silence that is shielding Ismael's life was promoted and protected by him: he did not want to be known, neither in prison nor at the hospital nor after his death. He himself chose the title "The lesson of his silence." One day he will explain why.»

Finally, we asked him about publicizing Ismael's life, and he replied:

«Yes, I think it's a good thing for today's young generation, for this exemplary life, its purpose, its facts, will stimulate and convince. It's an open door for the young generation and a closed one for us since we cannot fathom what the fate of today's youth will be.»

At ten to twelve our interesting conversation was interrupted to celebrate Mass on that important feast day. The concelebration of twenty-six Jesuits, all nonagenarians or thereabouts, in addition to the Judge and the Notary of the canonization cause, was a moving experience.

The second question is related to Fr. del Valle's questions: Why did Ismael continue to keep silent after they took him prisoner at the Battle of Alfambra, in the prisoners' camp in Santa Eulalia del Campo (Teruel) and in the concentration camp in San Juan de Mozarrifar (Saragossa)? Why didn't he say that he was Catholic Action's treasurer? Why didn't his friends and acquaintances speak up to get him released from prison?

There are no easy answers, still we shall attempt some plausible explanations. The simplest one could be that in those years people were generally afraid to reveal their true identity: the war was not over yet, situations could still change, the war itself had been a trying, cruel experience. In particular, people were afraid that informers might incriminate parents, children, siblings, relatives or friends who lived behind in the rearguard, causing new cycles of revenge.

Based on what we know today about Ismael, other probable answers are that, just as we prefer to seek our own interest rather than God's, Ismael only sought to do God's interest, never his own. He

lived forgetful of himself and totally delivered to God. Or perhaps God wanted to keep Ismael in the place where he had situated him, and once he had accepted his lot, the Lord gave him the strength he needed to fulfill his mission. Or perhaps Ismael, though weak in physique, was clearly spiritually stronger than most everyone around him, for his strength came from God and escorted him in silence and in pain, for he knew that in just a short time he would live forever in Heaven.

Ismael allowed himself to be seduced by God once and for all. He said yes to Jesus once, and all his life was converted into a yes; we, on the other hand, are used to saying yes only some of the time.

Third question. Why look for Ismael's possible political ties to one of the two opposing sides of the Civil War?

Because even if Ismael's heroic virtues and spiritual depth are clearly recognized in the published biographies, these life stories sometimes have expressions and contents typical of the war and the politics of those years which could, albeit unwillingly, distort his personality, for Ismael lived estranged from anything that was not the cheerfulness of youth and the happiness he felt after finding God.

Because it was typical of the Civil War and the post-war years to attribute political or religious affiliations to people as a quick way of characterizing one's friends or marking one's enemies, thus either accepting or persecuting them, giving or stripping away prestige, opportunities and privileges according to their affiliation. This happened at the front as well as at home. Of course, Ismael lived at a time when the Church was persecuted, a fact tolerated by the Republican government and fanned by the more radical wing that drove fanatics to commit terrible crimes against priests, nuns and friars, Catholic Action activists, and even lay people. Ismael could never forget the attacks on religion, the burning of church images in the Tomelloso square, the news from so many places of churches set on fire, images profaned, seminarians, priests and religious tortured

and murdered. In fact, La Mancha, and Ciudad Real in particular, was one of the areas where the persecution against the Church was harshest, sowing terror among the population. About three hundred priests, religious and lay people were tortured and murdered for the sole fact of being Catholic. In this group were Fr. Vicente Borrell Dolz, the parish priest of Tomelloso who baptized Ismael and gave him First Communion, and his two assistants Fr. José María Mayor Macías and Fr. Amador Navarro Lorente; the Bishop-Prior of the Military Orders Msgr. Narciso Estenaga y Echevarría, who gave him his Confirmation; Fr. Aníbal Carranza Ortiz, a native of Tomelloso who was parish priest of La Solana; Fr. José Sánchez Olivas, the Jesuit who taught Ismael his first and only Spiritual Exercises; and Fr. Manuel González, also a Jesuit, who was his spiritual director. Still, undoubtedly, his deepest grief



On the left, Fr. José María Mayor, his mother, Miguel Montañés and his sisters Consuelo and Lola. Fr. Bernabé Huertas Molina (sitting) and his sister Rosario, Fr. Vicente Borrell, Ismael and Fr. Amador Navarro.

came when Fr. Bernabé Huertas Molina, the Tomelloso Catholic Action Advisor, was killed in Socuéllamos; he had given Ismael spiritual direction from the moment that he had joined Catholic Action.

Because there is no doubt that Ismael was a stranger to any sort of confrontation, affiliation or just sympathizing with any political party or faction and was drafted into the Popular Army for the simple reason that Tomelloso was in a Republican-held area. The fact that photos of musical bands or theater groups included the Republican flag was because that was the only official flag, and the times were such that people were forced to speak and write following an official script that was marked by diktats, lack of freedom, censorship, and fear. For example, Ismael would write Ciudad Real as *C. Libre*, because at the time it had been renamed *Ciudad Libre de la Mancha*; he would write *Salud* because that was the customary, official form of greeting; the *glorious army* could only refer to the Popular Army in the Republican area, etc., and all of that was expressed in a cryptic language.

Because Ismael served loyally in the Popular Army, even when subjected to humiliations, insults and blows during his time at the front. Still, we know that he never tried to go over to the Nationalist side; this has been corroborated by witnesses, including a priest who had been conscripted with him: Fr. Félix Torres Olalla, an eyewitness who went over to the other side at the first chance, who has said: *«Ismael never tried to go over to the other side, nor did I hear him talk about it, because that was not in his plans.»* Friends, people from his hometown and mates drafted with him also went over to the other side, and they have testified that Ismael just wanted to serve God right there, where God had placed him.

Ismael's silences are very revealing and provide food for thought. As he modestly told a friend who was also a member of Catholic Action, he had been getting ready since the moment of his conversion: ***“Since I don’t know how to speak and I’m not very smart, I wouldn’t be able to talk about good things or about religion;***

for this reason, I want to be a life example,”¹¹ thus anticipating a life marked by silence and by example.

It was a silence he began to practice in his hometown, with small victories at first, and that he heroically kept from the moment that he was taken prisoner at the Battle of Alfambra. He broke it only to ask the prison chaplain to confess him.

It was an example that he began to give in his hometown. He allowed himself to speak to the chaplain, after his confession, for our comfort. That was the most sublime moment of his life, which he could never have reached unless he had walked a long way in search of Christ and struggled to imitate Him. He did not complain or ask for help, because he wanted to set an example and sacrifice his life to God in silence and in pain, since God had not allowed him to seal his testimony with his own blood. This is how the prison chaplain received his confession, in the important document that we have about his reputation of holiness.

Ismael imitated Jesus: *“I want to be a priest!”* he told the chaplain. Indeed, he was a priest by vocation, by intention, by desire, by confession, and because he celebrated the supreme sacrifice of the Mass by giving up his life.

Ismael’s life and death deserve to be known because *“God’s deeds must be published and proclaimed as they deserve.”*¹² Ismael is a work of God, and everything that happened and has yet to happen and to be, exists because the Lord of Time and History (as John Paul II used to say) plays with his children as if with the rag ball to which St. Theresa of the Child Jesus liked to compare herself.

We are going to enter into Ismael’s heart, but just like entering into the Heart of Jesus, we must be in a state of grace, shed our old selves, and become child-like: *“Let us approach with a sincere heart and in absolute trust, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water.”*¹³

11. Florentino del Valle, 14.

12. Tobit 12:1-5, 15-20.

13. Hebrews 10:22.

I

TOMELLOSO

This is how Fr. Florentino del Valle describes Tomelloso in his book:

«Scattered all over the plain, the population is exposed to the harsh summer sun and the biting winter frost, under a sky that's always blue. The broad streets are all alike, the houses lined up in endless rows from which each resident can look out in the slowly rising evening and the corners of the horizon, where the eye meets no obstacle, at the always renewed spectacle of the death of the king star that scatters gold dust on the earth and in the sky as a lingering memory of the dying day. There are no mountains or hills to restrict the view all around.



G. Muñoz: *The market in Plaza de la Constitución, 1920.*

This landscape, at once a cilice and a flesh-mortifying scourge, does not awaken indomitable, sensual feelings, nor tempt one to transient pleasures with false mirages of eternity, nor does it kill life's powerful drive by weakening the will into an easy life of comfortable inactivity, but rather heightens it.

Land and sky? There is much more sky than land; there are no mountains to limit it or clouds to darken it. It is for this reason that the souls from this land who launched themselves with a full battery of energy have soared so high.

Still, there's a disparity in the town between the temples of Mammon and those of God. To tell the truth, it's an unequal struggle for there are many factories but only one church. The shining metal is blinding, and the sound of church bells over such a vast expanse of buildings too faint... Much clinking of coins, only a faint murmur of prayers; more land than sky?»¹⁴

Fr. Alberto Martín de Bernardo has said:

«Tomelloso! It sits between fields of crops, like a happy grape picker resting from her labor, in the northwestern part of Ciudad Real province, a place marked by the pointed red cross of the Patron Saint of Spain, and looks toward the historic castle of Peñarroya where the plain ends and the land begins to rise in gentle swellings. The old Criptanense windmills are visible in the distant background. Breaking up the monotony of the sunlit plain and its scattered farmhouses is the imposing, crowded town of Tomelloso (40,000 residents), one of the most industrialized towns of La Mancha: it produces wines and spirits. Today its glorious name is becoming known abroad for its sparkling golden wine (bubbles of happiness). Alcázar de San Juan, an important railroad town, is not far. The borders of Tomelloso almost touch the provinces of Albacete and Cuenca.

Its urbanization and industry made Tomelloso the jewel of La Mancha; to ensure that this earthly glory would continue to shine,

14. Florentino del Valle, 3-5.

God added value to it with a new spiritual jewel. "Tomelloso is made of light." And... its souls?»¹⁵

We round out these snapshots with some more information about the town that gave birth to Ismael; it will help us better understand his life and personality, for as Psalm 87 (86) recites, «*The Lord notes in the register of the peoples: "This one was born here... within you is my true home."*»

Francisco García Pavón, a leading twentieth-century Spanish author, has written:

«... Due to its modest origins and its vigorous economic development, the history of Tomelloso is of necessity an in-house, closed-door, civilian rather than military affair with no projections to the outside except for purely economic reasons. Due to its recent founding and its isolation, it always kept itself clear of currents, dodging the convulsions that racked Spain's Official History. Sitting at the edge of its vineyards, Tomelloso was never summoned, nor did it willingly turn out, at the great calls of History.

... Tomelloso works looking neither at the Cross nor with the Cross at its back, but with the Cross above. Knowing that the Cross is there, respecting it, feeling its unquestionable pull, but without the passion of the fanatics who saved it from the Arab or Turkish crescents. The population's moderate stance before the phenomenon of religion reflects their generally dispassionate nature. Of course we should analyze the issue more objectively, so as not to fall into a misunderstanding. The lukewarmness we register is simply a practical one, not an inner state. For their extremely honest collective behavior, the Tomelloseros militate in the most orthodox Christian morality...; we know their pure, upright moral conduct and we especially know their restraint in the last Civil War, and finally, we understand their dignified social, family, and business environment.

The only moral and social law of Tomelloso has been work.

15. A. Martín de Bernardo, 15-16.

Work without respite on a harsh soil, under extreme weather conditions and for a type of crop as demanding as the vine, the rhythm of whose commerce resists the effectiveness of the most generous statistics. This unrelenting labor forged the role models that until now had grown in Tomelloso. The aristocrat, the intellectual, the politician and the artist were banished from it.

... A town such as Tomelloso, which every year gambles not just its future, but its present as well on one harvest extracted from the most miserly land in Spain, can neither rest nor escape into day-dreaming or an easy life. Like its ancient cart drivers, the spirit of each town resident, the spirit as well as the body, must be in a constant state of tension for the most basic needs, the mere anxiety of life, in the words of José Ortega y Gasset.

A plain, democratic cohabitation is the thread uniting the different social classes. A town without arrogance and with the pride of a shared effort, that of taming the land, Tomelloso always rejected all kinds of social conflict or fierce partisanship. A straightforward nobility of feeling and a dispassionate attitude towards all kinds of civic business fostered this social harmony.»¹⁶

To better understand Tomelloso and its surroundings, it is also useful to look at poems from three local poets.

In *Ruego al Señor desde la Tierra* [A Petition to God from Earth], Eladio Cabañero López writes:

*La tierra tiene sed: remos y lancha;
huyen las hojas secas al camino;
chilla la voz y se desgarran el trino;
sufre la luz desoladora y ancha.*

*El campo huele a cruz. Se desengancha
la noria, sin vendaje y sin destino,*

16. Mr. Pavón was born in Tomelloso on September 4th, 1919 and died in Madrid on March 1989. Francisco García Pavón, *Historia de Tomelloso* [History of Tomelloso] (Madrid: Ed. Ayuntamiento de Tomelloso, 1955), 11, 12, 13, 15, 20.



Church of the Asunción and Casino de San Fernando, early 20th century.



The Church of the Asunción de Nuestra Señora of Tomelloso in 2009.

*y en la frente el sudor es como un vino
brindado por la muerte de la Mancha.*

*Raíces y terrones, tumba y cielo.
Sangre y agua, Señor, para la tierra
amortajada al sol de la llanura.*

*Agua y llanto, Señor, pájaro y vuelo.
Siémbranos, lluévenos, siega y destierra
esta sed que nos quema y nos moltura.¹⁷*

[The earth is thirsty: oars and rowboat;
the dry leaves scatter on the walk;
the voice shouts, the trill tears;
the devastating, broad light is in pain.

The field smells of the cross. The water wheel
is unhooked, with no dressing and no fate,
and on the forehead sweat is like wine
drunk to the death of La Mancha.

Roots and clods, graves and sky.
Blood and water, Lord, for the earth
shrouded to death under the plains' sun.

Water and tears, Lord, bird and flight.
Let them sow, let it rain, mowing and weeding
this thirst that burns and exhausts.]

Juan Torres Grueso from his book *Tierra Seca* [Parched Earth]:

*¡Mi pueblo! No le miréis
la costra seca;
calar su fe y sus raíces,
calar con fuerza,*

17. Eladio Cabañero, *Poesía 1956-1970* [Poetry 1956-1970] (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 1970), 72.

*y encontraréis siempre verde
su rama nueva*

*Por eso quiero
calar en esta anchura,
en su perfil eterno,
medir su arquitectura,
rebasar su sistema,
tener la esencia pura
de la palabra exacta,
de la palabra suma.¹⁸*

[My people! Do not look
at the parched crust;
dig deep into its faith and its roots,
dig deep and hard
and you will always find
its branches evergreen.

This is why I want
to dig deep into this thickness,
its eternal profile,
size up its architecture,
redraw its system,
but keep the pure essence,
the exact word,
the utmost perfect word.]

At a meeting of the executive board of the Association for the Canonization of Ismael de Tomelloso, Natividad Cepeda Serrano, Secretary General of the association, commented with awe that even though Ismael had little formal education and came from a modest station, every time she read his life she was reminded of

18 Juan Torres Grueso, *Tierra Seca. Una exaltación lírica de La Mancha* [Parched Land. A Lyrical Praise of La Mancha] (Madrid: Editorial Pueyo, 1957).

the mystical poetry of St. John of the Cross that universalizes the nurture of love, in the silence of the plain, under the sun and the frost that turn wheat and wine into fertile crops. She wrote a poem entitled *Geografía de Amor* [The Geography of Love]:

*Claustro donde renaces de amor iluminado,
Siervo de Dios, Ismael de Tomelloso,
escancia tu amor hecho plegaria por la aldea global
donde ahora te buscamos.*

*Silencio de llanura,
llanto sin lágrimas, brote de trigo que en mitad
de la cizaña crece. Viña de Tomelloso para injertar
valores a los jóvenes que ignoran que Dios es el presente,
el Alfa y la Omega, la única exigencia de tu vida.*

*Déjanos tu cosecha, tu ejemplo de abandono
y sencillez, recuérdanos que quisiste ser de Dios,
y para nadie más. Pequeño amanuense, al que escuchó
el Señor, vengo con mi traje de sombras
a que escarches de amor mi vasta geografía,
a que vele tu amor mi corazón en horas de tristeza.*

*Desde la profecía del ángel, desgrana con nosotros
las cuentas del rosario a Santa María a la que siempre oraste,
y cultiva en mi alma la heredad de tu amor,
para que a través de tu vida conozcamos a Dios.*

[Cloister where you, Ismael de Tomelloso, Servant of God
are reborn in enlightened love,
pour your love now made prayer throughout the global village
where now we search for you.

Silence of the plain,
cry without tears, wheat shoot that grows

mixed with the darnel. Tomelloso vine for grafting
values onto youths who ignore that God is the present,
the Alpha and the Omega, the sole necessity of life.

Leave us your harvest, your example of submission
and simplicity, remind us that you chose to be God's
and no one else's. Little scribe, whom God
listened to, I come to you clothed in shadow,
that you may crystallize my vast geography with love,
that your love may stand watch over my heart in these sad hours.

Since the angel's prophecy, pray with us
the grains of the rosary to Holy Mary, to whom you always
prayed,
and nurture in my soul the legacy of your love,
that through your life we may know God.]

Some information about current developments in the arts, sciences, letters, and politics and in the economy in Tomelloso starting in the mid-twentieth century, is in order. We will risk giving the names of some of the protagonists of these developments.

The region has given birth to painters, some of whom have achieved international renown, such as Antonio López García, the worthy student of his uncle the great painter Antonio López Torres. Both influenced solid painters both inside and outside the family, together with Francisco Carretero Cepeda who apparently influenced his friend Benjamín Palencia; the draftsman José Luis Cabañas, Pepe Carretero, Caroline Colubret, Joaquín Díaz Vallés, Concha Espinosa, Fermín García Sevilla, Marcelino Grande, Félix Huertas, Federico Huertas, Diógenes López García, the art professor and photographer Juan Luis López Palacios, María Jesús Martínez, Rufo Navarro, Ángel Pintado, Andrés Ruiz Paraíso, Amadeo Treviño Jareño, etc.

Sculpture has had some unique developments, such as the monumental statues of Antonio López García displayed in the hall of

Atocha Station in Madrid. Another sculptor is Luis García Rodríguez: among his works is the statue of Francisco Martínez Ramírez “El Obrero;” Inmaculada Lara Cepeda-Maku, etc.

The town is home to a Municipal School of Music of growing prestige led by Luis Osuna who also directs the Asociación Santa Cecilia band; the choir is successfully directed by Marieli Blanco. There has been an increase in recitals, concerts and operas performed at the Municipal Theater. Among some of the better-known musicians from Tomelloso are Agustín Pradillos, the composer Alejandro Montejano, Miguel Huertas, and Luis Pozuelo.

In the sciences the following stand out: Santiago Ropero, a research biologist who was recently awarded the Fundación Doctor Antonio Esteve prize; Jesús Puerta Pelayo, a CERN physicist in charge of the Muones Central Detector information; Lorenzo Sánchez López, a geographer and author of several volumes on the subject and former Secretary of the University of Castilla-La Mancha; and Pluvio Coronado Martín, currently the youngest member of the Royal Spanish Academy of Medicine.

The town is also home to a large group of distinguished authors and poets, and of journalists who founded magazines and periodicals. First of all, Francisco García Pavón, Ph.D. in Philosophy and Literature who founded the Town Library and was its first director. García Pavón has received many awards, and through his extraordinary activity has opened the door in a plain, friendly manner, to notable poets such as Eladio Cabañero, Félix Grande (although born in Mérida, the latter grew up in Tomelloso from the age of two until he was twenty), Juan Torres Grueso, José y Ángel López Martínez, Miguel Palacios Valero, Dionisio González Ropero, Dionisio Cañas, Natividad Cepeda Serrano, Valentín Arteaga Sánchez-Guijaldo, and Francisco Pérez Fernández, among others.

In the nineteen-forties, a difficult period when Spaniards only thought about survival, García Pavón made another worthy contribution to the town by founding the Literature Festival that he

directed year after year until his death in 1989. The festival has reached its sixtieth edition. Brilliant speakers, authors and poets have participated and the festival has opened the door to hundreds of now successful young literati who were given here their first opportunity.

Among the magazines and periodicals we note: the excellent *Albores de Espíritu*, a magazine founded in 1940 and directed by the liberal journalist Francisco Adrados Fernández who died recently; José Jiménez Candelas, founder of *Luz de Tomelloso* (1958) and Clemente Cuesta Santandreu, founder of the periodical *Voz de Tomelloso* (1964). Current publishers are Francisco Rosado, founder and director of *Cuadernos Manchegos* (1975); Pablo Ortiz Perona, owner and founder of *Revista Pasos* (1982); Jaime Quevedo Soubriet, founder and owner of *El Periódico del Común de la Mancha de Tomelloso* (1992); José Luis Albiñana Masó, a still active octogenarian, former editor-in-chief of *Voz de Tomelloso*; the *Grupo Literario Jaraiz*, editors of *El Cardo de Bronce* which gave rise to the most important literary movement of the past thirty years enthusiastically promoted by Natividad Cepeda and Valentín Arteaga, and others.

Outstanding Tomelloso men of letters who have published books and specialized articles especially in the fields of politics, the economy and society are Luis Quirós Arias, a prolific columnist and lover of music, poetry, and literature; Francisco Martínez Ramírez, founder of the periodical *El Obrero de Tomelloso* (1903-1909); Pablo Camacho Alcarazo, who has published articles on banking, the economy, finance, and the wine and spirits industry in leading national magazines and periodicals.

With the return of democracy, Tomelloso began to have a presence in provincial, regional, and national public life. The current mayor, Carlos Manuel Cotillas López, is a representative in Parliament; Clemente Cuesta Santandreu, the first mayor of Tomelloso after democracy was reinstituted, was a candidate to the Senate and first vice president of the Provincial Council; Ramón González

Martínez de Cepeda, another former mayor, was regional assemblyman and first vice president of the Provincial Council of Ciudad Real; María Teresa Novillo Moreno is a councilwoman and a former senator of the Kingdom of Spain; Carmen Casero González is both councilwoman and regional assemblywoman; Antonia Valverde Quevedo is a former regional assemblywoman; Blas Camacho Zancada was a representative in the Constituent Parliament, took part in the first constitutional government, and was a representative in Parliament for four mandates; Elías Cruz Atienza, an industrial engineer who worked at the construction of the Spanish-American bases in the first constitutional government and later became general director of Cooperation with the Autonomous Regions in the Ministry of Territorial Administration, was born in Tomelloso, just like the current mayor of Getafe, Pedro Castro Vázquez, who is also president of the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces; Francisco Javier Martín del Burgo was a representative in Parliament and the General Sports Director of Castilla-La Mancha; he is currently president of the National Anti-Doping Commission. Undoubtedly, Tomelloso has awakened and taken an unprecedented interest in public life.

Today Tomelloso has five secondary education schools, an Art School, an Official Language Institute, private schools and thirteen public schools. After the harsh emigration of the nineteen-sixties, its population has again stabilized at about 40,000 residents; the number of dwellings has grown more than forty percent in the past ten years; the town is home to about three thousand registered businesses and more than twenty banking and savings institutions. The Tomelloso per capita income is the highest in the province of Ciudad Real and in the Autonomous Region of Castilla-La Mancha for areas with over 5,000 inhabitants, and is above the national average.

The people of Tomelloso have always kept their distance from any form of public display; still, there have been some recent exceptions when, after all dialogue venues were exhausted, the peo-

ple united came out in force to claim their just demands. This happened when they demanded the construction of a hospital and the high-speed train. Each time, more than twenty-thousand people spontaneously took to the streets, without any influence from the media, the political parties or other outside interests. And without any incidents. The hospital is already running, but they are still waiting for the train.

The economic, cultural, social, and political strength of Tomelloso does not seem to match its religious spirit, but that doesn't mean the latter does not exist. Tomelloso "works with the Cross above," as García Pavón wrote: its people know that the common good comes first, and that the common good is possible only as long as the good of each and everyone is achieved. They know that the principal aspiration of every human being is to be happy, that happiness is gained only through work and effort and is costly, but that only what costs has any worth, and that anything worthwhile will be at a cost. And that lasting happiness, as they know all too well, is not gained with noisy, sparkling fireworks, for these are transitory, they are gone in an instant leaving only a burnt stick, smoke and darkness.

The short, simple life of Ismael Molinero Novillo is an example and a torch that silently lights up the road to everlasting happiness and joy, even with all the difficulties he suffered, for sooner or later, in one way or another, suffering is everyone's lot.

«In the life of every Saint we see reflected as if in a mirror, the character of the people to whom the saint belonged.»¹⁹

¹⁹ Weiss, "Apol.," X, C, 1ª 24, *La Vida Sobrenatural* (Year XXII, Vol. XLII, Nos. 257-258, May-June 1942): 169.

II BIRTHS

The Servant of God Ismael Molinero Novillo was born in Tomelloso on May 1st, 1917 at 6 Hidalgo Street during the First World War, and a few months before the upheaval of the Russian revolution was to split Europe and the rest of the world into opposing blocks and usher in a state of more or less “cold” war that lasted seventy-odd years, until November 9th, 1989 when the Berlin Wall was torn down.

Ismael was baptized five days after his birth, on May 6th, by the parish priest Fr. Vicente Borrell Dolz²⁰ in the Church of the

20. Fr. Vicente Borrell Dolz was born in Valencia. In 1913 he became parish priest of Tomelloso where he remained until his death. Highly educated, he was one of eight parish priests who advised the bishop on matters of diocesan government.

On August 16th, 1936 he died a martyr’s death, shot against the wall of the cemetery for his faith and for events that had originated before the Civil War. First, he had confronted the local authorities who had knocked down part of the church to widen a street; then anonymous enemies had sent him a habitual criminal to extort money from him. The priest reported the young hoodlum to the Guardia Civil who arrested him; a few days later, he was shot while trying to escape. When the Civil War broke out, some fanatics, their hate fueled by the tall tales that circulated in town about the priest’s alleged responsibility in the hoodlum’s death, and by his opposition to the local authorities when he tried to save the church from partial demolition, persecuted him to death. After being arrested in dramatic circumstances, he was locked in jail, humiliated, abused, and wounded. From prison they took him to the cemetery gate where they tortured him to death. His elderly mother had followed the death squad, in vain begging mercy for her son.

Asunción de Nuestra Señora [the Assumption of Our Lady]. He was received into the Church with the ritual baptismal vows: “May the Lord Jesus, who made the deaf hear and the mute speak, grant, in his own time, that you listen to His Word and proclaim the faith.”

Ismael was the fifth of eleven siblings, eight of whom survived. His father Francisco Antonio, a blacksmith, and his mother Ángela María Francisca heroically raised their brood with admirable self-sacrifice and devotion. At present, three siblings survive: Luis, who is 87; Martín, 82, and Mercedes, 80 years old. María de la Cruz, the last sibling to die on February 5th, 2006, was a nun, Sr. María de San Miguel de los Santos, of the Little Sisters of the Elderly Homeless.²¹



Ismael's parents.

21. Ismael was the son of Francisco Antonio Lázaro Molinero Román, born December 17th, 1883 and died December 31st, 1965, and Ángela María Francisca Novillo y López, born January 30th, 1889 and died December 1st, 1942. His siblings were: Mercedes Antonia, born August 8th, 1910 and died April 20th, 1997; Antonio, born May 26th, 1915 and died April 23rd, 1990; Jesús,

We have little information about Ismael's early childhood, except for what the family or those who knew him have made available but given their old age they cannot remember many details. Nor did the biographers at the time think of collecting more information about Ismael's early life.

The mother, a very devout woman, taught Ismael his first prayers. At the age of six he began to be schooled by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac. There, under the gaze of the Virgen de la Medalla Milagrosa [the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal] he learned to read and write and was prepared for his First Confession and Communion, which he received in 1925, at the age of eight, on Corpus Christi day, from Fr. Vicente Borrell, the Assumption of Our Lady's parish priest. He was confirmed by the Bishop-Prior Narciso Estenaga y Echevarría.²²

That year, the Jesuits, led by Fr. Rodriguez, came to Tomelloso on a mission. The townspeople, both young and old, filled the church and spilled into the square to listen to Fr. Rodriguez's talks, deriving great spiritual benefit from them.

born July 29th, 1919 and died September 2nd, 2002; Luis, born January 4th, 1923; Maria Cruz, born January 21st, 1925 and died February 5th, 2006; Martín, born February 9th, 1928; and Mercedes, born on May 11th, 1930; three siblings died in early infancy: two died between Mercedes Antonia and Antonio, and the third between Jesús and Luis.

22. Msgr. Narciso Estenaga y Echevarría, Bishop-Prior of the Military Orders, was born in Logroño on October 29th, 1882 from a modest working family. He was ordained in 1907 and consecrated bishop in the Basilica of the Virgen Milagrosa of the Vincentian Fathers in Madrid on July 22nd, 1923. He solemnly took office in Ciudad Real as Bishop-Prior of the Military Orders on August 12th, 1923. On March 1st, 1934 he began publication of the Official Catholic Action Bulletin. In the first issue, the bishop wrote: "... *the Catholic Action of our diocese-priorate is a magnificent institution that gives splendid fruits, and will do so even more with each passing day.*" 22nd, 1936, he was executed with his chaplain Fr. Julio Melgar on the banks of the Guadiana River just after he had blessed and forgiven his killers. Francisco del Campo Real, *Mártires de Ciudad Real* [The Martyrs of Ciudad Real], Edibesa.

At the age of ten, Ismael continued his education at Headmaster Félix Pavón's school; he used to say that the boy was a good, smart and hard-working pupil and had rewarded him several times for his application and punctuality.

The Mother Superior of the Old People's Home of Tomelloso, a nun of the Little Sisters of the Elderly Homeless, recalled that when he was about ten, Ismael began to visit the old people at the Home with his mother on Sundays after Mass. They would help the Sisters serve meals to the guests and chat with them.

Ismael studied in Headmaster Pavón's school until he turned fourteen, when his parents had to pull him out and send him to work as a sales clerk in Claudio Moraleda's store to help the large family's meager income. In those years, the family lacked almost everything, still, they bore their poverty with dignity.

After he began to work, Ismael left his school mates for new friends. His open, merry, congenial personality and his great thirst



The Bishop-Prior Blessed Narciso Estenaga y Echevarría.

for life made him a necessary presence at each and every feast and party in Tomelloso. He played the guitar and the bandurria [a type of mandolin] well and was a stylish, skilled dancer in the street, the square, or the halls. He loved to entertain his friends with songs, jokes, recital of poems, and with all sorts of tricks that made people laugh.

The carnivals of Tomelloso were famous throughout the region. Masked balls and gaudily costumed revels went on day and night for the entire week, a custom that still survives.

«Ismael was not born a saint. He was not the kind of teenager you would want as a role model» recounts Fr. Florentino del Valle in his biography. *«The world and the devil coveted him and threw all their ruses and mischief in the path of this young boy,»* added Fr. Alberto Martín de Bernardo.

The gangs he mostly associated with were “Tito’s” and “Canuto’s” whose members had a reputation of rakes; they were not the most fitting company for a fourteen-year-old boy who had just come out of school.

Ismael was congenial, outgoing, and funny, and these qualities soon made him the center of all get-togethers, because he could never refuse to entertain at any time or for any event, though now he was associating with a somewhat risky company.

He was not known for his devotion; he went to church only on Sundays because he knew his mother watched him closely, but he was gradually moving away from religion.

Restless as he was, he soon left the employ of Claudio Moraleda and went to work in Jerónimo Belda’s business, where he also did not last long.

Then a fabric and novelty store, “El Siglo,” opened in town. The owners, Juan Pérez Palomares and Elías Montero Ruiz, had heard about young Ismael’s salesmanship, and offered him a job, which he accepted with delight.

Ismael revealed consummate artistic skill in arranging the shop’s windows with imagination and good taste. He changed them fre-

quently, decorating them with a variety of motifs; in the days before a holiday, he would display recent arrivals for promotion and sale.

He was among the first to give discounts to free the stockroom from items that did not sell easily. With the store owners he arranged to change styles frequently in order to keep up with fashion, and to lower prices to cleverly promote the liquidation of items that were no longer trendy.

According to his brother Luis, Ismael's bosses and friends appreciated his marketing skills. He had a great imagination. He remembers the shop window that Ismael arranged for January 6th,

Kings' Day, when he dressed up a seven-foot tall Gipsy nicknamed "Varal" as King Balthazar.

Ismael outfitted him as a real magician and gave him a scroll to hold in his hands that read: "Write your letters to the Magi Kings and leave them in our Balthazar's mailbox." An enormous crowd visited the store and sales soared. The grateful owners gave him a generous cash bonus.

This idea was perhaps a precedent for the custom in large department stores in the West, of having children write letters to the Magi [or to Santa Claus] at Christmas time.

Francisco Carretero: 'El Varal'. 1936.



Ismael was such a straightforward, upright, nice kid that many customers wanted only him to wait on them, because he'd pepper his conversation with jokes, tales or funny stories. One of the owners of "El Siglo" remarked that Ismael *"was the best employee he ever had."*

María and María Victoria, the daughters of Elías Montero, heard his father say that Ismael was a worthy fellow, full of cheer and congeniality, skilled at decorating the shop windows and good at attracting customers with his warmth and graciousness. María, the eldest, recalls that Ismael used to come to her house to visit her brother Ramón who was very ill, and would spend time with him, helping him and conversing with their mother. Both sisters also remember their father saying that he was a very reliable and trustworthy employee.

Martín Pérez de Juan, son of Juan Pérez Palomares, El Siglo's other owner, agrees with the Montero sisters and recalls that Ismael



Ismael in San Isidro with a group of friends. Ismael is marked with a cross.

would pick him up at school, take him by the hand and walk him home. He never saw him act rude or mean; on the contrary, he entertained him with improvised skits. In the period just before the war, he remembers that as they walked home Ismael would stop by the Church every day to visit the Holy Sacrament, something he had not done before.

Ismael was successful in business, at dances, and with his gang of friends. And he was gradually losing interest in the Church.

He had nothing against religion, nor was he prejudiced, but he lacked practice in things religious; he did not go to confession; he and his gang of friends had a cheerful, rash attitude that drove away other good friends who might have wanted to get closer to him. But he preferred an easy, comfortable life surrounded by the admiration of his group.

In 1933²³ Miguel Montañés Rodero, a boy somewhat older than him, who was his neighbor and knew him well, invited him to visit the Catholic Action Youth Center where he was president, with the idea of introducing him to the Advisor, Fr. Bernabé Huertas Molina who had founded the Tomelloso Center. Miguel appreciated Ismael's good qualities, in particular his winning way with people, and knew how to draw out his talents and personal likings: he made sure to mention that the Center held poetry readings during free time, where he could go to perform and teach poetry-reciting skills, or play the guitar or the bandurria.

Miguel showed him the Center, explained how the meetings worked, showed him the game tables and the library. Ismael was favorably impressed and promised to attend frequently. During one of his visits he spoke with the Advisor.

Ismael accepted in principle, reluctantly, but immediately began to have doubts even about the priest with whom he was expected to speak. He would visit the Center sometimes, when in-

23. Pope Pius XI declared 1933 a Holy Year on the occasion of the 19th centennial of the Redemption. Many religious events were organized to celebrate the 1900-year anniversary of the death of Jesus Christ.

vited by Miguel who kept reminding him about the study clubs, and he paid attention to his friend's advice, but was in a sea of doubts and always ended with recognizing, as a way of justifying himself, the limited Christian education he had received. Whatever religious inclination he had, he hid it behind a layer of indifference that was nourished by the environment hostile to religion that was common in those years.

Little by little, as he was taking small steps to see the priest and attend the club meetings, he came to understand that a life away from God was not as happy as a life with Him. He would compare the friends he associated with to the boys he met at the Center. Thus, he started to give up some of the worldly things that had accumulated around him. He began to go to confession with the Advisor and took him as spiritual director with the intent of improving his life.

All the members of that first youth group of the Tomelloso Catholic Action had an indelible impression of the Advisor: *"He communicated fire, a healthy restlessness, an anxiety for lofty ideals, and made us want to sacrifice ourselves."*²⁴

He spoke to them with his heart on fire:

«... We need active, resolute members who have a clean heart and a strong spirit.

*This is how you must be, because without these solid foundations we are going to come up short with who we are and what we intend to achieve. You are twelve; if twelve apostles conquered the world, you, who are also twelve, can conquer a town.»*²⁵

In 1934 the Holy Year of Redemption was celebrated in Rome; Fr. Bernabé Huertas was in the group from La Mancha that made the trip. At one of the three masses celebrated in the catacombs, in the crypt of St. Cecilia, Fr. Bernabé spoke briefly and exhorted the faithful *«to follow in the path of St. Cecilia, suffering martyrdom if necessary.»*

24. Florentino del Valle, 7.

25. A. Martín de Bernardo, 29.

This is how the president of the Catholic Action of Daimiel, Fr. Miguel Briso de Mondiano, remembers the event:

«Seeing that he was in deep recollection, we were reflecting and thinking about our beloved Spain, and the terrible religious persecution the country had been suffering for some time. We were also mindful of our responsibility as young Catholic men and women, because in the words of the archbishop of Toledo, we were the ones called to rechristianize it, to again bring the faith to the hearts of those who had lost it.»²⁶

With a grateful heart, Ismael remembered Miguel Montañés in the confidential dialogue he had with Fr. Ignacio Bruna, the Concentration Camp chaplain. He told him how much he owed to the friend who had introduced him to Catholic Action and to the Advisor and Spiritual Director:



Fr. Bernabé Huertas, sitting, and from left to right: Pedro Cuesta, Miguel Montañés and Ismael.

26. Francisco del Campo Real, *Testigos de la fe para el tercer milenio* [Witnesses of the Faith for the Third Millennium], 13.

«So many of us live plunged in the darkness of sin, pulled down by the chains of vice, because they lack a friend's hand to pull them from such wretchedness!»²⁷.

«Although I was raised a Christian, I would undoubtedly have lost myself forever, for my fiery character, my restless and violent nature pulled me irresistibly towards the pleasures of the world in which I would have wallowed, if another boy from my town hadn't come to stand by my side like a guardian angel. He was the very first Catholic Action Youth cell that the Advisor had founded in my town. He sought us out and began to educate us, taught us the value of sacrifice; and, finally, prepared us for martyrdom...»²⁸.

In 1934 Ismael answered the call with a resounding yes, a yes full of hope that he kept renewing in the final days of his life, in the words that he confided to the prison chaplain:

—“I want nothing to do with the world. I am of God and for God; if I die, I will belong all to God in heaven. And if I don't... I want to be a priest!”

Ismael was born again at the age of seventeen. His life was now in harmony with the music and stanzas of the Spanish Catholic Action song:

*Llevar almas de joven a Cristo
inyectar en los pechos la fe;
ser apóstol o mártir acaso,
mis banderas me enseñan a ser.*

*Por bandera y símbolo
la Cruz Redentora,*

27. A. Martín de Bernardo, 29-30.

28. A. Martín de Bernardo, 28.

*que extiende en el ánimo,
sombra protectora.*

*¡Paz en el Espíritu,
y sentir el corazón
lleno de esperanza
por el triunfo
del amor;
lleno de esperanza,
de firmeza y decisión!*

*Mi sendero en la tierra ilumina
con destellos de su radiante luz,
la misión Sacrosanta y Divina
de vivir o morir por la Cruz.*

[Tr. note: The C.A. song in the published English version, entitled *For Christ the King* (a.k.a. *An Army of Youth*) differs somewhat from the Spanish one:

*An army of youth flying the standards of truth
We are fighting for Christ, the Lord.
Heads lifted High, Catholic Action our cry,
And the cross our only sword!
On Earth's battlefield
Never a vantage we'll yield
As dauntlessly we swing.*

*Comrades true, dare and do,
'Neath the Queen's white and blue,
For our flag, for our Faith, for Christ the King.
Christ lifts His hands, The King commands:
His challenge «Come and follow Me!
From every side, with eager stride,
We form in the lines of victory.
Let foemen lurk, and laggards shirk,*

ISMAEL DE TOMELLOSO - IN SILENTIO

*We throw our fortunes with the Lord.
Mary's Son, till the world is won,
We have pledged you our loyal word.*

*Our hearts are pure, our minds are sure;
No sin our gleaming helmet taints.
No foeman fierce our shields shall pierce;
We're captained by God's unconquered saints.
Yet peace we bring, and a gentle King,
Whose law is light and life and love.
Mary's Son, may Thy will be done;
Here on earth as it is above.*

Music and text by Daniel Lord, S.J. (The Queen's Work, Inc.
St. Louis, Mo., 1932)]



*The Catholic Action Youth group of Tomelloso with Fr. Vicente Borrell and
Fr. Bernabé Huertas (to his right, above, Ismael).*

III

WORKING FOR GOD

Ismael changed neither his life nor his job nor his friends, but his work became more productive: he was proactive on the job with initiatives that benefited his employers. He waited on his customers with more pleasure; he was slowly gaining authority over his employers and his friends, thanks to his constant willingness to serve. And without meaning to, he had become his group's leader and a faithful, efficient employee who won everyone over with his good cheer and happiness.

«He only discarded anything that could weigh him down in his walk towards the new ideal that had set him on fire. He did not put away his guitar or burn his lute, nor put on a sad look or hide his attractive personality. Simply, he had found a direction. An understanding voice told him that the gifts that God had bestowed on him were going to be his weapons in the task of sanctification, and for his apostolate. Thus, while he could not convert error-addled minds with spirited arguments, nor deliver lofty speeches, he could sing jotás, strum his guitar, jump around on the stage, and be the clown who entertains, attracts and wins over the rudderless, directing them to the path of salvation and assisting in the priest's work.

True, he gave up dancing, except when entertaining the elderly guests at the Home; and he gave up going to the movies in order to save a few pesetas that he could then distribute to those needier than him that moved him.

One day, when due to a prior commitment or other compelling reason he could not avoid going to the movies, he devised a strata-gem to trick his friends. His will was already strong; in the theater he closed his eyes feigning sleepiness; his brother kept nudging him with the elbow, calling him “a bore.” What began as a joke or make-believe, became real: sprawled in his seat, Ismael fell into a deep sleep. He did not see the movie and won the bet he had made with himself; and while he cut a good figure with his friends who laughed, he cut a better one with God, who praised his victory.

All those who met him agree that he had a graceful, artistic soul. It was readily apparent; he was what everyone saw, and many enjoyed his artistic spirit.

Self-taught, without teachers or schooling, he skillfully played any musical instrument that fell into his hands. He had an instinct for drawing out music from the chords, combine sounds, play somber, harmonious background music to religious hymns or lively jota arrangements.



Music group. Ismael is the fourth standing from the left.

He was much applauded at poetry readings. In the literary and musical evenings that the Catholic Action youngsters frequently organized, Ismael's was always the feature performance, especially as a reader of poetry. No one who knew him could fail to sweetly recall those bygone times. And how he could read! When he stepped on the stage to recite one of his favorite poems, those that touched his soul as if he himself had written them, he held the audience breathless. He understood José María Gabriel y Galán, the poet of the long furrows and the quiet fields, of My vaquerillo and El Ama, El Embargo and Los Mendigos. When he recited the last poem especially, and Pemán's Viático, he was impressive, and cried, and made the audience cry.

For more formal evenings, the youths would organize comedies or zarzuelas [the traditional Spanish operettas]. More than once, Ismael was assigned the leading role, as in the famous "Mendigos" for which they were forced to give a repeat performance in the largest theater of Tomelloso at the public's request. For that event, Ismael displayed other artistic skills as well: as the stage director, he organized the play in all its details, acting included. In addition to superbly playing his role, he was also the stagehand and the painter; at least with a thick brush, for in just a few hours he drew and painted a wonderful backdrop with a slender palm tree, required background for the play, that was much admired by the audience. As Pedro, one of his friends has recalled, this was one of Ismael's successes that his friends could not forget, for it was painted beautifully.

He was achieving a reputation for his characterization of roles, and his performances were often veritable triumphs. One day in the street a dirty, hungry beggar child asked him for alms. Ismael had an ingenious idea for feeding the little rascal. He took it upon himself to wash away the caked filth, dressed him in colorful clothes, gracefully hung on his shoulders a blanket from a large batch that the store had just received and was eager to sell, and arranged the boy in the shop window with a guitar that he strummed

to attract passersby. That day an ever-changing crowd of curious people stopped to stare at the unusual spectacle, and see how “Carrañaca”²⁹ had been disguised. The publicity was very successful»³⁰ and the store owners rewarded him.

«Ismael was always ready for the ministry work that the Catholic Action organized. Here I quote Montañés who was C.A. president at the time: “He was a good assistant for anything that might be needed; everything he put his hands to was a success. He volunteered and did everything to ensure that the communions were orderly arranged, or that theater rehearsals and performances went according to schedule. He was so eager to serve, that one day he accompanied me on an official visit to a nearby town where he was to make a speech. He plainly told me that he couldn’t talk in public at all. I encouraged him, sketching a short speech for



him, which he gave successfully... and he ended the celebration by reading poetry.” One was a lovely poem dedicated to the Sacred Heart. In the final days of his life, when he was very sick, Ismael lovingly recited it to the other ward patients. Apparently the poem is Divine Love and was writ-

Carrañaca.

29. A Tomelloso old man who wandered the streets playing the guitar.

30. Florentino del Valle, 9-11.

ten by the Jesuit Fr. Félix G. Olmedo; it is as tender as it is apostolic, a sweet complaint to the Lord, a loud knocking on one's soul.

Montañés told me about an accident that happened on the train when he and Ismael were traveling to Puebla del Príncipe, the town they were working that day. This is what he said: "I thought of picking up some right-wing propaganda and distributing it on the train. I was not aware that I was doing something illegal. Sure enough, the inspector, who was most likely a 'Red,' reported us to the Guardia Civil. The guards made believe they were detaining us in the Manzanares station; but after the inspector left they let us go with these words: 'Go in peace, kids, and don't think of doing this again on the train.' Well, Ismael was not upset at this small mishap, which gave us cause for laughter and jokes."»³¹



Ismael with the Magi, January 1936.

31. A. Martín de Bernardo, 88-90.

Ismael was not vain; he probably didn't even know the meaning of the word.

«Miguel Montañés has said that “as to straightforwardness, there was no one like him.” Everything he did was for Christ, to win over as many souls to Him as he could, like Xavier who won the souls of his opponents whenever he won a chess match. Another incident shows how Ismael worked for God, not for any form of exhibitionism. In January 1936, he made wonderful preparations for the Adoration of the Magi in the Church and when the whole “cast” had their photograph taken, he refused to be in the picture and they had to “force him to pose with the actors’ families to show his appreciation for their good work.”

His talents were in the service of God. “If someone had asked Ismael to make sacrifices for Catholic Action—added Montañés—he would have done it.” He wanted to be good, to obey, that was the truth!

His friend Pedro has written: “I saw with great satisfaction that from day to day the call of Divine Love was growing stronger in his heart. I understood that a change was taking place in him, which, though not as sudden as St. Paul’s, was still quick. This perfecting was visible because he would fulfill his obligations day in and day out, in town as well as in the Church, and in all his actions we could see a gradual change, in his conversations, his dealings with people, his comportment, and his absorption in Church, which was especially noticeable.”»³²

An important change was taking place in Ismael's life: now his only talk was about seeking out souls for Christ and he lived for that. But he also felt the Lord calling him to silence and to example, more than to words. For this reason, when a friend asked him about his behavior, he modestly replied what he had been telling everyone:

32. A. Martín de Bernardo, 47-48.

«— Since I don't know how to speak and I'm not very smart, I wouldn't be able to talk about good things or about religion; for this reason, I want to be a life example.

It was one his goals, one that he confessed to a friend in a moment of frank intimacy, a goal that was the end result of a long process in the struggle of contrary affections, of a rushing of apostolic fervor on one side, and of justified mistrust of his modest education on the other.

It is not as if he had resolved to become a devotional figurine or a statue with crossed arms and tilted head: he had simply and wholly resolved to do his best and to be useful from inside Catholic Action.»³³

What kept him close to the Heart of Jesus was the charity that he practiced among the poorest and neediest, and the seriousness with which he transmitted this attitude to family and friends.

Here is one testimony of his rich charity. One morning, *«as he was walking to work, he met four dirty, ragged little girls who were begging. He called to them and said:*

— Look, kids, wait for me at the corner when the store closes; I will give you some clothes and fix you up.

He did not have to ask them twice. When Ismael went out to lunch, the little girls were waiting for him. We don't know if Ismael bought the clothes or asked his employers to donate them. The children took his arm and he brought them home where he cleaned them up, combed their hair and dressed them with new clothes. As he was missing one dress, he asked his mother to give him one of his sisters'. When he was finished and the children were about to leave, he said to them:

— Be good now, and don't let me see you again all dirty!»³⁴

33. Florentino del Valle, 14.

34. A. Martín de Bernardo, 61.

Another time, there was *«a poor woman who got by selling wicks, cigarette paper and flints. The children used to mimic her, deriding her and yelling to her in the street: “Cigarette lighter, cigarette lighter!” Heaven only knows how flustered and upset the poor woman must have been! She was later taken in at the Shelter and Ismael met her. To teach his youngest brothers to be more compassionate, he would say to them whenever he went out to volunteer at the Shelter:*

— Kids, I’m going to see the poor cigarette lighter.

The little rascals would start laughing and yell: “Flint, flint!” Then Ismael would put on an air of authority and gently scold them, trying to persuade them to stop. According to one of his brothers, once Ismael got upset and told them:

— If I catch you, you’ll see...»³⁵

He developed the art of loving the poor at the Old People’s Home that he had been visiting with his mother since he was a child, and later Fr. Bernabé would ask the C.A. kids to visit.

In Tomelloso there was *«a shelter with hospital, the Old People’s Home, that had been rebuilt in 1893 with donations from a charitable resident, Doña Crisanta Moreno. The homeless elderly from the town and surrounding area who had been forced to leave their unheated homes (cold from a lack of love and from poverty, for life was such that one could not survive without a job) were housed there. They had knocked at charity’s door and had been taken in by maternal arms that for a while made them forget their tired limbs. There, a supernatural virtue guided the Little Sisters of Charity to tend to them, overcoming their natural distaste and doing naturally even the lowliest chores, even persuading their wards that it was the nuns’ duty to care for them.*

The Shelter became the preferred venue of Ismael’s ministry. With a deep, saintly understanding, the C.A. Advisor had guided

35. A. Martín de Bernardo, 63.

his charges there. He wanted them to learn about suffering and loneliness, to prepare them for life, at the same time comforting the old guests who welcomed the charity of laughter like the sun caressing their cold limbs.

For the young volunteers, the hours spent at the Shelter were a constant effort; they had to rein in their nature that clamored for different sights in their age of affected beauty, different pastimes on their day of rest, different company in their age of dreams. At the Shelter they worked; they would pick up the broom and sweep if necessary, because chores were always somewhat behind schedule. With the aplomb of someone working the pruning hook in the vineyard, or the pen or typewriter at the office, in two minutes they finished the chore, of course not as thoroughly as the Little Sister would have liked, for she walked behind the boys picking up the sawdust in between the benches, and dusting the tables... The elderly guests who were slow and clumsy, lame and half-blind and usually needed the help of a Sister; on Sundays were escorted with youthful liveliness by the



The Tomelloso Hospital-Shelter before the Civil War.

boys, who sat them down and gracefully served them their meals with cheerful talk and jokes that made them smile.

Ismael was one of the more punctual and industrious volunteers.

“Every Sunday and often during the week as well, one of his friends has commented, after Youth Mass at the parish Church and after breakfast, or even missing breakfast, he would walk to the Shelter to offer his charity and his good cheer to the elderly; he always tried to make them laugh and give them as pleasant a time as possible while he was there.”

“We often saw Ismael—the Mother Superior has said—affectionately take by the arm some patients who had difficulty walking.”

There was one old woman who always complained, she lived on sadness and touched hardly a bite. Surly and aloof, she sat at one corner of the dining table, shut inside an unreachable silence. Ismael liked to visit her. He would sit next to her and would kid around at first telling some of the jokes that he always had ready; then he would clownishly fill her plate, look for the daintiest bite, fill her spoon and put it in her hand, then affectionately bring it to her mouth, as one does when trying to trick a stubborn baby into eating. Thus he would slowly dry her tears. How happy was Ismael when he tried to cheer her up with a new trick: he conquered his distaste and tasted the food in her plate! The pleasure he felt betrayed him. One of his friends realized what he was doing and scolded him amicably:

— That’s too much, Ismael, don’t do that!

*— **Look, I am thinking about the religious trials I want to bear and I want to start mastering myself**—Ismael replied.*

He had been thinking for some time about a possible religious vocation but had yet to choose which order he might like to join. He wavered between the Company of Jesus and the Brothers of St. John of God; and he wanted to practice self-sacrifice and self-control in order to size up his strength, his endurance, and his practical love of the poor.

Still, he was shaken by his friend’s rebuke, for as a rule he

never did anything without first consulting with the individuals whose authority he recognized: the Advisor, a friend, or the Mother Superior.

Moved by this feeling of humble submission, one day he made a strange request to the Mother Superior: that he be allowed to eat the leftovers from the old patients' plates. The nun did not think it was proper and explained her refusal saying that he might contract a disease. But because he felt that the explanation was insufficient, he found another way to mortify himself.

One day at the end of lunch, Ismael's friends were asking for his whereabouts. They found him in the kitchen, armed with apron and oversleeves, scrubbing pots and pans with such gracefulness and self-possession that he seemed to bask in his own glory.

One day Ismael was given another chance to serve selflessly and in secret. He had realized that the infirmary was the ultimate place of neglect and he directed his actions there. He gently sat next to each bed and as he served the patients their meals, he would season them with words of Christian resignation and with turns of phrases and a verve that kindled almost forgotten smiles in their expressionless faces. It became right away his favorite chore. If sometimes the Sisters, taken by scruples of responsibility, warned him that he had to leave because he was exposing himself to disease, he would listen attentively with lowered eyes and leave with his usual smile and... his usual jokes, as if to dismiss the importance of what his eyes could not dismiss.

In the entertainment that usually followed lunch and sometimes lasted the entire afternoon, Ismael was the most popular performer.

"Because he was communicative, even mischievous, which made his virtues more pleasant—the Mother Superior continued—he also played a central role in entertaining our poor elderly whom the world had forgotten. He cheered them up with quips and pranks. One Sunday he would cleverly narrate comic strips, other days he would recite poetry, something at which he excelled, or sing La Mancha jotas and dance with the elderly."

And so Ismael strummed the guitar and sang; when someone else took over the singing, or, especially, when later on someone brought a record player³⁶ to the Shelter, Ismael would dance with the more spirited of the old ladies, bringing joy to those childish elderly in the sunset of their lives.

— Ismael, don't you have a girlfriend to take out on Sundays?, they would ask.

— Yes, here she is: look at her verve and how well she dances!

Good old Mercedes is still alive and still lives at the Shelter. She remembered Ismael with tears in her eyes:

"How he loved us!—she said. When the war broke out and they forced the Sisters out, the Catholic Action kids had already stopped coming and we were very sad. One day I asked an old lady to pick up her courage and walk to the store where Ismael worked, to ask for some espadrilles. I knew the store did not carry them, but it didn't matter. The old woman went into the store and asked for espadrilles. They had a good laugh and spoke a while, and he inquired about all of us and comforted her, reassuring her that soon the Sisters would be back, and the C.A. kids also. We were so happy when the old woman told us everything! How we loved him!"

This is what Mercedes has said, a wrinkled, little old lady stooped by the years. This is what the innocent blind boy said, surrounded by the chorus of all the elderly who gratefully accept shows of affection that warm them up like the rays of the winter sun that filters through the terrace doors.»³⁷

36. It belonged to Pedro Pablo González, the father of Asunción González Burillo who was Mother Abbess of the Conceptionist Sisters of Manzanares.

37. Florentino del Valle, 14-20.

IV

GOD ASKS SOMETHING MORE OF HIM

We learn to walk by walking, we learn to pray by praying, and we learn to love by loving. We confess Love by confessing.

«Ismael was listening to the Advisor and going to church filled with faith and love. This is what Pedro has said: “We became very good friends when he began to regularly receive the Holy Sacraments.” Most of his conversations were about spiritual matters. He very much enjoyed listening to someone talk about Jesus, the Holy Virgin and the Saints for whom he felt a particular devotion. Sometimes, he started the conversation himself and would insist on discussing his beloved subjects: Christ and Mary. Pedro continued:

“He listened attentively to conversations about the Virgin Mary, to whom he was very devoted. She was like a mirror in which he always liked to reflect himself, to keep chaste, not only outside, but inside also. He chose St. Aloysius Gonzaga as a role model, and like him would pray in secret. He was drawn to the religious life of the Company of Jesus and enjoyed hearing about the challenges that St. Aloysius had overcome to become a Jesuit. He suffered at the thought of having to ask permission at home, for he knew they would object, and at the thought of the military draft.”

“There were times when Ismael had to cover for his father in the shop and was alone—Pedro continued—so he would say his usual prayer there, and it was a long one. For good measure, he would add some bodily penance and would ask his friends for instructions. Ismael was not an ordinary Christian when it came to prayer. Besides fulfilling his obligation as a practicing Chris-

tian, in addition to the daily morning and evening prayers he would lengthen the evening one with a silent prayer, unaware of the time he dedicated to it. As to food penance, even though he omitted to mention it because he had decided to keep it secret, I can say with confidence that he mortified himself a lot. He wanted to discuss these particulars, just like prayer, frequently because he was always seeking to improve himself, and conversation always shed light on one detail or the other.”

As to mortification, he was told to practice mortification of the spirit, or to deprive himself of little things that would not harm his health but still have value in God’s eyes when done in a spirit of obedience.

The Catholic Action secretary at the time added: “He would ask me about methods of self-mortification, both spiritual and physical. I would suggest something appropriate to his situation, such as giving up dessert; speaking very little; lowering one’s eyes to avoid looking at certain things, which although good, etc...”

Ismael practiced these acts of mortification, but still went hunting for more.»³⁸

Ismael would get excited about the heroic deeds of the Saints; he wanted to imitate them to get closer to God. For this reason, he would ask Pedro:

*«“**Tell me about my Saints...**” He was interested in St. Aloysius Gonzaga, St. Francis Xavier and St. John of God. He especially enjoyed listening to their sublime, heroic acts of charity. Above his bed he had hung an image of St. Aloysius. He had made and carved the frame himself. It showed the saint carrying a victim of the plague on his shoulders, in those distressing years when Rome was being punished with the plague. He admired the “madman of Granada”³⁹ who carried the sick and the dead to his hospital. For this reason,*

38. A. Martín de Bernardo, 73-74.

39. St. John of God.

he was sympathetic to the religious who belonged to that glorious Order. Did he dream of becoming a Brother Hospitaler who poured his charity on the sick at their bedside? Apparently yes.

He wanted to withdraw to a convent, adding that “he would be happy to join any Order, even if he were just handed a broom and assigned to sweep the whole day; because then he would live in the house of God.”»⁴⁰

«Recounted one of his friends: “When someone told him about an episode in the life of St. Francis Xavier, the one where the Saint mastered himself before a sick man full of sores by touching the sores with his lips, Ismael couldn’t repress a cry of joy, which I am sure can be correctly interpreted as: I must do the same!” For this reason, we should not be surprised at how he treated the Shelter patients, and of how he enjoyed sitting next to their unpleasant, ugly faces.»⁴¹

«When discussing these matters, sometimes he was sad because “he knew that his health was frail and did not want to be a burden in any Order that might accept him; he was afraid of being rejected on that account.”

Ismael didn’t just admire the Saints: he imitated them.

He truly made a living example of his life. Fr. Ignacio Bruna has rightfully said: “When those of us who knew him and dealt with him will publicize the deeds that we witnessed, the world will shout in unison: He was a saint!”⁴² Now this good priest perhaps was not aware of the beautiful acts of charity that Ismael had done, but he did know about his most sublime, heroic act: his offering of love for which he had been training since the day he had joined Catholic Action, with the small, daily exercise of an unimpeachable life in the world.»⁴³

40. A. Martín de Bernardo, 63-64.

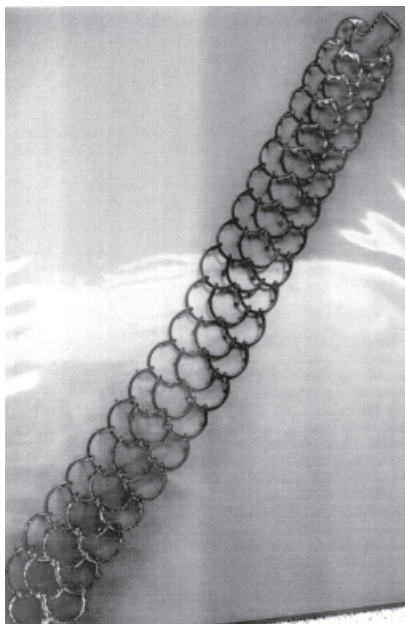
41. Florentino del Valle, 18-19.

42. Fr. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 220.

43. A. Martín de Bernardo, 64-65.

«With the eagerness to do better and more perfectly which had awakened in him, Ismael began to look with endearing simplicity and amazing perseverance into the lives of the Saints in search of forms of holiness that he could copy, if possible, exactly. What intrigued him about St. Aloysius Gonzaga was the whiteness of his chastity, the harshness of his self-penance and his long, secret praying. He ignored even the names of instruments of penance, though he would learn them over time.

One day, one of his good friends showed him a cilice.⁴⁴ Ismael took it, crushed it in his hands, positioned the ends on his bare left arm and with his right hand pulled the two tails of the cilice down



with such vehemence while raising the left arm, “that I immediately jumped on him to remove it—said the friend—but he wouldn’t release it, actually tightened it even more, as if instead of an instrument of pain, it were a pleasant object that gave intense pleasure. He asked if he could keep it; I did not allow it, though later with his innate cleverness he understood the mechanism behind the cilice and he no longer cared to have mine.”

Ismael’s cilice.

44. Ismael gave the cilice and other personal effects to Jacinta Burillo, who is mentioned frequently in his letters, the night before he left for the front. They are his only surviving personal possessions. Jacinta was married to Pedro Pablo González and was the mother of Asunción González Burillo, the Abbess of the Conceptionist Sisters of Manzanares.

With the typical reaction of the docile child who refuses to trust his own judgment, Ismael asked his friend for permission to use it. The intensity of his look and the anxiety that showed on his face betrayed the intensity of his desire; the friend recommended he use it only with his confessor's permission. But a slight limp, which he could not hide, soon suggested that Ismael was wearing one on his skin.

Something similar happened again later, because the lives of the Saints kept inspiring him new ruses in the practice of self-mortification. His deft hands patiently made knots in a rough rope that he used right away to bind his limbs, tying them up like St. Francis Xavier, the nimble athlete of Seine used to do.

One day, his mother found him with the instrument of penance constricting his body. She must have understood, but pretending not to know, asked him what it was. Ismael got out of the predicament by complaining that she had opened the door to his room without knocking. Looking to hide from human eyes, he made the cellar of the house into his retreat, just like St. Aloysius who used to hide from the Castiglione courtiers in order to pray and mortify himself.

The cellars of Tomelloso's homes are famous. Dug from calcareous, siliceous soil, they are ideal for grape-pressing, as a pantry, and as a cool haven from the stifling summer heat, especially during the leaden siesta hours.

One enters these cellars from inside the house, down a staircase dug from the same soil. The cellars get sufficient natural light from the traditional skylights cut out in the sidewalk that let the light in from the outside, at intervals, through the iron grate that secures the skylight. Ismael made the cellar into his retreat. Almost every day, during the siesta, he would retire there. To do what? His art studio and his shop were there, as was his reading library and study. But everyone suspected that those walls were also mute witnesses to prayer and penance.

He began by carefully arranging the room, which used to be a

coal cellar by then providentially no longer in use. His sensitive temperament required order and cleanliness. To prevent unexpected forays from the curious, he would call his little brothers, give them a short catechism lesson that they had to learn by heart (and for which they were rewarded with candy), and have them guard the door, while studying, so they could warn him if some intruder tried to break into his quiet hideout and chance upon his secret. It was there that he gained familiarity in talking to God. His friends, the same ones who had originally called him to serve and who after a while respectfully looked at him as their superior, were amazed as they gradually realized that he had overtaken them and was signaling to them from afar; cheerfully, plainly inviting them to soar resolutely in the flight of the spirit. They saw in him and admired a strong, dominating will, an extraordinary self-mastery over youthful whims and fancies, and an abundance of sacrifice, which they could achieve only with difficulty and in reduced doses. They admired him when they saw him kneeling in deep meditation, while they strove to cut their imagination short after a little while.

This change happened quickly, as if he wanted to be praised. Once he answered yes to the call of Grace, he set out to become one of the best.

He had little ascetic training, but a golden will. With the simplicity of a child, but with holy insight, he zeroed in on the best boys, sizing them up, and began to copy the traits he admired most in each one. At that point he needed the help of a role model, not because he lacked determination, but for fear of straying from a path that he wanted to be straight and narrow. Later, after he had found his direction, he would no longer need models, which can be a cage for men with strong personalities. The Lord had given him the grace of writing such clear plans for him that they attracted the holy envy of fellow ascetics who were now trying to copy some of those fine patterns in the life of the boy who had begun by hesitatingly modeling himself after them.

Still, this is what he did early on. He asked for advice, for en-

lightenment, almost for directions from several of his friends, even if they were wary of helping him, especially when they began to realize that he was overtaking them.

On this topic, one of his best friends has written: “He approached me hoping to find a friend, even more, a confidant, a good counsel, so that we could meet and talk about the things that mattered to us, in our free time, and always depending on circumstances.”

The following became Ismael’s religious schedule: he attended Mass at seven in the morning, the first mass of the day in Tomelloso; his work at the store began at eight. At first he was not explicit in explaining why he had to leave home so early; not everyone around him understood except his mother who soon guessed the reason, and would discreetly put a sandwich in his hands, for breakfast. Ismael rarely touched those sandwiches, for the beggars knew him well and would wait for him at strategic corners.

He had a favorite corner in the Church: he would walk into the chapel dedicated to St. Anthony, where the Holy Sacrament was kept (it is the vestry today). From there, next to the Holy Host, he could see the central altar. Far from human eyes, he would pray, think, believe strongly, and talk to Jesus. The prayer of the simple people! God enlightens the minds of those who humble themselves in His presence... There Ismael offered everything that the day was going to put in his hands; he already knew that work also could be converted into prayer.»⁴⁵

«“He chose this place—said Pedro—because he could be very close to the Lord without anyone spotting him, and because he wanted to seem like everyone else without having people heap praise on him, which he did not like.”

Pedro continued: “He very much wanted to receive Communion daily, but because he worked as a sales clerk, he used to say that he was forced to tell small lies because the female customers were always trying to haggle, and for that reason he refrained

45. Florentino del Valle, 21-25.

from receiving the Host for days, although lately he would receive it several times a week. "What a sensitive conscience! When Jesus came into his heart, he did not want Him to find there even the smallest blemish.

He was always careful not to lose the purity that the Eucharist left in his soul, by some tiny fault, not even the small unintentional lies of the job. It's easy to calculate how much care he took to avoid such blemishes, so as not to lose the daily comfort of Communion.

Sometimes, when he went back to the store he would find a crowd and the owner would gently reprimand him: —Ismael, where have you been all this time? Don't you see that the store is full of customers?"

*— **The store is full of customers**—the good Ismael would reply lost in thought—**Where I just came from it was empty, no one was there! And it should have been so full! Because He who lives there deserves to be treated differently!***

And he would begin to wait on the customers with his usual cheerful attention.

Whenever he had a few minutes, he would stop by the Church to greet the Lord. He loved so much to stop by St. Anthony's chapel that as he walked back to the store he would mumble:

*— **I have just seen the Master... How lonely is the Master!**⁴⁶*

Before resuming work in the afternoon, he would again spend a while with the Lord and this was perhaps his longest visit of the day. He would enter from the vestry door, reach the Church and begin to pray. How the Holy Spirit inspired him then!

These were his everyday devotions, which, if possible, he doubled on feast days. Here is one such scene recounted by Fr. Florentino del Valle.»⁴⁷

46. "Some doubted the truth of these scenes from work; but after hearing the opinion of his boss and other similar statements, they seem quite likely. He definitely was a frequent visitor to the Holy Sacrament." A. Martín de Bernardo, 80.

47. A. Martín de Bernardo, 78-81.

«A scene at the Old People's Home.

On Holy Thursday, the church doors were left open at night to allow the faithful to worship the Lord at the Easter Sepulcher. In the last two years before the war, Ismael was there: he did not come or go, or take half-hour shifts. He stood kneeling at the pew, motionless, the whole night. His example kept some other boys who were visiting the Sepulcher still for a long time, but after a while they became tired and sleepy. They looked at Ismael and were struck by his trance-like look and his intense meditation. As they left the Church they stopped by the Shelter and the Mother Superior offered them chairs on which to rest in the parlor; and glasses of wine and cookies. Someone thought of Ismael and went to call him.»⁴⁸

«Not wanting to disrespect the Mother Superior, Ismael accepted and left the Church for that small refreshment. The Mother and the other nuns told me that they were uplifted at the thought that Ismael had spent the night deep in prayer without taking even one break. "In addition—the Mother Superior continued—he was never gloomy or sad in his devotions, for looking at him people only saw a cheerful, even mischievous, teenager who was his friends' 'clown,' whom they had nicknamed 'the show-off' for his good cheer and easy jokes. For this reason, many of his traits that carried a spirit of true virtue went unperceived.»⁴⁹

«And so after tasting the sweetness of friendship, the wine and the cookies, Ismael got up to return to the Church, as if weighed down by a heavy burden. They asked him to stay a while to chat in the parlor, but with his usual laughing expression he replied that a promise he had made called him back to Church, and said good night to his friends. He prayed the whole night before the Sepulcher.

48. Florentino del Valle, 25.

49. A. Martín de Bernardo, 82-83.

Seeing him in that pose, so uniquely his, before the Sacrament, his friends wondered, and we wonder today, knowing that he had little ascetic training, what was the subject of his prolonged meditations, and what where his feelings. I believe we can find the answer on a page I saw among his more rumpled papers, a poem that was undoubtedly a frequent subject of his meditations:

*¿Por qué empeñarse en saber
cuando es tan fácil amar?
Dios no te manda entender
no pretende que su mar
sin playas pueda caber
en tu mínimo pensar.
Dios sólo te pide amor.
Dale todo el tuyo y más,
siempre más, con más ardor,
con más ímpetu.... ¡verás
cómo amándole mejor,
mejor le comprenderás! ⁵⁰*

[Why strive to learn
when it's so easy to love?
God doesn't command you to understand
he does not expect his sea
without beaches to fit
into the smallest of your thoughts.
God only asks for your love.
Give Him all your love and more,
always more, with more passion,
with more élan... and you'll see how
in loving him better,
you'll understand him more!]

50. Amado Nervo.

Ismael had a deep faith and he loved God and spoke to him humbly, that is true, but with confidence, addressing him like a Father. He prayed in silence and mortified himself in secret, although he could also do penance in plain sight, without anyone noticing. He knew to give up dessert at the table, especially if it was a little more elaborate than usual, or the tastiest bite, with a pretext or a funny remark that charmed his family, whom he could easily mislead because they did not understand the harsh language of his asceticism or the fact that he gave his snack or breakfast sandwich to the beggars.

Ismael had made a resolute choice to be good, but sometimes he slowed down, not because he regretted his decision but because he was fearful of taking the wrong turn since he no longer had the counsel of the Advisor who had been transferred to another town. For this reason he beseeched his friends, who, intimidated by the responsibility, were forced to reply: —This goes beyond our rules of caution, and puts you on shaky soil; better ask advice from your confessor.

It was in this predicament that he uttered his sincere cry, at once heartbreaking and comforting to the Shelter nuns:

— I want to be good, but I don't know how; I want to be very good, but I don't know how to go about it.

God came to his aid. In April 1935, a Spiritual Exercises course was going to be held in Ciudad Real and Ismael and Montañés were invited to attend. The organizers explained to the two boys the effectiveness of the exercises; they pointed out to them that it was a great school of virtue. Since that day, all that Ismael could think, talk and dream about, was the day when he would leave for the course. The first serious difficulty was the mundane issue of money; at the time, he only earned three pesetas a day, which were needed at home to support his many siblings. He could not expect his family or his employers to understand the importance of the Exercises and pay for the cost. He confidentially discussed the problem with his friends, but without being discouraged about finding a solution. He gave up all discretionary things and with the help

of Catholic Action was able to collect the money he needed, about seventy pesetas for expenses, travel, etc. and he left for the Ciudad Real Seminary, where the Exercises were going to be held under the direction of the Jesuit Fr. José Sánchez Oliva.⁵¹»⁵²

«At the time, José Ballesteros who had such grateful memories of Ismael, was a philosophy student at the Seminary. He later became a priest. He saw Ismael at the Saragossa Doctors' Hospital in 1938. This is what José had to say about Ismael and his impression of him when they first met:

“Around Easter Week in 1935 I met Ismael on the occasion of the Spiritual Exercises. With him were some other boys from Tomelloso.⁵³ He was bright and restless, cheerful and merry at all times. It wasn't the kind of cheer that stirs up trouble or doesn't uplift. It was natural and instinctive, as if coming from a heart that, feeling happy, radiates happiness throughout his being. I came to like him, undoubtedly because we were similar in temperament... Still, not only did I love him, I also admired his visits to the chapel in his free time, where he stood in deep meditation, kneeling before the Sacrament, and I admired him even more because after all he was just a Catholic Action boy.”

51. *Author's note:* José Sánchez Oliva, S.J., a priest, was arrested when the war broke out. Wholeheartedly and with immense joy, this is what he replied to someone who was offering to help him escape: “How can I run away from martyrdom, when I've asked God for it my whole life?” That same night, a light truck left the jail for Carrión de Calatrava, eight miles from Ciudad Real, with eighteen prisoners, including Fr. Sánchez Oliva. The latter, in addressing Brother Sánchez, also a Jesuit, told him: “Let's go, God is calling us.”

Fr. Sánchez Oliva kneeled before the murderers when they discharged their rifles. One of them was unable to erase from his mind the peaceful, joyful look of the martyr. They threw the corpses in a *noria* in the cemetery known as “Carrión's Well.” Three years later, when the bodies were exhumed, they found the body of Fr. Sánchez Oliva: he was holding in his teeth a medal of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and a small crucifix that hung from a chain he had around his neck.

52. Florentino del Valle, 25-28.

53. Miguel Montañés, Pedro Cuesta and Rogelio Redondo.

Fr. Rogelio Redondo who was also a seminarian at the time, recalled: “More than the Exercises that require so much commitment, those days were the happiest in Ismael’s life. He could not hide his happiness at being in the Seminary, where his only thoughts were about his eternal salvation. I admired the frequent, extended visits he made to the Holy Sacrament. When he took leave, this is what he said to me:

— How I envy you, you seminarians know much more than we do how to go about being good... and it’s so easy to be good in here!

He did the Exercises with great benefit, and was pleasantly surprised when saintly Fr. Oliva kneeled at his feet and brimming with humility, kissed them. On the morning of Wednesday of Easter Week they concluded the Exercises, and in the afternoon he returned to Tomelloso with his good friend Montañés.

As he took leave, he said to me:

— It’s a pity that the Exercises are over! And laughing as usual, his soul on his lips, he shook my hand and continued:

— Listen, little priest, see that you write to me, all right? Because perhaps I’ll become a priest too, later on, you know? And he left. He must have really liked the Seminary, perhaps it stirred in his heart a love of embracing the priesthood, because one time he said to me, half-joking and half-humbly:

— Why don’t you take me with you to the Seminary, I would be so happy there, even as a porter! Because books are very difficult for me, for I believe I’m pretty dumb when it comes to books.

It was clear by then that all his aspirations had the one, same goal: “To consecrate himself to God, said a friend, something that was very difficult for him to hide.” For him, “vocation” was not just a whim. He sought to belong completely to God, no matter where.»⁵⁴

54. A. Martín de Bernardo, 86-87.

«The Exercises gave a more marked profile to his character, but without erasing his enchanting good humor. They carved deeply into his soul, as if chiseling on everlasting granite, some basic principles that became steadfast rules of conduct even in difficult predicaments. His will was fortified, became more resolute; he did not speak more forcefully or thread more heavily but simply, with perseverance, systematically helped his spirit fight its enemies; he was even merrier, because the laughter on his lips echoed that in his soul. It's as if he felt he was sculpting a masterpiece. He was the artist of his own soul.

He gave a direction to his life without worrying too much, knowing that he was doing the right thing. He intensified, if possible, his life of service through joy, at the Shelter, at home, with his friends, and with the youngest Catholic Action members, whom he understood more than anyone else because in between explanation and illustration, advice and maxim, he would inject a tale, a joke, a sleight of hand that awed them and spiced up the meetings.

With joy he was refining his soul, filigreeing it through a constant mastery and renewed assaults of self-mortification, because he knew that no great achievement happens without sacrifice. Pain breaks stones, but also creates statues. Pity the statue whose sculptor feels sorry for the marble and "treats it with care"!

He was skilled at cutting short a joke that already rose playfully to his lips, or in letting his friends talk without injecting a witticism while the conversation continued lively. He had asked one of his friends, during these conversations, to test him at gradually higher levels, in order to become accustomed to master himself immediately, at any time. For example, in the best part of the conversation when Ismael's eyes were sparkling and everyone could sense that he was about to interject something funny or witty, the friend would say his name, and Ismael would stop in his tracks, shut his lips and listen, extracting a smile from the face of his Guardian Angel.

Undoubtedly, those who were not in on the secret perhaps in-

terpreted that mastery of the will and that exercise, asceticism—preparing himself for what God wanted from him—as a quirk and looked at the friend as a weird spoil-sport or an impertinent censor. One gets ready for the great battles with small skirmishes. Great triumphs require a slow preparation. And martyrdom often confirms and glorifies the little things, highlights the small everyday acts of self-denial, makes a sublime reality, one day, of what was for a long time an exercise, almost a game, towards becoming a saint or a martyr.

Learning how to suffer is the most important and difficult art in life, for it requires a method, from the small to the great, from the easy to the difficult, from the common to the exceptional. Small sufferings must be like a ladder to the great ones. One must learn to be a Christian also by confronting everyday minutiae, effectively reining in anger and ill humor. We need a large stockpile of moral energy, and one way of replenishing it is to exploit the weak currents of small, everyday contradictions.

The death of those who die like heroes, in a burst of total dedication or after a sickness saintly borne, is a prepared, not an improvised death, the result of long trials. Day in and day out, they sacrifice on the altar of everyday life what we see, in hindsight, under the structure of heroic acts: choosing chastity over carnal pleasure, modesty over the flattery of pride; zeal over the easy life; the cry of pain over comfort... Ismael kept getting ready for everything, training himself to be a most generous, total “sacrificial victim” at the moment that had been planned for him “from afar.”»⁵⁵

«The love that Ismael felt for Our Lady the Virgin shone through when he recited the Holy Rosary and in his conversations with close friends. In all his needs, his comfort and aid was the Rosary, which he prayed with his fingers after he lost his rosary beads; he would recite it several times a day.

55. Florentino del Valle, 28-30.

When someone offended God in his presence, he felt a sharp pain in the stomach. Always self-effacing and obedient, recounted an acquaintance, “during the war Ismael would volunteer to queue for rations for several families, so he was the only one who didn’t get to sleep at night and suffered the vagaries of the weather.”

Often he would come home at night and comment:

— I left because I cannot stand the refugees cursing; they have an evil tongue.

Other times, he would start reciting the Rosary when he was in line and explain:

— This way I am not bored; and it’s the best way to use time.

He also suffered intensely whenever he learned that a priest had been scandalous. He did everything in his power to avoid offending God. Not only did he give up all forms of entertainment (and because he was cheerful, it took him a lot of mastery to say no), he also tried to keep those over whom he had any influence away from temptation using all the imagination and jokes he had to distract them.

One day, it was Carnival time, he and a group of friends of the same age were together. He dressed up as a witch and with a broom in his hand was jumping everywhere to amuse them and divert them from going to the dances.»⁵⁶

«Ismael grew in perfection and in virtue every day, attracting the praise of his mates and of all those who took notice.

These are some of Ismael’s simple apostolic acts. The Tomelloso Old People’s Home was his most frequent venue, because in tugging at the hearts of the elderly poor with his acts of charity, he was also sowing the Redeeming Christ in their souls. But we already saw him at work here, and also in almost all the propaganda work he did at the evenings and public happenings that took place in Tomelloso.

56. A. Martín de Bernardo, 83-84.

His greatest apostolic achievement was his life. Of course, he went on expeditions and sorties in search of souls for the Lord. In His service, he always managed to work without resting, his eyes fixed on the final victory, his big heart full of holy optimism. He loved God and his loving soul could not resist the sight of cold and insensitive creatures who owed so much to Him.»⁵⁷

On June 21st, the feast of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, the patron saint of youth, the Catholic Action youths organized a great party. After Mass, they carried the image of the saint in procession in the temple, singing the Catholic Action song, and celebrated an evening at the Colegio de la Milagrosa, the school where Ismael read poetry, strummed the guitar and made the nuns, the kids and their families laugh with his jokes, as he usually did.



Fr. Bernabé Huertas Molina, the C.A. Advisor (sitting) with Fr. Amador Navarro Lorente, Fr. José María Mayor Macías and the parish priest Fr. Vicente Borrell Dolz. The four martyrs were murdered in 1936.

57. A. Martín de Bernardo, 88-89.

V CIVIL WAR

The bloodiest and most violent war ever fought in Spain was the Civil War: it had been brewing for a long time and erupted on July 18th, 1936.

Cut off as it was from the major communication roads and with the land parceled into small lots, Tomelloso was not a town conducive to revolutions. Its plain folk were busy with everyday chores and followed the raucous vicissitudes of national and European politics only from afar.

Consequently, historians say, compared to what happened in other towns of the same region and province, Tomelloso was spared many of the war's atrocities.

«The revolution caught Ismael in Tomelloso. Of course, there were exceptions and crimes were committed in the name of the revolution in this town also, for one, the murder of the parish priest⁵⁸ and its responsibility in the death of two assistant priests, in addi-

58. In addition to Fr. Vicente Borrell Dolz mentioned in note No. 20, two assistant priests from Tomelloso were murdered in Ciudad Real. Fr. José María Mayor Macías was born in Navalpino on August 13th, 1897. On Wednesday of Easter Week in 1935 he was appointed assistant in Tomelloso. After being jailed in town, he was released and decided not to hide. On September 5th, he was again arrested in Tomelloso and jailed for three days there and for one day in the *checa* [*checas* were locations used by the militia during the Civil War as jails or improvised courts] of the Ciudad Real Seminary. The night of September 8th, 1936 he was taken to a hamlet, Las Casas, where he and the Jesuit priests Manuel González (see note No. 69), Domingo Ibarlucea Oregui and some lay people

tion to the sacrilegious wrecking of the town's churches in the early days of the revolution.»⁵⁹

«With Montañés and Pedro, Ismael attended Mass that was celebrated in secret at the Shelter. One day they were caught by the militiamen and thrown in the town jail for half a day. They were released only after the militia exacted a steep fine from one of them. Then Ismael began his self-confinement at home.»⁶⁰

«On Saint Anne's Day (July 26), some arsonists came from out of town and with the help of some unhappy, bitter locals, ripped the paintings from the parish church and piled them up in Plaza Mayor, where they burned them in a huge bonfire along with other art works and devotional objects.»⁶¹

«Ismael probably left his hiding place to witness the scene from a hidden spot. He was able to catch a piece of ribbon from the pontifical banner that Catholic Action had kept as a souvenir of the pilgrimage made to Rome in the Holy Year.»⁶²

«His blood turned at the sight of the billowing, sinister flames, and he went back home in a state of restlessness. But his family was more interested in making sure that no one saw him, for they knew all too well what being religious meant. They feared for his

were murdered. The corpses were thrown in a heap under a ditch near the Las Casas cemetery. They were buried there the following day.

Fr. Amador Navarro Lorente was born in Carrizosa (Ciudad Real) on July 11th, 1905. He was seized on August 18th, 1936 in Tomelloso where he was assistant priest. He was moved to Ciudad Real on September 3rd with his fellow in the ministry Fr. José María Mayor Macías. He was murdered on October 24th in the morning. We ignore where his body lies, though it is believed to be among the bodies that were thrown into the fatal Carrión de Calatrava Well.

59. Fr. Anibal Carranza Ortiz, a Tomelloso native who was parish priest of La Solana was murdered at the beginning of the Civil War.

60. A. Martín de Bernardo, 99-100.

61. Florentino del Valle, 34.

62. A. Martín de Bernardo, 100.

*life, and with good reason. One day he was taken to jail; he was released only after his father pleaded help from some higher-ups that he knew. Once more, Ismael shut himself at home.»*⁶³

Luis Molinero has reported that some militiamen went to Ismael's father's smithy and asked for tools to force open the doors of St. Francis' Chapel, wanting to burn the paintings there. When Ismael heard them, he came out from hiding and told his father not to hand over the tools because they were going to burn the images, like they had done with the parish church.

His resolute, bold intervention provoked a heated exchange and the militiamen withdrew, but not before telling him that they knew who he was and that he would pay for it very soon.

The scene was witnessed by Luis who had hidden under a table in the shop.

When the militiamen left, Ismael's father was troubled because he knew those were not idle threats; he decided that Ismael had to leave town and sent him to an uncle of his, a hunter who knew a safe farmhouse near Lagunas de Ruidera.

The farmhouse is now in ruins, but is still standing thanks to the restoration work done to one of the walls. The place is so remote that not even Luis Molinero knew how to get there. We discovered it after making some inquiries, and Luis became emotional when he recognized it, as if his memory had suddenly been jolted back; he said that he had spent two weeks there with Ismael who had hidden there at least a month and a half, until early September 1936.

When Ismael returned to Tomelloso in September, the news were even less reassuring because the Civil War had intensified; he prudently kept inside the home.

«News at once gruesome and comforting were reaching Tomelloso: the martyrdom of so many believers, religious and

63. Florentino del Valle, 34.



Farmhouse near Lagunas de Ruidera, where Ismael's parents hid him for a month and a half in the summer of 1936.



Luis Molinero in a recent visit to the farmhouse.

priests, the inhumanity of the executions but also the invincible fortitude of the martyrs.

The death of Fr. Bernabé Huertas, the former Advisor of the Tomelloso Catholic Action who had become parish priest of Socuéllamos, was discussed in the intimacy of the homes, and cautiously commented in safe groups in the street. The eyes of those who reported the death, and of those who listened in shock, would instinctively turn to the young men whom Fr. Bernabé had educated and who were united in their memory of him.

When Fr. Bernabé was transferred to Socuéllamos to be the parish priest of that town, he had found a shocking religious desert, but the town was slowly coming around as it responded to his call. The Church was already no longer deserted at the daily morning Mass, nor was it now a rare sight to see women and men receive Communion frequently.»⁶⁴

«The whole town loved him, and for that reason he was also a target of hate. In those hellish days, the priest had a premonition of martyrdom, and “prepared his parents and his sister for his imminent passage—one of his acquaintances has written to me.— He reasoned with them about the beauty of a martyr’s death told them that if God’s inscrutable plans had decreed that he was going to suffer it he would offer himself totally, with immense joy and inner pleasure. He added that they must accept God’s Will completely and embrace the cross He was allowing them to bear, reassuring them it would never be so heavy that they could not carry it.” On the August 30th, after celebrating Mass in a prayer room at home and distributing the Bread to his family, and again discussing martyrdom with them, he was seized by a band of militiamen. The acquaintance we mentioned earlier has described the scene to us: “He ended the Mass by remembering his children (this is how he affectionately referred to the Catholic Action youth of Tomelloso), in particular Montañés and Pedro. Three hours later,

64. Florentino del Valle, 32.

eight militiamen came to the house. His mother opened the door, and when they asked for him, she replied that he was home. Fr. Bernabé was praying. He rose to meet them and greeted them with his customary politeness. They said that he had to go with them to the Town Hall to give a short statement. He called his parents and sister to say goodbye (for he knew he wasn't coming back), and in front of the militiamen gave them his final advice, asking them, once more, to freely accept without misgivings the Will of God and to confide only in the Heart of Jesus. He hugged them and on the threshold raised his eyes to Heaven, took his Crucifix and the Rosary with him and got into the militiamen's car.

He was incarcerated in the Socuéllamos jail until the early morning on September 6th. In that time, he generously comforted the other inmates; on the 3rd he confessed them, and saw his mother, to whom he repeated the advice he had given her on the day of his arrest."

He was taken to the site of his execution. He spoke with the militiamen of how he would die, but they left him alone, not wanting to kill him. But someone who had watched the scene branded them as cowards, whereupon they retraced their steps. Fr. Bernabé was quietly waiting for them. He was praying. They murdered him in the morning of September 6th, on Bonillo Road, in a place called "Horseshoe Ridge."

Fr. Florentino del Valle has written that the earth was soaked with blood and for a long time the rain could not wash it out, a detail also noticed by some of the executioners who happened to walk by. The fact was talked about in Socuéllamos and Tomelloso, and more than one person from the two towns went to see for himself and to collect some of the earth as a relic.»⁶⁵

After Fr. Bernabé was murdered, Ismael continued *«to stay shut inside his home, because there was a file on him due to his outstanding activity on behalf of Catholic Action and his Christian*

65. A. Martín de Bernardo, 96, 97, 98, 99.



Cross raised on the site of Fr. Bernabé Huertas' murder.



The father and sister of Fr. Bernabé Huertas next to the cross.

ministry. He suffered intensely; more horrifying news of more martyrs and of “searches” reached his hiding place; his heart was rent by pain because he passionately wanted to be a martyr; he was to feel the same passion, even more deeply, at the front. This is what he said:

— I was asking the Lord to give me the strength to drink from the cup of martyrdom, but... the fruit wasn't ripe yet for me to enter heaven right away; I neither wore the crown nor carry the palm, and this for me has been harder than even martyrdom. He also confessed that he had generously delivered his life up to the Lord.»⁶⁶

«In the Catholic Action group, Ismael had become close friends with another boy, José Antonio Martínez. Some letters from the correspondence that he exchanged with his friend have survived. They wrote to each other about everything they knew, they encouraged each other, and in this way found some comfort. Ismael's letters exude a fiery spirit, the strength with which he forced himself to stay hidden at home, his eagerness to be a martyr and his acceptance of God's will. Here are some excerpts:

My dear friend J. A. Martínez: I am writing to ask you for Fr. Manuel's address,⁶⁷ because he told me that he had left it with you... Write to me right away and send it to me, and tell me how you are; I am well, thanks be to God..., I suffer here, but what are we to do, God sends us this... May He be blessed!... Until now we have to thank Him for watching over us; but if He were to command us to do something, we must obey, because anything we do for Him is of little account; therefore, let us be bold and bear what may come. I would be so happy to suffer for Him, to whom we owe so much and whom we repay so poorly!

Please tear up this letter or put it in a safe place. When you

66. A. Martín de Bernardo, 100.

67. According to Pedro Cuesta, Ismael wanted him to be his spiritual counselor in the period just before the war. A. Martín de Bernardo, 88.

write to me, put the letter in an envelope and seal it. Do not write my name on it. Remember me in your prayers. Ask for a lot.

This is all for now, I am your friend who does not forget you in his prayers. ISMAEL. Regards.

The recurring thought in this letter is to suffer for God. The idea of sacrifice was always fixed in Ismael's mind. How long and deep he must have meditated, to already be "Host"! What plans he would devise to one day be a victim and a holocaust on the altar of martyrs, of suffering, of pain! Enlightened by these thoughts and driven by a burning desire, he cried out:

— I would be so happy to suffer for Him, to whom we owe so much and whom we repay so poorly!

In another letter in which he replied to his friend Martinez, Ismael was overjoyed to receive news from his friend, and sent him a clipping from *Heraldo* that was probably full of boasting, because he felt sorry for whoever had written the piece:

My dear friend: You cannot imagine my joy at receiving your letter, because I was already convinced that you had forgotten that you had to reply to me. Thank you for the monologue,⁶⁸ which I enjoyed a lot, you must tell me where you found it.

I am worried about Fr. Manuel⁶⁹ because he hasn't written to

68. Note by A. Martín de Bernardo, 103: «*It was entitled Spain repents at the feet of Mary Immaculate. It was a good piece, otherwise Ismael would not have been enthusiastic about it.*»

69. «*In two letters he referred to a Ciudad Real martyr who had played a crucial role in his focus on sainthood: it was Fr. Manuel González. In one of the letters he asked for the priest's address so he could write to him. In the other he was worried because he had received no reply, and decided to write him again.*» Ismael never wrote to him.

However, «*a careless letter—a clumsy wording, as we humans often do—had lost Fr. González. It had betrayed him, for this is how his pursuers had discovered his whereabouts in Daimiel and seized him. They thought they had made some kind of breakthrough when they put shackles on "the apostle of the working class" of Ciudad Real, as everyone who knew him (and they were many, in Ciudad Real and in the large towns of the province, for his schools, his Spiritual*

us and I had asked you for his address so I could send him a postcard. I am sending you a piece from Heraldó: read it and you'll see. I feel sorry for them!

Don't forget me, and pray a lot. All my best. Don't think I belong to the other side, because what's happening to me is the same that's happening to you: I haven't seen anyone in a long, long time. ISMAEL.

Some of his sentences show how wary he had become:

As to getting together, I think it's difficult, because I believe that whatever happens is because Our Lord God sent it to us.

Exercises and Retreats) called him. Ismael and his good friends had met him in Tomelloso during one of those retreats and the memory of that serious but cheerful man, his modest but winning airs, had been burnished in their hearts. The Reds hated him... but also "envied him" because with his example he destroyed their arguments against the Church's tyrannical oppression. When he was arrested and taken to prison, he confessed his true identity of priest and Jesuit.

In jail he comforted and encouraged those around him: "We must work for God and courageously accept our fate!"

He gave a magnificent self-defense in court. "Me, an enemy of the people? And yet you know that I stripped myself to give to the poor, that I spared no sacrifice to help them? Produce another reason to accuse me, not this one, for everyone knows it is not true."

The audience was moved and spoke up on his behalf. Then the accusers moved to slander him, they mentioned political parties and hidden weapons, and handed down the death sentence. The trial ended with the priest admonishing the judges with these words that would weigh heavily on their conscience:

"Ponder carefully the crime you are about to commit! I am not saying this to spare myself. My greatest wish is to die a martyr for Christ, but you, do not commit this sin! Though in the midst of all this, I am comforted by the fact that all the workers for whom I fought, are opening heaven's gates to me... Long Live Christ the King!"

On the eve of September 8th, the Nativity of Our Lady, the good priest had a glimpse of his possible rebirth in heaven: "What a wonderful day is tomorrow, the feast of Our Lady, to die a martyr!" And this is what happened. As dawn was breaking, when it was almost still night, a volley of shots ripped through the body of nine martyrs of the faith: one of them was Fr. González.» Florentino del Valle, 36-38.

This being the case, may all that He lays out be welcome, still I don't think we should seek out the enemy. And in a frank expression of friendship he added:

Trust neither your shirt... nor your undershirt. My best to your family.

Martinez had a bright idea for meditating together. After Ismael replied that getting together was impossible, he thought of exchanging the meditation points on paper slips, so that they could share them. A child acted as the go-between, and to mislead the enemy they used to roll the paper up like cigarettes and tell the child "Here, take these cigarettes to Ismael so he can have a smoke."

From some of his letters we get a glimpse of Ismael's frustration: — ***I think I'm going to burst for not being able to talk to anyone. Ouch!***

What a huge ordeal not to be able to expatiate!⁷⁰

In other letters he wrote about his acts of self-mortification:

I too want to see everyone; but I mortify myself and go nowhere, and see no one. I haven't seen Pedro in a long time and this because I said "Bye" to him in the street; Miguel, since we were in the can⁷¹ together; J.A., it's been a long time... I'm going to burst. Your letters put me in a good mood, but you take your sweet time answering.⁷²

«During one of those get-togethers he showed his friends the pontifical ribbon from the Catholic Action banner and distributed pieces of it, crying from the emotion. His friends have kept the pieces as a souvenir.

This is what his friend Pedro has said about the times during the war when they met at his home: "Often on Sundays we would gather at home, and spend the afternoon chatting away, reviewing

70. A common saying in Tomelloso, to denote someone who enjoys talking at length.

71. Jail or prison.

72. A. Martín de Bernardo, 101-104 and Florentino del Valle, 36.

topics such as the Sacred Heart, the Holy Virgin, St. Aloysius, the desire for suffering, etc. He had an unquenchable thirst to learn about and delve deeper into devotional practices, which he must have done frequently and at length.”»⁷³

«One day they met in the street; outwardly calm, and remembering their Advisor they reckoned they would like to have some of his objects as a souvenir and a relic, that by touching them they might appreciate him more, should the ultimate trial come to pass. Ismael traced a somewhat daring plan; one day he announced that he was going on a country trip and rode his bike to Socuéllamos where he spoke with Fr. Bernabé’s family about their wish. He came back with a large bundle tied to the back seat. Another day he rode a motorcycle that he had borrowed; he had never ridden it before, but with a few short lessons, his cleverness and the memory of the martyr he mounted it resolutely and made a quick, successful trip.

Since a lot of us wanted a memento of the martyred priest, the third time he rode to Socuéllamos in a car and brought back Fr. Bernabé’s office desk, his library books and a lot of other objects he had used... When Ismael returned with his precious load, everyone greedily jumped on it and he had a good time watching the scrabble with his usual smile that always gave a drop of happiness to anyone who looked at him. He deemed himself amply compensated by the spectacle; he only kept for himself the complete works of José María Gabriel y Galán that became an inexhaustible mine for his literary interests.

Pedro Cuesta, José Antonio Martínez and Ismael spent Christmas Eve of 1936 together. With the help of Ismael’s deft hands, they built a small nativity scene using whatever they had handy. They prepared a dinner to which Ismael contributed a perfectly delicious hasty pudding made with grape syrup. Afterwards, they read Mass devoutly. They sang carols until they exhausted the repertory; they meditated and spoke about the Child who became man

73. A. Martín de Bernardo, 104-105.

for love of humankind and who was so little known that he was persecuted and killed, his faithful followers as well.»⁷⁴

«Pedro has written that they spent Christmas afternoon together in meditation and in conversation about the many thanks they owed to God for having allowed them to celebrate Christmas in such dangerous circumstances.»⁷⁵

1937 was a quieter year for the towns of La Mancha: the terror of persecution and the killing of martyrs had spent itself, and a secretive life full of fear, hunger and hardship had begun.

Still, Ismael's eagerness to be a martyr hadn't spent itself. He did say that **"he envied those who had fallen."** His yearning to be a martyr was stronger than fighting at the battlefield, because Ismael detested war.

We know very little about the first months of 1937: the Church and St. Francis' Chapel had been shut down, their paintings burned; the Little Sisters who ran the Shelter and the Sisters of Charity had been forced into hiding or had fled. Ismael continued to meet his friends; they kept up a prayer and meditation schedule using texts that they kept hidden in his cellar, and they continued to pray the Rosary in the park.

«Ismael had plenty of time for the things of the spirit. He had many free hours to devote to prayer and spiritual readings. He was moved by the cruel deaths that the martyrs had suffered with heroic courage; his heart leaped with joy and holy envy at the thought of those who had received the martyr's crown. He insistently and tenaciously asked God to grant him that supreme grace. Always putting himself in the hands of His holy Will, he accepted God's no and humbly offered up the pain he felt at the rejection, as if that itself were martyrdom. In those blackest of days he saw with

74. Florentino del Valle, 38-39.

75. A. Martín de Bernardo, 106.

otherworldly clarity that his life in this world would be one of great suffering. He divined the path to sainthood and to exalt his suffering, he thought he should suffer in silence. During this time in Tomelloso, he tempered his soul with so many good examples, so much prayer, so many salvific readings!

Ismael had a foreboding of his future, and prepared for it by praying, reading the lives of the Saints and honing his soul with new virtues and acts of mortification. His thoughts were visible on his face. An acquaintance has said: "He clearly had a premonition of sacrifice and it showed; for this reason, he wanted to leave Tomelloso as soon as possible."»⁷⁶

76. A. Martín de Bernardo, 107-108.

VI AT THE FRONT

The Civil War continued to rage and the Republic needed more men. On September 18th, 1937 it called up the '38 class, also known as the "baby-bottle draft" because its conscripts were the youngest; and because Tomelloso was in a Republican-held area, Ismael was drafted into the Popular Army.

We don't have much information about this event.

A manuscript from Sr. Felices Sánchez, a Daughter of Charity, reads:

«His departure affected me greatly. The night before he left for the front, he came to Miguel's (Montañés) house, where two of us sisters were housed. He asked for a medal of the Virgin and sewed it himself between the fabric of his vest. I let him do it and this action, which I never forgot, became for me a subject of meditation.»

Also moved was Mother Asunción, the Abbess of the Conceptionist Sisters of Manzanares, who had known Ismael as a child because their two families were neighbors and on friendly terms. Mother Asunción has said that she owes her vocation to Ismael for the great love he showed to the Eucharist, spending long periods kneeling before it in silent adoration. On the eve of his departure, Ismael entrusted her mother with a box that held his personal belongings, a *cilice*, several books, and devotional objects; they kept the box in the bedroom until Miguel and Pedro came to retrieve it one day:

«He said goodbye to my mother and my family and was serene, actually cheerful, cracking jokes as usual, because he was a joker.»

A friend from town has related that his parents must have feared that he was going to be betrayed and killed, because they forced him to ask for a reference letter from the Casa del Pueblo, though he was convinced it was useless because the authorities had a big dossier on him.

«His friend said: “I ran into him the night before marching out, at the filling station in the square. I had not seen him in a long time and greeted him profusely:

— Where are you coming from?

— Look, kid, they are giving me references because tomorrow I leave for the “front.” I will take them with me, but they won’t be any good. You know they have a file on me, and maybe after I get there they’ll shoot me.

He hugged me and taking leave, said:

— Until the war is over, or until Heaven... Goodbye!”⁷⁷

«How sad was this good-bye! Some marched to their death disgusted and without ideals. When it came time for the last good-bye, his mother, sensing that she was going to lose him forever, hugged him with these heartbreaking words: “I won’t see him again, they’ll kill him, they’ll kill him!” Shaken, Ismael freed himself as best he could from his mother’s embrace and his words of good-bye floated like a sinister, bitter echo:

— Pray for me; goodbye, until eternity.

And he marched to his sacrifice.»⁷⁸

The following morning he left with Miguel Montañés, Sevilla, Espinosa, Masó, Serna, Tomás, and others: *«In the first leg of the train trip to the capital, Ciudad Real, although his heart bled more than the others’, it was Ismael who kept making jokes to lift the*

77. A. Martín de Bernardo, 113.

78. Florentino del Valle, 40.

sadness of the departure that was chocking them. Afterwards, the conversation became more subdued and his foul-humored mates frequently interjected swear words and curses. For Ismael, the martyrdom that would last the whole time he was at the front, had begun. He went out in the corridor, surreptitiously took out his Rosary and began to pray with the passion of a man shipwrecked in the stormy high seas.»⁷⁹

From Ciudad Real, where they stopped a few days, he wrote a letter to his parents; they did not reply, and he was not sure that they had received it.

They resumed their trip and reached Valencia, where they stationed Miguel Montañés and Antonio Masó. The rest marched on toward Cuenca, with a stop in Utiel on October 5th, 1937, from where he wrote a letter home:⁸⁰

«My dear parents and brothers: I will be very glad if this letter finds you in good health, just as I am... I am writing these few words to let you know that we had a safe trip. We reached Valencia at noon, we left at eight at night for this place, which we reached at ten at night the same day. Here we are fine, we eat, drink and sleep in a grand room with the bathroom next to it, and we are lodged better than we had expected. Mother, I very much regretted staying so long in Valencia without visiting Mrs. Pilar, not knowing the address. As to food, we are better off here than in C. Libre⁸¹ because we have plenty of potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, meat, etc...I'll write again with more details and send you my address, because we are not staying in this house

79. Florentino del Valle, 41.

80. In the Spanish original, we have transcribed his original extant letters with all original spelling errors retained, because in the letters transcribed by his biographers the spelling errors were corrected. In Spain, over half the country was illiterate. For this reason, notwithstanding his spelling errors, Ismael is to be praised, also because in addition to his own, he also wrote his mates' letters to their families.

81. Ciudad Real.

long. With nothing further I close this letter. Your son who loves you and doesn't forget you.

Ismael.

I leave you. The cook is calling me to peel the potatoes. Send my regards to Jacinta⁸² and family, I'll write to them soon.

Kisses to the kids.

Greetings to my aunts.

To sister Sixta...⁸³

After Utiel, his first destination was the capital city of Cuenca. From there he began to write letters to his family and friends, partly to ease their worry, and partly because the city was quiet and he was writing that his situation was not bad. He had managed to be assigned to auxiliary services. He wrote often, and his letters marked the itinerary of his soldierly life.»⁸⁴

«Upon reaching Cuenca, the first lodgings where they put us up—wrote Sevilla—was the city Seminary. The lovely chapel was our dormitory and Ismael got ahead of us and found the place where the altar had stood, and placed his sleeping mat there.»⁸⁵

Ismael shared the space with Félix Torres Olalla, a priest who is now ninety-three years old and lives in Guadalajara. Fr. Olalla has said: *“We found ourselves in the Cuenca Seminary that had been converted into barracks for the militia. We both slept in the chapel, it was the dormitory for our company, and undoubtedly both of us chose to sleep there because it was a sacred place, even if it had been totally defiled.*

To tell you the truth, even though I had never set eyes on this young man before, I was struck by his look, for his eyes revealed his inner world.”⁸⁶

82. Jacinta Burillo.

83. Original letter. AGC-IT.

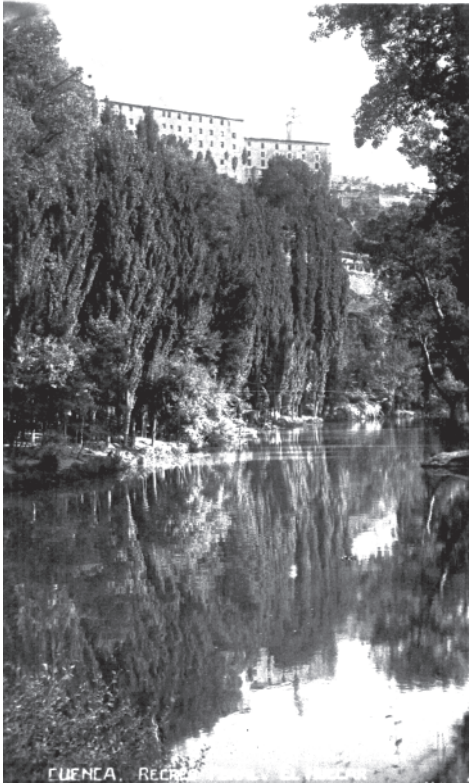
84. Florentino del Valle, 41.

85. A. Martín de Bernardo, 116.

86. Memoir by Fr. Félix Torres Olalla. See Epilogue No. 2, Second Round of Inquiries Assisted by Our Lady the Virgin, p. 141. AGC-IT.

«On October 9th, 1937 Ismael wrote a letter from Cuenca informing his family of his whereabouts and exuding good humor and tranquility, so as not to alarm them.

“My dear parents and brothers: I am writing you these few words to let you know that until now we have no news of our assignment; sooner or later the brigades are set to march out—that is, the men assigned to all types of duties. As for us, the auxiliaries, we are surely going to stay in the barracks and work here, since they have begun to teach us some basic duties; but there is nothing concrete yet.



The Cuenca Seminary converted into barracks during the Civil War.

There are fourteen of us from town, and we are always joking, and have won the sympathy of the other mates. You don't have to worry about me because I am fine. We are all together in the same quarters with large windows. This is a healthy, beautiful place. I am sending you a postcard so you can see how nice this place is.”

He continued with some advice for his younger brothers; in particular, he asked Jesús to guard his “little chest” where he kept his things: Jesús, take care of my little chest. I want to see you responsible, for you are

*now the “chief steward” at home and must be dependable and make your inferiors respect you; but first you must be dependable. Luís, I tell you the same, let’s see if you can get rid of your bad temper, etc. I suppose you’ll get angry for this. Write to me, all of you.*⁸⁷

He received no reply, so on the eleventh of the same month he wrote again in the same tone: Dear parents and brothers: just a few lines to let you know that I’m worried because I haven’t received news from you, after writing you six letters in the six days since we left Ciudad Real, six letters and still I haven’t received a reply... Please tell me if you need anything. This morning we had a swell time, Tomás, Sevilla, Espinosa and myself played the guitar and also a bandurria that belongs to the officers’ cook, and all hell broke loose. Our mates didn’t know what to do with us. He told them he had heard from unofficial sources that they were going to leave for Madrid but tried to reassure them by saying that it was not official. Since he had no news of the Catholic Action president, he asked them, “tell me if you know anything about Montañés.”»⁸⁸

«Two days later, on the thirteenth, he received a letter from home, to which he replied right away.

I received your letter, which filled me with happiness... I hear that you only received one from me, though I already wrote seven letters since I left Ciudad Real. Yesterday they gave us our equipment; some of us look like puppets with these pants tucked in at the ankle; we are well equipped, with two changes, a pair of pants, an army jacket, a fur-lined coat, espadrilles, a bag for clothes, a knapsack or haversack, glass, cutlery, plate... Several officers from different corps visited us yesterday, asking for men to assign to specific details. Because they couldn’t find any, they carded

87. The original has been lost. A. Martín de Bernardo, 116. AGC-IT.

88. The original has been lost. A. Martín de Bernardo, 117 and Florentino del Valle, 42. AGC-IT.

all of us, to see what we could be useful for. Please don't write until I tell you where they are taking us, because it seems they are going to move us very soon... Our food is very good, with plenty of bread. For this reason I think of you very often...»⁸⁹

«He received another letter from home, to which he replied right away that they had received orders to leave Cuenca, but did not know the destination. On October 17th he wrote from Embid:

I'm picking up the pen today to let you know that I am now in Embid, about five miles from Cuenca in the Division's Signals Company. We are fine, and we have been lucky. Those of us from town are all together. This is neither a hamlet nor a town (it's something like "Cerrillos"),⁹⁰ though the cottage that serves as barracks is very nice. There's lots of groves and mountains, and a river runs through it...⁹¹

Another letter mailed on October 23rd, also from Embid, is more or less in the same vein. He worried that the family might have to stand in line to buy food, and wrote:»⁹²

«I am fine, thankfully...; of the nineteen of us who were brought here, only four have been placed; the rest of us are waiting. This is a lovely, healthy place and one notices it: after eight days of being here, we are all shiny, thick and dark. The conscripts from Madrid say that this is an exile, but they are happy for the "chow" they get. I think a lot about you when I think about the food lines, and seeing how much bread they give us, which is more than we can eat. It's cold here but since we are always exercising, we don't feel it as the cold walks briskly and doesn't linger. Tell Aunt Asunción that I still have some cheese left and that everyone says it's good... Write to me soon, don't be

89. The original has been lost. Florentino del Valle, 43. AGC-IT.

90. A farm compound in the district of Argamasilla de Alba.

91. The original has been lost. Florentino del Valle, 43, and A. Martín de Bernardo, 118. AGC-IT.

92. A. Martín de Bernardo, 117-118.

*lazy; put a lot of things in your letters, don't get tired of writing, because I don't get tired of reading...*⁹³

In his good humor, he had written that the cold "walks briskly and doesn't linger" because he was already noticing the intense cold of Cuenca.

He felt sorry for the scarcity of bread and food that he suspected his family was enduring.

*The allusion to the cheese, how good it was, according to most, is one of the many examples of generosity that we learned from his friends, for what was his was everyone's. When, once in a while, he received a package from home, he only kept a very small part for himself, and everyone felt invited at his table.»*⁹⁴

He wrote several letters from Cuenca and a postcard on November 1st, 1937:

Dear parents and brothers: I hope this letter finds you well. I am fine, thankfully. This is to let you know that we are no longer in "Signals" because they moved us back to Cuenca. Tomás and Serna were kept at the General Staff's; they moved back Sevilla, Espinosa and myself and the other men who had been assigned to "Signals."

We are in the same barracks as before. I will write you every day. Without anything further, I am your son who loves you.

Kisses to the little ones.

Regards to everyone.

*Ismael.*⁹⁵

On November 4th:

Dear parents and brothers: I will be glad to hear that this letter finds you well. I am fine, thankfully.

On the first I sent you a postcard to advise you of our arrival

93. The original has been lost. Florentino del Valle, 43, 44. AGC-IT.

94. Florentino del Valle, 43-44.

95. Original letter. AGC-IT.

here and that we were staying in the same barracks as before. We are no longer in "Signals;" they moved us to the Depot Company from which they'll assign us to different corps, because I think there's lots of vacancies to be filled, for example, in the Quartermaster Corps, the Health Corps, etc.

The reason for these vacancies is that they are organizing brigades and divisions and taking all useful men from the top, leaving vacancies for the men of the auxiliary services.

I don't want to say anything until I get my assignment, but I think they'll send us to a place where I'll really enjoy doing the tasks to which I'll be assigned. I think we are all doing fine. I'll write every day, but please don't forget to write to me in return, sending the letter certified so that it's delivered into my hands.

Please write right away, and don't send anything.

I close hoping to have your reply, and remain your son who loves you and doesn't forget you.

Ismael.

Kisses to the little ones.

My best to Tomás.

Tell Jacinta to write to me, she still hasn't written, tell her to do what you are doing, instead of two letters, she can write one but send it certified.

Please tell me if there's any news about calling the '39 draft.

All my best.

Greetings to all the neighbors.

I am sending you the certification stamps.⁹⁶

«During their detachment in Embid it rained a lot. Seeing that a friend usually had his feet wet because he only wore espadrilles, he took off his shoes and gave them to him. In a letter that he sent to his parents from Cuenca in mid-November he wrote about this simple gesture:

Until now I've had a lot of luck, even if a lot of things have

96. Original letter. AGC-IT.

happened that are too long to write about. The day before yesterday I was assigned to the guard corps of these barracks. I am on duty for twenty-four hours, and then have twenty-four hours free. I owe this assignment to Espinosa, and secondarily to my niceness. Sleeping quarters are better than before. As to food, since the new cooks from town took over, I lack nothing. I haven't sent any money yet because there's no 'Thrift Bank,' but I took advantage of the fact that these trusted ladies came to visit and I am sending you one hundred and twenty-five pesetas. I regret that I cannot send more because I was paid only two hundred and eighty pesetas and I had to buy several items, which would have cost nothing if the prices had stayed the same, but I think prices here are higher than anywhere else... I am sending you two bars of soap, because I think it's scarce... Write to me right away and send the letter certified, because I haven't gotten letters from you... I bought a pair of pants that cost sixty pesetas and are ugly. A pair of shoes, forty-five pesetas, because I gave mine to Espinosa who didn't have any, he was only wearing espadrilles and it kept raining and his feet were always soaking wet and so I went and gave them to him... Write often, don't be lazybones. Espinosa and Sevilla get letters every day, and I get nothing. You can't imagine how happy we are when someone gets a letter... Father, I am sending you a cigarette, I want you to smoke it. I just got it from a lieutenant and I thought that the best man to smoke it is you.»⁹⁷

On November 20th he sent a postcard to “Comrade Francisco Antonio Molinero, his father (C. Libre)”:

Dear parents and brothers; I will be happy to know that when this letter reaches you are well. I am also well.

This is to inform you that until now I have been fine. I had news from Antonio that made me very happy, and will answer him right away. Tell me if you received news from him, and when,

97. The original has been lost. Florentino del Valle, 44. AGC-IT.

and the letter's date. This being all, hoping to receive your reply, I am your son who loves you.

Ismael.

Greetings to all the neighbors.

Write right away.

My best to Tomás.

*Kisses for the children.*⁹⁸

On November 23rd, he wrote:

*«"The time has come for us to leave this regular Cuenca. I don't know where they are taking us, but according to what I heard, I think it's a place where we'll be better off than here. But as with everything, may God's will be done. Patience and resignation. I will write to you once I get there, as I always do..."»*⁹⁹

Ismael spread his good cheer when they traveled and during their stays in the various places to which they were transferred. He also conveyed his optimism in their unknown fate. Accompanied by guitars and bandurrias, it was the rare day when Ismael did not take the initiative of organizing a party to entertain everyone, to help them forget that they were away from home and in the thick of a war. But he converted everything to prayer, a prayer that he lived twenty-four hours a day, including at night.

«According to Sevilla, "Ismael had made himself a Rosary of knots on a thin rope that was a little frayed at the ends, to pretend he was untying the knots if they caught him praying... There were days when he did not eat but shared his ration with those among his mates who were still visibly hungry." He liked being on night watch, it was a favorable time for him to do acts of mortification and pray. He let his mates sleep the entire night while he did their shift as well. In the barracks (the former Cuenca Seminary) was a

98. Original letter. AGC-IT.

99. The original has been lost. Florentino del Valle, 45, and A. Martín de Bernardo, 118, 119. AGC-IT.

good man, one Camacho, who was being hunted by the S.I.M. [Military Intelligence Service] that wanted to execute him. Ismael and his friends had hid him there, and one night while on watch duty he let him escape so he could seek a better hiding place.

Realizing that Ismael was eating very little, Sevilla (who was the cook) would take him into the kitchen and force him to eat something. He had found a quiet, secluded corner in the kitchen for him, a store-room where he prayed and did his acts of devotion. But it was not just this. "During our outings, he would retire to the groves along the river and pray. Every time we took notice, Ismael had already disappeared."»¹⁰⁰

Fr. Félix Torres has told us that «with his angelic demeanor and words» Ismael had diffused a serious confrontation Fr. Torres had with a gate sentry, that «could have cost him a lot of pain.»¹⁰¹

Fr. Torres has often mentioned Ismael's angelic look, which he has never forgotten; it is one reason why he continues to pray on his grave in Tomelloso. He told us that he will continue to visit the grave as long as he can, and has continued to pray daily to him.

«In December they moved him from Cuenca to the front at Teruel. In Mora de Rubielos they separated him from Sevilla. There, an emotional Ismael hugged him and said:

— **From now on, everything will be more difficult, but this is what God wants... Blessed be!**»¹⁰²

100. A. Martín de Bernardo, 119.

101. Memoir of Fr. Félix Torres Olalla. See Epilogue No. 2, Second Round of Inquiries Assisted by the Virgin, p. 141. AGC-IT.

102. A. Martín de Bernardo, 120.

VII THE BATTLE OF ALFAMBRA

It was the month of December in 1937. A typical winter in the high plateau had set in, at an altitude of over three thousand feet above sea level, with frozen snow and temperatures reaching as low as -4 F.

The first news we have of Ismael from the front is in a letter that he wrote to his parents on December 13th, just before the battle of Teruel. He tried to reassure them, but it is clear from his words that he was in pain, even as he tried to comfort them.

First of all, I apologize for not writing sooner, but in just a few days we went halfway 'round the world, and I didn't want to write until we reached a stable place. Apparently we have now reached our destination, and I pick up the pen to tell you not to worry, because I am fine and my appetite is hearty...

*It's very cold here, but we are sheltered comfortably and barely feel it. Don't worry about me, I am fine. I want you to eat (if you have food), drink, laugh, sing... and don't worry, I am O.K. I have no news of Sevilla or Espinosa; they separated us...*¹⁰³

«The good son was comforting his parents. He was already in pain, he was probably already ill, because in the same letter he added in a somewhat veiled manner, almost offhandedly: "...when there's health, the most important thing in this world... (let's hope

103. The original has been lost. Florentino del Valle, 46. AGC-IT.

we don't lose it), there's life. It's irritating not to have it, still... what is one supposed to do? We'll get closer to it eventually." Eventually? When? In Heaven? Eternal health is there. Is this what Ismael was trying to say in this letter? Apparently yes, even if the sentence is not very clear.»¹⁰⁴

The Republican Army was very interested in occupying Teruel for military reasons and for reasons of propaganda. It would be the first provincial capital they would conquer in the war. In view of this, they had deployed over one hundred thousand soldiers and a vast array of media and foreign news agencies, along with the presence of high government authorities: they wanted the world to witness a sure-fire victory. This is how Fr. Florentino del Valle described the situation: *«They were going to join battle in one of the harshest climates in Spain. The frontline ran through a landscape painted in ocher tones, like iron soil, of an imposing grandeur. They were in the high tableland, at an altitude of three thousand feet above sea level, with an average altitude of two thousand seven hundred feet in the hollows at the bottom of which flowed the Guadalaviar, the Turia and the Alfambra, its tributary on the left, all waters above Teruel. Teruel is dry and extremely cold, with winds that cut through the flesh; snow was on the ground, a bit later it would be the great ally in the war, damaging bodies with frostbite and paralyzing operations. On December 15th, 1937 the Reds took the initiative with a great push and enormous preparations. The foreign news agencies had been alerted and armored trains had brought some Red party bigwigs nearby to enjoy the spectacle of a victory they were taking for granted and that would offer to the world banner headlines—a provincial capital seized from the Nationalists! It was just three days before the Nationalists were set to begin the great Guadalajara offensive. The Reds took advantage of this circumstance to unchain their offensive with*

104. The original has been lost; partially completed by A. Martín de Bernardo, 125.

over one hundred thousand soldiers hemmed in that wasteland and in the shelter of the hillocks that the locals eloquently call “molars.” Like choking, iron-tight pincers, or a hangman’s noose that tightens and chokes to death, they closed in on the town to the north and the south. By January 8th the town was in the hands of the Reds.»¹⁰⁵

But this victory did not mark the end of fighting, because the Nationalists began a sweeping maneuver to undermine the morale of the Popular Army before launching an attack to recapture Teruel, in a show of greater unity and superior organization.

The victory days were painful for Ismael, not for military or political reasons, but for religious ones. This is what Alberto Martín de Bernardo has reported, as related to him by Fr. Ballesteros: *«He had to suffer cursing against God, whom he loved so dearly. He was so distressed that his delicate constitution was affected. When Ismael spoke with Fr. Ballesteros in the Saragossa hospital, he told him that he had suffered more from the cursing and the profanities he had heard in the trenches, than from the freezing weather and deprivation of those terrible days when his body, destroyed by his own people, could have fallen on the white snow shroud that covered the barren fields of Teruel.*

*— **When that happened**—he told Fr. José, opening his soul to him—**I would squeeze my Rosary tight and pray...***

Hearing the soldiers’ cursing and profanity-laced talk was so painful that it rent his heart. Fr. José continued: “Broadcasting to the four corners of the world Ismael’s conduct, his actions, his deep piety and his unblemished feeling of being Catholic, setting him up as a role model of Catholic Action Youth, is the proper thing to do, since his name is on the list of those who were among the best and triumphed, victims of satanic hate. I am saying that he was a victim of satanic hate because the acute suffering that consumed his spirit during the time he spent in the Red-held area,

105. Florentino del Valle, 46, 47.

hastened his death. The horrible curses he heard from the lips of those villains who surrounded him, day in and day out, caused him horrific pain (as he himself said); he sought relief by withdrawing to where no one could see him, and there he would cry until his inner torment subsided."

In the trenches he must have suffered humiliations that pushed him near martyrdom. It is still Fr. José who recounted the following events, just as he had heard them from Ismael:

"One day, a group of militiamen, with the captain in front, started swearing and using foul language. Ismael stopped speaking and his silence, together with a grimace on his face, betrayed him as a 'Fascist' or a 'blessed' (their words):

— Look, say this!—One of those cold-hearted, despicable and evil soldiers asked him to utter a disgusting curse that made Ismael cry inside.

Ismael answered with a courageous silence. Then they began to insult him and deride him. He did not speak. Curse... never! They insulted and mocked Christ, because he refused to offend Him.

— Say it...—They again insisted, threatening him. Silence was his one loud reply. Knowing they were getting nowhere, and angry, they goaded him to curse, and seeing his resistance and his obstinate silence, they insulted him and slapped him."

For the love of God, Ismael suffered with exemplary resignation, and came out triumphant from the attack in which he risked being killed. This was not the only incident, according to Fr. José "there were many times when those godless soldiers wanted to force him to swear."

They must have caused him a lot of pain, though out of modesty he did not mention it because when he emptied his soul to the kind chaplain of San Juan de Mozarrifar, he complained: "Later, in the Red Army and in the trenches, I touched with my hands the people's lack of faith, their hatred of Christ, their frightening ignorance of religion." And because he wanted to cleanse his memory of all that grief, he cried, with his eyes shut: "The Red

trenches, I am horrified at the memory!... I'll tell you more about it, Father, after I've rested a while... I was so close to getting the palm! What a torment not to have been a martyr! I so envy the Catholic Action boys who have died a martyr's death! But that is God's will, and may He be blessed!"

Added to this grief were the hardships and exertions of a harsh army life: poorly dressed, starving, and with the cold seeping into their bones, in that fateful 1938 winter temperatures fell so low that the soldiers suffered frostbite by the thousands and had to be hospitalized with frozen feet and hands. A severe, huge snowstorm that fell dawn-white on those dark camps of death and of hate, intensified the cold even more.

Persecuted as he was, they assigned him to the harshest, most grueling spots, and to the night shift, which he preferred however because he could deliver himself more freely to prayer and recite the Rosary to Our Lady with his fingers.»¹⁰⁶

On January 12th, 1938 he wrote a letter to his parents and one to his brother Luis; he did not mention his suffering. From this date on, his letters were stamped from Alfambra, which was in the front line.

Dear parents and brothers: I will be glad if this letter finds you well; so am I, until now.

I received your letter of the 25th of last month¹⁰⁷ which filled me with so much joy that I forgot to eat and my other duties as well. For I was quite worried; I would lie down but couldn't sleep, because many days had passed since I wrote you the first letter on the 13th.

Together with your and Luis' letter, I also received one from Cousin Feli, which cheered me up, and I'm very grateful for it. This is a dangerous place; but the lion isn't as fierce as they paint him, and after receiving all these news I feel satisfied and glad.

106. A. Martín de Bernardo, 126-130.

107. Christmas Day.

I was very happy to learn that Antonia got married and that Antonio had the good luck to attend; but it [happiness] will come back, with health and good luck... with patience, everything will catch up and pass.

As to paper, I don't have any more, so send the sheets a little at a time, since I only have a few left; as to the stamps, keep sending them so I can write you every day. But since you don't answer right away to each one of my letters, I will do the same.

When you write, tell me about more things, because it's a pity to waste paper.

I guess by now you must have received one or two of my letters where I was making a small request, due to the temperature we have here.

Answer right away. With nothing further, I am your son who wants to see you.

Ismael.

Please give all my best to all the neighbors and the uncles and aunts, Tomás and anyone who asks about me. Kisses to the children. Greetings for Jacinta, and tell her that yes, I remember the master: how could I forget!...¹⁰⁸

Ismael subsisted on hope: «*it [happiness] will come back, with health and good luck... and with patience, everything will catch up and pass.*» He mentioned his health and patience in the same sentence, thought of everyone, prayed for everyone by name, especially for Jacinta, with whom he had often talked about religion, and remembered the Master (God).

This is what he wrote to Luis:

My dear brother Luis. I hope this letter finds you well. I am also well. Greetings.

I was pleased to receive your letter from the 5th of this month, holding it in my hands filled me with joy, though I am sorry to hear that you wrote me also on the 3rd and sent five .45 cent

108. Original letter. AGC-IT.

stamps, because I did not receive it, but there's nothing to worry about, we are far away and letters take a long time.

You told me about your birthday, but not if you received a letter I sent the 28th of last month with my wishes for a happy birthday, I sent it expressly for that reason.

Tell Jesus that he's turned into a scoundrel, he doesn't want to write even one letter to me; and tell him not to worry and to be ready, and to make everyone love him.

Today I wrote to Miguel because I received his letter yesterday where he was telling me that he was waiting to leave for the front.

Write often, you'll note that the writing is pretty bad, the fact is that I had to write for several buddies, and in addition, I must write on top of a riveted plate, which makes it very uncomfortable.

That's all for now. I look forward to your news and I am your brother who loves you.

Ismael.

*Remember me to your bosses. My regards to all and tell me if you see José Sanchez often and if he asks about me.*¹⁰⁹

On January 17th the Nationalists launched a counteroffensive that wrested positions from the Republican Army, weakening the enemy further with each passing day.

There is an anecdote recounted by Martín de Bernardo as told to him by Fr. José Ballesteros: «*The Nationalists were getting ready for a counteroffensive, and endless convoys of trucks full of soldiers were rolling to the front. At the end of their shifts, the Red guards had to report the number of trucks which they estimated had passed through. Ismael was troubled: should he tell the truth or lie and go against his sensitive conscience? One night he cov-*

109. Original letter. AGC-IT. José Sánchez was a Catholic Action boy and a friend of Ismael. He was a nephew of Arturo Ortuño known as “el murciano” who lived next to the Colegio de la Milagrosa in Plaza del Mercado de Abastos in Tomelloso.

ered his ears, shut his eyes and began to recite the Rosary, which he did every day, counting the Hail Mary's with his fingers. The Captain came upon him, and seeing that Ismael did not salute him, suspected he might be sleeping and was about to shoot him with his pistol. When he ended his shift, Ismael was able to say, without telling a lie:

— *I didn't see or hear any trucks during my watch shift.*»¹¹⁰

On January 23rd, 1938 he wrote to his parents:

My dear parents and brothers: I hope this letter finds you in the best of health. Up to now, I am also well.

Only a few words, so I don't lose the habit, and because I want to be sure that you don't worry about me.

By now you must have received the several letters I wrote you, along with a postcard: in them I was replying to your letter of the 25th of last month; in the others, I was replying to Luis' letter (he is the only one I remember, since he is the one who most remembers me) dated the 5th of this month. He told me that he had written a letter on the 3rd, with enclosed .45 cent stamps, but I did not receive it.

I also wrote to my bosses. And to Tomás and Antonia. They must have received my letters by now.

I have no news from Jacinta. Tell me, is it because she doesn't want to write to me? I sent her a letter the 15th of last month, then a postcard, and still no news from her.

Please tell me when Jesus is leaving for the front; because if he's got to go, better he go soon so he won't have to endure what I had to endure, because if I had been a mechanic, I wouldn't be here.

About our pay. We haven't been paid in two months. We think we'll get the money this month; if we do, I will send you the money right away, and because we lack for nothing here, I will send all of it.

110. A. Martín de Bernardo, 133-134.

If you could see me today, for sure you wouldn't recognize me; for I look like one of those ancient painters, with long hair and a goatee... in particular I've gained weight from the excellent meat they feed us. Please tell me if you received my letters where I was asking for a small package.

In your next letter, please send me a small envelope of fucsin powder to make ink, and two pens. They are certifying the letter... And don't forget to send me stamps once in a while.

Luis, tell me something about my friend Jose Sanchez. Tell me something so I can write to him.

Please find out if Jose Angel is in the '40 draft. And also "Paquito," the boy who was with me in the shop.

Tell me what's happening in town, if it's lively. I had to take a break just now, because the mailman is here. What a joy!... I received a letter from you and a postcard from Antonio.

I see from the letter that you are well, which is my greatest wish. I had no news from you for days!

I understand from what you say, that you didn't receive my first letter where I was asking for socks, a cap and gloves. But you did receive my second letter where I repeated my request (but don't think that I'm all washed up), they are for the guards and other buddies, who would really like them.

Mother, I would like you to pay a visit on my behalf to Aunt Jacinta and Uncle Pedro Pablo and family. Tell them that I'm sorry he's sick, and hope he gets better, and give my regards to Cousin Ines, I'm very happy she's there, because being in Aunt Jacinta's house it's as if she stayed in her own home.

In his postcard Antonio tells me that he burned himself... nothing major, and that he wrote to you, so that if you find out from someone else, you won't worry, because it's nothing serious. He scolds me for writing some sad letters to you, which I don't think I did... I just wanted you to have a clear idea of where I am, which I don't think should make you sad, because it's not as awful as people think.

With this letter, I have replied to yours.

Mother, I don't want you to worry, try to think of other things, your mind will feel better.

Everything comes to pass in this world, and we'll see each other soon already. Don't forget to talk to the master of Jacinta's house... I remember him a lot [tr. note: referring to the Master (God)]. I was overjoyed to receive Martin's letters. Martin, I want you to scold Mercedes for me, right now. Antonia, I would so want you to write to me. I will write you a letter tomorrow. I did send my congratulations to you and Tomas.

Please write soon. Without anything further, I am your son who wants to see you.

Ismael.

Regards to everyone and to my Uncles and Aunts.¹¹¹

On January 25th, 1938, he wrote to Antonio who was at the front in Extremadura:

My dear brother Antonio: I will be happy if when this letter reaches you, your wound is healing. My health is fine.

I received your postcard from the 11th of this month. I was overjoyed. I was worried because I had no news from you.

I understand what you write. You are starting to handle me carefully; I don't think you are frank with me. You don't tell me how you got wounded... What were you doing?... I don't think you should hide anything from me!

You and I are men, and neither you nor I should hide things from each other. I learned a lot of things here; I had to get accustomed to a lot of things, and I wouldn't be frightened if instead of a burn, you had suffered a more serious injury. It's a good thing that you're not telling our folks what really happened, but I don't think you should hide it from me.

For my part, I have no intention of hiding things from you. I did not write it home, nor will I do it in the future, but I was sick

111. Original letter. AGC-IT.

for five days with the chills, on account of the intense cold of these lands. And now, my sight is such that some days I can barely see; I see all cloudy, and some days I can open my eyes only in the dark. Our folks don't know this... even though you rebuke me for writing sad letters home; I don't think I did, because there's nothing in any of them to make them sad.

I only remember telling them the following.

I don't want to continue doing what I did the first months, deceiving them. Because I am not in a town, which is what you believe. I am at the front. But you must not worry, it's not as bad as people think. I also told them that it's very cold, and made a small request, that they send me some woolen socks, gloves, and other things... What do you say?... I don't think I acted wrongly, because sooner or later they would have found out. I am telling our mother as little as possible because I don't want her to suffer. The mere fact that we are not at her side (although she thinks that we're in good health) is enough to make her lose her sleep.

What matters is for us to be healthy and lucky. Who could have predicted that I was going to be one of the soldiers who took part in the grand operations of the "Capture of Teruel" where our great Popular Army is writing such glorious pages...

As you can see, I'm safe and sound. One always puffs himself up with these sacrifices. It's this bloodiest reality of all centuries that forces us to think like this. And we must believe in victory, though if fate has decreed that we lose (and I think this is what will happen), we'll go back to our quiet fields, satisfied and at peace because we'll have done our noble duty.

As I said, good health and good luck are the most important things, and may we be so lucky as to rejoin our family that suffers so much from our absence.

Write to me soon, don't be lazy... And above all, don't hide anything from me about what happened to you.

This is all for now. Hoping to have your agreeable news, I am your brother who loves you and wants to see you.

Ismael.

Give my regards to Antonio and Esteban, and all our friends.

Regards.

*Leave the return address as is.*¹¹²

In this letter addressed to his brother Antonio, Ismael wrote carefully, because correspondence was censored. The cold and the illness had clouded his sight but he hid his condition from his parents and from Concha, his brother's fiancée who lived in Tomelloso.

On the same day, January 25th, 1938, he wrote:

Unforgettable Concha: I hope this letter finds you well. I am in good health.

I received your kind letter of the 26th of last month, and I was pleased to receive it, for I already had a poor opinion of you on account of having no news from you.

Now I know the reason why you didn't write before; and after all, everything has turned out fine.

If you knew how happy your words of encouragement make me feel; because just as I try to distract myself... and cheer up my friends who are poor in spirit and despair for trifles, so I, too, like to be cheered up.

I do whatever is in my power to have fun. Don't think I'm always chirping like a baby bird fallen from the nest and missing its mother. I eat everything they feed us... (although sometimes, the braying in my stomach won't let me sleep; but it doesn't matter). I also drink whatever they hand out, wine, cognac, other spirits. I do it in order to live. If sometimes I look serious, it's because I have no news from you, as for the rest... nothing else can bother me.

Clearly though, we must understand that this is a matter of the greatest import; but if we don't try to live, we'll be bored to death. We are in a very cold region, but it's O.K. with me. The air

112. Original letter. AGC-IT.

is very healthy. Yesterday I received a letter from your sweetheart,¹¹³ my brother Antonio. He tells me not to worry because the postcard was written by Antonio Maso, he can't write because he burned his hand. I think we know what's what.¹¹⁴ He will explain what happened, right?...

When you write to me, tell me what really happened, because I don't think it was a burn. But if it's true, then all the better because it's nothing serious.

He scolds me for how I'm treating our parents. Says I wrote them very sad letters, and other things... I don't think it was a mistake on my part to give them a clear understanding of where I find myself, since sooner or later they will find out anyway.

Write to me soon; you have no idea of the joy I felt, even physically, when I saw and read your letter. It's always good to know that a person whom one appreciates, also appreciates them in return. Now, what really shocks me is the fact that we must treat like friends... but what can you do!... Patience, everything comes to an end in this world!...

This is all for now. Gratefully waiting for your news, I truly appreciate you and want to see you.

Ismael.

Give my regards to your parents and the girls... and also to the miller's wife.

All my best.

When you write to me, you don't have to waste a stamp; if it's convenient, you can send it on to my home and they will mail it in the same letter.

Write me lots of things, don't waste paper.

Regards to Grandmother.¹¹⁵

113. He affectionately called his brother "guácharo," lit. "baby bird."

114. "To know what's what" = "to find out" the reason for his brother Antonio's wound.

115. Original letter. AGC-IT.

On February 1st, 1938, Ismael wrote to his parents. It is the last original extant letter we have from the front:

To my dear parents and brothers. I hope this letter finds you well; as of now, I am also in good health.

Just a few words to let you know that I am fine, having reached the new month in perfect health. I have little to tell you, although I haven't had news from you for a few days now, and something always happens. Also, one feels great satisfaction, even physically, in writing to one's parents; if I don't do it for a few days, it's as if something was missing.

A few days ago, I wrote to you together with letters for Antonia, Concha, Martín, etc... I owed a letter to Antonia; as to Concha, since I had received a letter from her with a date from last year, I thought it would be a good thing to kill a few birds with one stone.

I suppose you received another letter from me, in which I was answering your letter of the 12th of last month.

Can you tell me something about Jesus, if they have decided he must march out or not; because, as I said in my previous letter, if he has to join the army he must do it, and not be a fool.

Tell Cousin Esperanza and Angelita to forgive me for not having written even one letter, I'm going to do it today.

*This being all, I wait for your news. You son who loves you.
Ismael.*

Give my regards to Dolores and family, and tell Rosa that I still have the candy.

Tell me what Jesus is doing; ask him to write to me.

All my best.¹¹⁶

Still from Alfambra, on February 1st, 1938 he wrote to Pedro Cuesta. His spirit found strength in hope and in faith; his only complaint was that he couldn't receive Communion:

116. Original letter. AGC-IT.

Pedro, my dear friend, don't think I've forgotten you. How could I forget a friend to whom I owe so much! No doubt you've learned that I am at the front in Teruel, where our great Popular Army is writing such glorious pages of history... Although they played us a nasty trick by assigning us to this Brigade as active soldiers, even though we are in Auxiliary Services...; I tried many times to be assigned to this Brigade, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't have avoided being sent to the front as a rifleman... Here the only things we need are peace of mind, hope, and faith in victory... The day before yesterday I received a letter from Miguel, where he says that you are asking often for news about me. I think he was fine in Valencia. In those six days he was lucky enough to meet our friend Jesús¹¹⁷ who treated him and his friends as they deserve, since they all had breakfast¹¹⁸ with him; how lucky! Don't you think so? But you should not envy him, because you too met him this past Christmas when you spent the day with him. Unfortunately, I am not so lucky! Patience! Write to me by return mail. Your friend Ismael.”¹¹⁹

The following day, the decisive battle began for Ismael, in which the Popular Army was defeated.

The Historical Military Service has published *La Batalla de Teruel. Monografías de la Guerra de España*.¹²⁰ It reads, in part:

«The battle known as the Battle of Alfambra was very short—it lasted three days—but achieved spectacular results.

The [Nationalist Army] operations were to have begun on February 3rd, but were postponed for two days because of poor visibility. When dawn broke on the 5th, the artillery had to wait for

117. “To meet our friend Jesus” means to receive Communion.

118. They received Communion.

119. The original has been lost. Florentino del Valle, 48. AGC-IT.

120. Servicio Histórico Militar, “La Batalla de Teruel,” *Monografías de la Guerra de España* [The Battle of Teruel. Monographies of the Spanish War], No. 10 (Madrid: Editorial San Martín, 1974).

the fog to lift. When it did, the batteries began to fire on their targets with devastating force for two to two and a half hours. They were assisted by an incredibly violent air bombardment.

On the 6th, the maneuver continued at an ever faster pace... with practically no enemy in front of them, it culminated on the 7th of February.

General García Valiño wrote that “The operation to move the front from the Saragossa to Teruel road to the Alfambra River was a complete success, with such a small loss of casualties as to be unbelievable; we lost about ten officers and three hundred soldiers, less than what the occupation of any height had cost us in the first days of the battle. The enemy, on the contrary, was shattered, since the enveloping maneuver of the Palomera Sierra had thrown them into such disarray that many of their units were left without the possibility of retreat. Of course, we seized all the deployment of munitions and provisions for the Singra stabilized front.” There were 1,257 and 6,409 ascertained dead and wounded, respectively.

With the Alfambra maneuver, the Battle of Teruel radically changed the course of the war.»

This is what Fr. del Valle has written:

«The Nationalist offensive began on the 5th. The left wing (the Moroccan Army Corps) was under Yagüe’s command. On the right, the Galician Army Corps was under Aranda’s command. The center was formed by the Cavalry Division and the Navarrese conscripts under the command of Gen. José Monasterio Ituarte and Lt. Col. Juan Bautista Sánchez. Everything was ready on the 4th. The troops’ morale was very high. The artillery opened fire and wreaked havoc up to where the eye could see. The troops attacked resolutely; heights and villages began to fall. The Navarrese first line infiltrated itself on all sides, with an irresistible thrust, encircling the great system of Red defense that was centered in the town of Pancrudo, one of the most powerful systems deployed by the Reds

during the war. Leaving behind several towns, the right wing advanced towards the Alfambra River to cut off the enemy retreat to the town of Alfambra. The horses won the day by successfully running the great steeplechase which they finished off by watering in the Alfambra. The battle was over by dusk, when the day had exhausted itself. The vast, dreaded Palomera Sierra was now behind us, and we had conquered fourteen towns. It was an irresistible whirlwind advance, an unstoppable rush. The fall of Teruel was advancing.

Seen from any vantage point, it was a dramatic picture. Demoralized soldiers fled in all directions, stalled trucks blocked the roads, war materiel was strewn everywhere; the Alfambra defeat was so dramatic that few other battles would have more fatal consequences for the Reds.»

According to eyewitnesses, Fr. del Valle has written, at the Battle of Alfambra Ismael offered himself as a sacrificial victim:

«...he threw his rifle, remained standing, clutched the Virgin's medal in his hands and began a feverish, trusting prayer. Hissing balls barely missed his silhouette; his fellow soldiers were running and cursing, or falling heavily to the ground, mortally wounded. Upright on his feet like a praying statue, Ismael waited until he heard a harsh voice order: Hands up! And he surrendered.

This final act was symbolic of his whole life at the front. Later he would recall, with a shudder, the martyrdom of those hellish days in the midst of an atheistic, coarse soldiering when the mantle of Our Lady protected him like a shield...

They took him prisoner and treated him with dignity.»¹²¹

The Battle of Alfambra was crucial to the armies' morale: the soldiers in the Popular Army lost heart while the morale of the Nationalist troops soared. The news traveled to all the fronts, thanks also to the extensive publicity that the Republican government had

121. Florentino del Valle, 49-50.

spread abroad when the Reds had seized Teruel. As a matter of fact, starting on February 17th, from Alfambra the Nationalist troops mounted a great offensive across the Aragonese front. Five days later, on February 22nd, they would retake Teruel. And they kept advancing on one side towards Lérida which they seized, moving the front up to the Segre River; on the other, more important side, they took the territory from the right bank of the Ebro up to the outskirts of Tortosa and pushed toward the Mediterranean by way of Vinaroz. Thus they gained access to the sea and split the Republican-held area in two. One could say that the Battle of Alfambra was the beginning of the end of the war.

VIII SILENCE

«And so—on February 7th—Ismael stood in the humiliating line of the defeated.»

Since Teruel remained under the control of the Popular Army until February 22nd, the prisoners were forced to cover on foot the thirteen-mile distance between the Alfambra front and Santa Eulalia del Campo, where the headquarters of the Nationalist Army had been set up. There they turned some cattle barns, buried under frozen snow for several weeks, into a makeshift prison. Ismael



Cattle barns used as prison in Santa Eulalia del Campo, where Ismael was detained from February 7th to February 14th, 1938.

and the other soldiers who had survived the battle and the freezing weather, were detained there from February 7th until the 14th when he was transferred to the San Gregorio Concentration Camp in San Juan de Mozarrifar, near Saragossa.¹²²

Eager to confirm the exact location where the prisoners of the Battle of Alfambra had been detained, we turned to the Santa Eulalia Town Hall. Leonor, a pleasant town clerk, told us that it was almost certain that they had fitted a stable located on the road, in Pozohondón. Desiring to visit the sites in Alfambra and Santa Eulalia, Msgr. Joaquín Martín Abad, the Episcopal Vicar of Madrid, who was born in Teruel and knows the area well, kindly offered to take us there. When, on the road to Teruel, we arrived in Santa



Msgr. Joaquín Martín Abad at the door of the cattle barn.

Eulalia, we decided we would try to find on our own the place where Ismael had been jailed. A mile or two after leaving Santa Eulalia, we spotted from the road a dilapidated building and decided to cross a fallow field and go in. When we reached the place, we began to take pictures, Fr. Joaquín as well with his excellent camera. Of course, we were somewhat disheartened at the thought that perhaps it was not the place we were looking for, when we saw on a door lintel recess a

122. Apparently the biographers were not aware that Ismael's first destination as prisoner was Santa Eulalia del Campo.

faded writing that read, “All for the Fatherland.” We knew then that that had indeed been the prison camp. It was confirmed to us that the place was known as “La Masada de la Hoya del Monte” [the farmstead in the valley up the hills].

On the road to Teruel we were able to speak by phone with Fr. del Valle who was in Villagarcía de Campos, on the occasion of his 102nd birthday. It was St. Vincent de Paul’s day. We noted that Ismael had probably lost here the Virgen Milagrosa medal that he had sown inside his vest the night before leaving for the front.

Ismael’s sacrifice of silence, offered like a promise pleasing to God, began at this time.

*«He began to hear the first expressions of pity, the first insults; the mocking laughter of those who saw in him a defeated soldier pierced his soul. They took his information, and while everyone else tended to exaggerate their past merits to plead their case, Ismael hid his membership in Catholic Action. Even more, some of his town folk who were officers at the prison camp knew that Ismael was hiding his status and did not speak up.»*¹²³

«When they started to card everyone, he unassumingly stood in line with the others. He saw that his mates who offered up excuses and past merits were released; and those who said nothing because they had nothing to say for themselves, were treated with suspicion and considered evil, and imprisoned. Ismael decided to say nothing.

— *Your name?*

— ***Ismael Molinero Novillo.***

— *Age?*

— ***Twenty years old.***

— *Where are you from?*

— ***From Tomelloso (Ciudad Real).***

— *What can you tell us about yourself?*

123. Florentino del Valle, 51.

— ... *Nothing...*

He offered no attestations, no explanations. A captain from his hometown whom he knew and who was his friend was there. He hid from him instead of seeking his protection.¹²⁴ Be quiet! Had he told them about his ideals and his role in Catholic Action, he would have been released. But Ismael wrung his bleeding, agonizing heart and did not speak. He kept silent with that holy, sublime silence that bound him for sacrifice and suffering.

How difficult it is to keep silent in order to suffer!...

Ismael kept silent and suffered. A straightforward account of his suffering at the front, which most of the prisoners who were there could testify was the truth, could have freed him, but he kept his silence “because I wanted to suffer—these were his words—for God, for the souls and for Spain.”»

«He felt his body weak from the pneumonia he had undoubtedly caught in those last nights when he was on watch duty at the frozen front line. He said nothing, kept his silence until the disease betrayed him; he held his suffering, bleeding heart tight in his hands. We can only attest to one fact: his silence¹²⁵ which, providentially, was broken just in time, before death irretrievably sealed his lips, so that we could admire the greatness of his sacrifice.

124. Captain Francisco Vázquez López Ortega, born in Tomelloso, was a friend of the family. He studied at the General Military Academy of Saragossa and also taught there. He was eventually promoted to general, but Ismael did not reveal his identity to him.

125. *Author's note:* A piece written by Francisca Javiera del Valle, a seamstress at the Jesuit College of Carrión de los Condes (Palencia), published by Martín Alonso in *Decenario del Espíritu Santo, Biografía de un alma* [Tenth-Year Anniversary of the Holy Spirit. Biography of a Soul], chapter XIV, c), pp. 148 ff., “Selection from Unpublished Writings. Exterior Recollection and Silence” (Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, YEAR), might help us understand the mystery of Ismael's silence:

«Exterior recollection and silence are very important for inner recollection and silence. Inner recollection somewhat resembles the process by which a walnut forms and grows. If the outer shell has not formed, the nut inside will not grow:

We have been unable to fill in the details of the first segment of his prisoner's life. He contracted a pneumonia that was treated poorly and undoubtedly caused the disease that consumed him, together with the fact that he did not have a robust constitution. Hidden at first, tuberculosis stealthily broke his resistance, and in the last stage lorded it over his body, burning it with a stubborn fever that he could not fight off due to poor nourishment, and that advanced easily and rapidly.

it forms and grows only inside the shell. Therefore, the practice of exterior silence and recollection is very important to achieve interior recollection in our soul. Through it the soul reaches the solitude it needs to live joyfully, if it wants to attract the loving looks of the finest of Lovers.

We must hurry to reach and possess as soon as we can this exterior concentration and silence. I am saying "possess" because even though we may want it, unless we make all possible efforts to seek it with all the power of our will, we will fail to reach it and possess it. Because this exterior recollection and silence, though we may readily talk about it, is not easy to reach. To do so, we must do what people do when a house is on fire and they throw all the furniture out through the window, leaving the house to burn empty, and the lady of the house looks at the furniture and cries: Poor me! I had it set up so nicely! I spent so much money and effort to buy this furniture. And she looks at it sadly without realizing that in fact she should be happy because had not the furniture been removed, it would have burned with the house.

The same happens with us, with our exterior recollection and silence. Having little to do with creatures is good for us; we free ourselves from troubles and sorrows, from headaches, from offenses to God. We can be freed of all this when we live recollected and in silence, and forgo the world with all our strength. How much the soul rejoices in this withdrawal!

Still, that is not what we are, because it's either or: either we tell God with all the truth of our soul that we want to love him and serve him and will embrace each detachment with all our power, or we won't. And if the latter, why do we say that we seek and look to sanctify our soul? If we truly want it, we'll strip our soul of everything, in the same way that we empty a house when there's a fire, something that we do very quickly.

For everything lies in what we want, as long as we truly want it. If we want something with all our will power, we have already won it. What is left for us to do will not be heavy. When there is good will on our part, separating ourselves from the creatures of this world is easy.



Fr. Ignacio Bruna.

Around mid-February he was taken to the San Juan de Mozarrifar Concentration Camp near Saragossa,¹²⁶ and there lived anonymously until the disease that secretly undermined him finally brought him down.

In that period, Fr. Ignacio Bruna, a zealous chaplain, ministered to the Concentration Camp prisoners, comforting the afflicted and helping those who succumbed to disease die a good death.

One day he was conversing with the troops in one of the wards, when a health worker called him urgently to assist a seriously ill prisoner who had just been brought into the infirmary. He felt death was fast approaching and wanted to be reconciled with God.

If you love God and are truly seeking Him, look to the tools you need to reach your goal. For this, you must imitate the earthly lovers who waste no weapons to reach their goal of being alone. They have no books to teach them how to love, and yet they love. No sacrifice is costly to them, for where there is love, sacrifice has already been won. And the love of God that engenders caution and discretion will give you the caution and the discretion you need to make your separation from the creatures of this world without anyone noticing, and keep your silence without being known.

Never ask what is going on, or pay heed to the conversation around you or be curious about what happens around you. Your only concern is going to be to love and love again in order to have love and more love. If you want this love, all creatures will readily seem dull to you, and you will leave them behind without any great effort, and will live happily in your exterior recollection and silence. This is the path we always ought to follow, to receive the blessings that are promised to anyone who walks down this path. May the Lord grant us His grace, with that we can win and conquer everything. AMEN.»

126. *Author's note:* The area is known as San Gregorio and the camp was called San Gregorio Concentration Camp. It was located in a superb four-story building, a former factory.

The chaplain went. This is what he captured in his diary so that the memory of that encounter would not be erased from his mind.

“In the San Juan de Mozarrifar Concentration Camp near Saragossa, I had the good fortune to meet this unassuming violet already transplanted in the gardens of heaven.

On March 18th, 1938, as I was making my usual rounds of the infirmary, I noticed a noble attitude in one of the patients, and like a halo of holiness. I approached him with respect and affection, asking the usual questions one asks when starting a conversation.

— What’s your name? What do you have? How long have you been at the camp? Is there anything you would like?

He made a general confession of his life, then we talked a good while. As I was affectionately reproaching him for not revealing his identity sooner, he replied with utter spontaneity.



The building that housed the Concentration Camp in San Juan de Mozarrifar (Saragossa).

— Father, I've been here a long time. Whenever you came to visit, I was deeply moved, and when you left I would become despondent. But I wanted to suffer for God and for Spain, and I knew that if you had known who I was you would have deprived me of this chance, or at least mitigated my pain. Now that I feel my situation is serious and you can do nothing for me, it doesn't matter anymore.

He became emotional and I left so he could rest, because due to his state of health he tired easily."

Later, at the request of those who had known Ismael and wanted to have detailed information about his illness, the chaplain added his impressions to the interview.¹²⁷ Let's hear them:

"Have you ever carefully looked at a portrait of St. Aloysius? When I saw the young man, that was the first image that came to my mind."

— Look, Father, I'm going to die and I want to confess myself, if it's O.K. with you.

— Son, I'm here for you, totally. Prepare to make a good confession, and let me know when you think you're ready.

He opened his lovely eyes, he sweetly looked at me and whispered:

— I am ready, but you must be merciful. I am very sick.

The confession lasted about an hour. The sacramental seal forbids me to speak, therefore I will just recount the conversation we had after the confession.

— I feel so happy, Father! Talk to me about suffering, troubles and crosses, they have been my golden dream and were alive and real in me, especially since the war began. How well I now understand, Father, the words that the Catholic Action Advisor repeated so often: "Children, know that God's immense graces only fall into empty, lonely hearts." And how lonely is my heart!

127. *Author's note:* Referring to the Saragossa Doctors' Hospital nurse, Auro-ra Álvarez, who took notes directly from the chaplain and delivered them to Fr. Clemente Sánchez and Fr. Martín Brugarola, S.J., in addition to her own notes.

I have neither parents nor friends, nor glory or wealth, nor any human comfort... And yet, I'm happy!

When I wished him a promising future, should God want to save him, he sat up on the bed, looked at the Crucifix that presided over the room, pointed his finger and said:

— I want nothing to do with this world. I am of God and for God. If I die, I will belong all to God in heaven. If I don't... I want to be a priest!

— What are you saying, Ismael? Kid, you're delirious.

— I'm not delirious, Father. Won't I even have the satisfaction to have you believe me? Yes, I want to be a priest. A good priest. Like the ones God needs to work for Him gratis, neither greedy nor a salary earner. I want to live absorbed in Him, lost in His immensity, totally delivered over to Him. No selfishness or money, comforts, family, or honors, only Christ!

He shut his eyes, but to meditate, not to sleep. I opened them to cry; I was moved, and said:

— Don't you know that to be a priest means to live sacrificed,¹²⁸ always?

— Ah, yes. But tell me: even if no one sees your work, or the fruits of your labor, even if you are criticized, do you do it for God?

— Of course.

— Everything's fine, then.

I, a priest who had been in the ministry for several years, was amazed, and put to shame by his spirit, which was much superior to mine. He continued:

— Tomorrow, when I receive Communion, I will complete the detachment I started days ago and haven't been able to achieve. I will leave my whims, my likes, the needs of my poor nature with Christ.

— How long have you been here?

128. Author's note: The review *La Vida Sobrenatural* reads *crucified* instead of *sacrificed*.

— *Here in San Gregorio, two and a half months.*¹²⁹

— *Two and a half months! Why didn't you identify yourself! I would have facilitated your practice of self-penance and brought you what you needed. I would have taken you into my home for a while. Above all, I would have comforted you. Perhaps you didn't see me all this time?*

— *Yes, Father; I did see you. You often came into our cell; I would listen to you with much pleasure and when you moved about I'd kiss your cassock without you or my cellmates noticing. It would have cost me little to improve my situation by talking to you. I was tempted more than once, but thankfully I rejected the temptation, because I would have lost a precious opportunity to suffer in silence for God and for Spain. I'm telling you all these things now because I'm about to die, and there's nothing you can do to help... Now I am tired. We can continue our conversation later.*"¹³⁰

The patient's labored breathing and his weak, dry, but persistent cough convinced the priest to walk away, even though Ismael's exalted words had so transfixed him that he stood glued to his bedside, listening.

When the chaplain visited him again, he found Ismael staring at the crucifix that hung high on the wall. He sweetly turned his head toward the visitor and welcomed him with a smile.

—*How are you doing, Ismael?*

— *Father, I'm happy. I feel so much happiness! Indeed, how can God give me so much comfort! What's heaven going to be like if I already feel so happy here? Father, so many men live plunged in darkness, pulled down by the chains of vice, because they lack a friendly hand to pull them up from their terrible state! Many of those who throw themselves into the gutter would have been saints, had they only run into other saints!... Providence*

129. *Author's note:* Actually, he had been there for just over a month. He must have lost track of time.

130. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 220-222.

has been generous with me. Although I was raised a Christian, I would have lost myself forever, for my fiery character, my restless and violent nature pulled me irresistibly towards the pleasures of the world in which I would have wallowed, if another boy from my town hadn't come to stand by my side like a guardian angel. He was the very first Catholic Action Youth cell that the Advisor had founded in my town. He sought us out and began to educate us, taught us the value of sacrifice; and, finally, prepared us for martyrdom. And if not all of us have spilled our blood for Jesus Christ, it's because the Lord didn't want to grant us such a formidable grace. We all valiantly offered it, not one ran away; and those who died, died courageously. I was asking the Lord to give me the strength to drink from the cup of martyrdom, but... the fruit wasn't ripe yet for me to enter heaven right away. I neither wore the crown nor carried the martyr's palm, and this for me has been harder to bear than even martyrdom.

And he continued:

— We need saints! Our religious advisor prodded us boys to be holy. He died like a saint, he died a martyr. Shortly before his death, he used to tell us: 'The storm has broken the dike of social restraint, the lion of revolution is roaring because there are no saintly hands to stroke his mane. There's a surfeit of materialism in our age because there are no saints. We must be prepared to die like our Teacher; our blood shall not be shed in vain.' Later, in the army and in the trenches I touched with my hands the people's lack of faith, their hatred of Christ, their frightening ignorance of religion. I'll tell you more about it after I have rested a while... I was so close to getting the palm! What a torment not to have been a martyr! I so envy the Catholic Action kids who have died a martyr's death! But that is God's will, and may He be blessed!

After resting awhile, he spoke about the Virgin. Ismael loved her intensely.

— Our Lady of Pilar! I was two months in Franco's Spain, in the Virgin's Spain without kissing the holy Pillar! How dreadful.

Talk to me about the Pillar, and since I can't go, you go and visit her on my behalf... Father, as a souvenir of what you've told me, I would like you to give me a scapular of Our Lady of Pilar."

"Since I didn't have any Pilar or small Carmel scapulars—the chaplain continued—I gave him a large one that I would never have parted with for it was a souvenir of my saintly mother and I always carried it with me. I laid it on his chest and he thanked me with a warm, tender kiss..."

—I will serve Spain anonymously, I will offer all the discomforts of my illness and the pain of my sacrifice to God. I craved martyrdom and I finally succeeded. Not because I am shedding my blood for the Faith, but because of the desertion, the drawn-out suffering, the anguish of dying without my saintly mother at my side.»^{131 132}

*«He was crying, all emotional—added the chaplain—I wiped his tears, kissed his angel's forehead and left.»*¹³³

Fr. Ignacio Bruna has praised our good Ismael:

*«"I have seen many flaunt medals and decorations on their chest; crippled men, Knights of Spain, and I look at them with affection, because they all made great sacrifices to save our Country. Ismael had no decorations, no medals, no crosses, still I know that he did have them. What were his crosses? They were like those of the Crucified One. Sores all over the body, lack of everything, deprivation of human comfort."*¹³⁴

Seeing that Ismael was seriously ill, for the disease had already "affected the lungs, which had become soft due to caseous necrosis and decay, which he eliminated with frequent vomiting," the camp physician ordered his transfer to a Saragossa hospital. Given the seriousness of his condition, he could be sent to either

131. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 223-224.

132. Florentino del Valle, 51-58.

133. A. Martín de Bernardo, 154.

134. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 224.

Torrero or the Doctors' Hospital [the teaching hospital in Saragossa]. They prepared to transfer him. The doctor summoned Fr. Ignacio, who was saddened at the news; having learned the name of the hospital he wrote a recommendation to the chaplain there in which he said:

"Dear Friend in Christ: Ismael Molinero is being transferred to your hospital. He is an excellent young man. Talk to him and you'll see. He wishes to receive Communion tomorrow morning. Do not desert him. If there are any Sisters there, please have them attend to his spiritual needs.

Affectionately in Christ.

Ignacio Bruna.

San Gregorio, March 18th, 1938."

Ismael was sorry to leave. And the admiring chaplain was bitterly disappointed. Later, he recounted how he remembered Ismael:

"When I run into hardened, unpleasant hearts, I go back with my mind to that camp infirmary and the date, March 18th, and I seem to see the face of that angel who only knew how to smile, telling me: 'Go on Father, I'll bless you from Heaven.'"

In his memo book, around that date, the chaplain wrote: "Did he die? Is he still alive? I don't know, but I carry his name, Ismael, and his virtues in my mind."

When the good chap-



Our Lady of Carmel.

*lain went home in the evening, he told his landlady and her family: "I would gladly change place with one of those who are going to die!"*¹³⁵

On March 18th, 1938 in the afternoon, an ambulance took Ismael to the Doctors' Hospital at the Saragossa Medical School. He continued to suffer the way of Calvary; Satan had tried to seduce him with false dreams of freedom and pleasant privileges when the chaplain, upon learning his identity, had gently scolded him because he had not identified himself sooner:

— *"Why didn't you identify yourself! I would have facilitated your practice of self-penance and brought you what you need. I would have taken you into my home for a while."*

Ismael had replied that he had chased away like "*a temptation*" everything that might divert him from following God's will: he lived detached, released, redeemed. He offered himself to God in silence, even more so after receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation, which had given him the strength to consummate the work he had begun and had to complete. This is why he replied:

— *"Then I would have lost a precious opportunity to suffer in silence for God and for Spain."*

Having broken his silence in the confession, Ismael was flooded with joy.

135. Alberto M. de Bernardo, 156.



Saragossa's Old Medical School. Doctor's Hospital.



The men's general pathology ward at the Hospital.

IX DEATH

It was March 18th, 1938 in the afternoon.

«At the feet of the Doctors' Hospital staircase, an ambulance had stopped. The health aides pulled out a stretcher in which lay a young man who was visibly very sick.

— A voice ordered: Take him to prisoners' ward No. 17, Bed 6, Infectious.

Nurses, health aides and a few Little Sisters of Charity were in attendance. The young man was Ismael Molinero. Modestly, but with feeling, he said to some of the attendants:

*— **Tomorrow I would like to receive Communion. I'm very sick. Please tell the chaplain here.**—But he did not give them the letter of recommendation. He hid it because he wanted to consummate his martyrdom in silence.*

Night came. Ismael could not rest. He eagerly looked forward to the morning when he would receive Jesus in the intimacy of his heart, and that made him forget the pain.

Before dawn on the 19th, the feast of St. Joseph, he was already awake. He was praying... A tinkling bell in the hallway announced that Jesus was coming.

The chaplain was walking toward his bed, above which hung his prisoner's card. Finally, after two years, he would have the happiness of receiving Him in his soul!

The chaplain reached his bed, but kept on walking and left the room.

Ismael could have called him, alerted someone, told them how

much he wanted to receive Communion, but he understood that God was also asking this of him, and so he offered his sacrifice with sublime generosity. It was only a few days later that he could not hold back a sigh-like complaint that revealed a glimpse of his soul.

— *The Lord has wanted to deprive me of this comfort that means so much to me.*

A nurse, one Aurora Álvarez, a brave and kind Catholic Action girl who had escaped Red Barcelona, was working at the hospital. She was impressed by Ismael's attitude, and wrote down her impressions:

"On March 19th, 1938, as I went into room No. 17 I noticed a patient who had just been admitted. They had put him in bed No. 6. I spent most of the morning attending to the other patients; since he didn't ask anything, I didn't go near his bed. In the afternoon I was again in the room and noticed that he barely spoke with the other patients. Puzzled by his mysterious silence, I was wondering if he could be one of the many Reds who weren't happy to find themselves on our side. Yet his sweet countenance and the goodness one could read in his eyes betrayed the innocence of his soul, making it difficult for me to believe that he was guilty of so

*many crimes or that his hands were stained with blood. Was he a good man? If so, why didn't he say so?"*¹³⁶



Aurora Álvarez.

On the 20th, in the afternoon, two men from his hometown unexpectedly came to visit. One was Alfredo Salinas (the father-in-law of Ismael's brother Luis Molinero) who had crossed over at the front to Franco's Spain. Ismael showed some emotion, and

136. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 227.

since that always ends in tears, his eyes swelled. The conversation became animated right away and Ismael told his fellow countrymen about some of his suffering.

But he did not ask for help and did not complain. He suffered in silence.

As the visitors were leaving, the nurse called Alfredo and asked him:

— Listen, soldier, who is that kid?

— Ismael Molinero, he's from my hometown.

— Is he a good kid?

— He's one of best kids in Tomelloso. He was Catholic Action secretary.¹³⁷ He is an exemplary young man. I'm going to the front. Take good care of him.

Aurora was puzzled when she heard this. She approached Ismael's bed and asked him:

— Are you from Catholic Action?

Instead of replying, he made a gesture as if he didn't understand. He was willing to lengthen the sacrifice of silence or renew it. Still, as if giving vent to something that afflicted him, and to avoid answering, he said:

— As you can see, I am quite sick and the only thing I regret is that I'll die without seeing my parents.

— Don't think about that now.¹³⁸ You must only think about getting better so you can go see them. Don't be saddened by the fact that you are here as a prisoner. For me you won't be a prisoner like the others. More than a nurse, you'll find in me a sister. You aren't telling me, but I know that you belong to Catholic Action. I am also a member. Because we both belong to it, and especially in these circumstances, it is my duty to do whatever I can for you.

Ismael's sad face turned sweet, his eyes shone with gratitude

137. Actually, Ismael was treasurer and board member, respectively. See note No. 5.

138. A. Martín de Bernardo, 157-163.

and kissing the hand of the young woman who was comforting him and cheering him up, he broke out in sobs:

— *Yours are the first affectionate words I've heard since leaving home. In all the time that I was in Red Spain, all I heard were insults. What pained me the most was to hear God's name called only to curse Him...*¹³⁹

«Since the silence was broken, she began to extract some details that she was interested in:

— Tell me, have you been a prisoner and a patient for a long time?

— *I have been two months in San Gregorio, and one month a patient.*¹⁴⁰

— *What did you do in those long hours when you were in jail?*

— *I would retire to a corner and with my fingers pray sections of the rosary for Spain's victory. I was undaunted by physical pain but I did feel overwhelmed by sadness because I couldn't meet even one prisoner who had my same beliefs.*

It's only when they took us out to work and I spotted a priest that I wanted to evade surveillance and run to him, throw myself in his arms and open my heart. But I checked myself. One day we were taken to work in the city, close to Our Lady of Pilar's shrine. Ah! I didn't visit my Lady of Pilar! We had just gotten into the truck that was going to take us back to jail, when I saw a priest. My heart leaped; my body wanted to jump out and talk to that representative of God... I was so excited that to control myself I covered my head with a blanket and the truck pulled out... I cried bitterly; but that day too I resisted!

— *Still, why didn't you identify yourself, to avoid this suffering?*

Ismael resisted answering but as the nurse insisted, he simply said:

139. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 228.

140. Again, Ismael miscalculated the time, because he had been in San Gregorio for just over a month.

— God was asking this sacrifice from me, and with His help I was able to achieve it!»¹⁴¹

«He was getting tired. The nurse noticed it and asked him no more questions that evening. But she told some of her friends.

That afternoon, just before his town folk paid him a visit, he had begun to write a letter to his mother, which he was hoping to send via the Red Cross mail. The letter clearly reflects, as if in a mirror, his acceptance of God's will.

Mother, for sure these few lines are the last ones you will receive from me, and they will fill you with great sorrow. But we should not grieve for the things of God. I was taken prisoner in Alfambra; I was treated well and they transferred me to Saragossa, where my stay has been perfectly comfortable and good.

One day I was seized with a serious illness, something that can be treated only with God's will.

So, patience and resignation. This is what God wants. Blessed be!

Not wanting to make her suffer, he did not mention that he had been detained in a prisoner camp where he had been treated harshly and subjected to hard labor, or the vast solitude that surrounded him.

While cleaning and arranging Ismael's night stand, Aurora found an envelope addressed to the hospital chaplain.

Surprised, she asked the patient:

— Ismael, what is this?

— Oh, you can tear it up. It's nothing.

She concealed the letter in a medical book she had in her hands and when she finished her chore she went into the hallway and read the letter. It was the letter of recommendation from Fr. Ignacio Bruna.

She could not contain herself and went back to his bedside, asking for an explanation:

141. Florentino del Valle, 61-62.

— *What does this mean? Who gave it to you?*

Ismael did not reply. He shut his eyes, pursed his lips and turned his head, as if to find strength. But the woman persisted, and he finally gave in:

— ***I want to pass unnoticed; I want to suffer. Had I delivered the letter, they would have given me special treatment and my sacrifice would have been over.***

Trying to divert the nurse's attention and undo the effect his words were having on her, he continued:

— ***Tomorrow I'd like to receive Communion. Give me this great happiness before you leave. I don't know why, but on St. Joseph's day, when I was admitted, they denied me Communion. The Lord wanted to deprive me of this comfort that means so much to me. I want it so much!***¹⁴²

— *I will speak to the chaplain, don't you worry. If they denied you Communion, it's because Father doesn't usually give it to the prisoners until he has questioned them, since almost everyone has little or no religious education, and so he doesn't give them Communion until he has prepared them.»*¹⁴³

«*The following day*» he finally received the Host from the hands of the chaplain who «*upon learning his identity and his grave condition, promptly gave him Communion. The nurse found him with the hands crossed, the eyes half-open and a blissful expression on a face paler than usual. She approached the bed quietly and asked him:*

— *Are you sleeping?*

— ***No, I was saying my thanks. I am so happy with Jesus in my heart! After yearning for it for so long, this is the happiest day of my life. What I've suffered is nothing compared to the joy that floods my soul today! Let me say my thanks for the great benefit I received.***

142. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 228.

143. A. Martín de Bernardo, 164-166.

The nurse offered him a Rosary that she was bringing him, and this completed his joy. He was visibly moved by the gesture:

— No, don't put it under the pillow where I might lose it; put it here, on my arm, and remove it only after I'm dead and send it to my mother, as her son's last memento.»¹⁴⁴

It was the first Communion he had received in two years.

Several witnesses then and now have testified to the great love that Ismael felt for the Eucharist and the long periods he spent praying in Church in Tomelloso and at the Old People's Home when his devotion and contemplation had so impressed his friends and the nuns. Other testimonies are from Fr. Ballesteros when Ismael had attended the Spiritual Exercises at the Ciudad Real Seminary and the recent statements of Mother Asunción, Abbess of the Conceptionist Sisters of Manzanares, and Sr. Aurora Serrano who had known him when he was growing up.

An unusual event brought more comfort and joy to Ismael. On March 22nd, a bullet wound in the leg brought Fr. José Ballesteros to the Doctors' Hospital in Saragossa. In Chapter IV we saw that the two had met in Ciudad Real in 1935 at the Spiritual Exercises.

Several years later, Fr. José recounted the meeting to Fr. Alberto Martín de Bernardo:

«When the Republican government called up Fr. José's class, he ended up at the Aragonese front. Around noon on March 22nd, 1938 he had the chance to cross over to the Nationalist side and the same day was taken to the Doctors' Hospital in Saragossa. "While the file for my release and my support of the Nationalist regime was being processed—he recounted—I was admitted as a Red patient" because as he was running away from the Red trenches, he had been shot in the leg. Working in the office where the file was being processed was another seminarian and friend of Fr. José who had also escaped from the Red Army: he promised to

144. Florentino del Valle, 64.

promptly process the papers. Fr. José's bed was in a hallway, because the hospital was full. At the end of the hallway was Ismael's room. The rumor that the new "Red" kid was actually a seminarian from La Mancha quickly made the rounds of the health workers, and he gained the sympathy of the Sisters and the nurses.

"Two or three days after being admitted—said Fr. José—Julia Quero, one of the hospital's volunteer nurses, told me that they had a patient from my same region in bed No. 6, ward No. 17, at the end of the corridor where I had my bed. I went over to take a look, and saw a young man, his large eyes shadowed by the kiss of pain, with a long, thin nose, prominent cheekbones, white lips cut and parched by a high, persistent fever; a desolate, lonely smile rising from a face as haggard as a corpse's, the body a skeleton covered with skin, the long, gnarled fingers wound around a Rosary that he held blissfully on his chest. I did not recognize him. He looked at me quietly...

He finally spoke:

— What's up? They tell me we are compatriots.

Ismael replied very quietly:

*— **Maybe. I'm from Tomelloso... and you?***

— I'm from Albaladejo.

*— **I think I know you, or maybe I've seen you somewhere.***

— That could very well be. Perhaps on a trip, or in Ciudad Real, or at the Seminary...

*— **Ah! You were in the Seminary?**—he said, coming to life somewhat.*

— Yes. Now I'm here, wounded.

*— **That's where I saw you. In 1935, at the Exercises.***

I instinctively looked at the card on the headboard and read his name: Ismael Molinero.

— So you are Ismael de Tomelloso, the one who came to the Seminary for the Exercises? (at the hospital they had started calling him Ismael de Tomelloso)."

They embraced effusively. They were both alone, without their

families, so it wasn't strange for those two hearts, united by the same misfortune, to hug each other, for it was a comfort for both.

"Still, how sick Ismael looked! He had changed so much. The disease and the pain had eaten away at him and left a sorry figure, a compelling one nevertheless, for he was like surrounded by a halo of holiness, and just looking at him moved one to pity and devotion.

We talked at length, he with great difficulty and fatigue. He told me about the disease, his sorrows, something of his martyr's life."

From then on, he found a confidant and a friend who did everything he could for him.

We have a letter from Ismael written on March 25th, the feast of the Annunciation; perhaps he had met Fr. José on that same day. He felt very sick and wanted to leave a memento to his beloved mother. There is like an echo of the happiness that flooded him after he had received Communion, a happiness that was cut short, because in the midst of writing the letter, he collapsed.

Mom, today as I write this letter, my condition is rather poor; still, I am immensely happy because I had the good fortune to receive the Body of Christ.

After writing this, I have to tell you how everything happened.

For we know that God lays out everything, therefore we must follow his Holy Will.

I have been assisted very capably in my disease, for it happened that...¹⁴⁵

He was seized by a coughing fit and coughed up blood from the lungs. Pale and hurting, he collapsed startling everyone. Hence, it is not strange that when Fr. José met him he was in the pitiful state that he described.

The disease was making great strides and the physician gave no hope for a cure. He coughed up blood more frequently; his state of extreme weakness was worsening; his wheezing, cavern-

145. The original has been lost. A. Martín de Bernardo, 172. AGC-IT.

ous breathing signaled that his lungs were wasting away. He had very little life left in him.

Ismael was in great pain, still he did not complain. He prayed, he recited the Rosary, he gazed at the Crucifix.

Fr. José had promised to talk to someone who might be in a position to get him released, in particular the seminarian from La Mancha who handled these matters.

When the nurse was told of the plan, she was against it, for in her noble, charitable spirit she did not want him taken from the room where she was tending to him.»¹⁴⁶

«Aurora suggested to Ismael a novena to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart to ask for his health. He accepted»¹⁴⁷ saying:

— **«As you wish, though my life ends here. I think I'll die straightaway.»**¹⁴⁸

— «Don't go to heaven yet. Don't you see that the world needs young men like you?

— **This is what God wants. I'm good and ready and want to go to heaven as soon as possible.»**¹⁴⁹

«Aurora began to recite the novena, kneeling next to the patient's bed. Ismael was smiling. It was night already. Very much pleased, and with a knowing look, he dismissed the young woman:

— **Go and rest. When you come back tomorrow, you probably won't find me alive. May God repay you for everything!**

Ismael was not showing any enthusiasm. Still, the nurse kept praying. Smiling as usual, not wanting to hurt her kindness but yearning for death to take him to his true fatherland, he said to her:

— **I don't want to force the Virgin to work a miracle by giving me back my health, when I'm so close to Heaven.»**¹⁵⁰

146. A. Martín de Bernardo, 169-173.

147. Florentino del Valle, 65.

148. A. Martín de Bernardo, 176.

149. Florentino del Valle, 65.

150. A. Martín de Bernardo, 176-177.

«As the novena progressed (invited by Aurora, Mrs. Pilar had joined her), noticing that he looked slightly better, the two women became excited and were making bright plans.

— When you are well, the three of us will visit Our Lady of Pilar to give thanks.

Ismael turned his eyes to heaven and sweetly suggested:

*— **I will give thanks in heaven, and very soon.***

He was convinced that he was about to die, and this belief gave him strength in his sickness.

One day, the nurse suggested they make a pact:

— I'm exhausted, I'm worth very little in this world. Should we ask God to make an exchange: I die and you live?

*— **Ah, no! You aren't going to snatch away from me the happiness that I'm expecting any day now!**»¹⁵¹*

«The visible improvement spread to his body, and this had a positive effect on his morale; they came to believe that he might recover. But it was in vain! In a few days, Ismael's body began to suffer the most atrocious torments of the disease.

A high, persistent fever caused him to sweat profusely. On his skeletal body, the sweat exacerbated the ulcerous sores that spread to all his body. What's more, the back and the spine were already down to the flesh, as if he had been horribly scourged. Ismael suffered and kept his silence.

Lying on his bed of sorrows face up, he breathed with immense effort. As he labored to breathe, he felt his chest being pierced with daggers. "They would change his position frequently, because he was choking; when they moved him, he made a painful gesture, which he tried to hide with a smile." This is what Aurora has testified: "I can say that in the month and a half that I took care of him, I never heard him complain once." And Fr. Ballesteros has written: "He never complained or objected about

151. Florentino del Valle, 68.

anything. He must have felt intense pain, but never complained. Also, as he was always lying in a supine position, his sores must have hurt even more."

When Fr. José's clearance was approved and he was set free, Ismael felt envy, but only because the priest could now visit Our Lady of Pilar; somewhat sad and dejected, he would say:

— *When you pay a visit to the Virgin, remember me to her and say a Hail Mary for me.*

*He took Communion whenever he could, which was almost every day. He did it with such fervor and piety, with such love and visible composure that the bystanders were moved to devotion, if not tears. "He edified those of us who surrounded his bed," said Fr. José. "He looked like an angel come down on earth; so much so that we often referred to him as Aloysius Gonzaga or John Berchmans, something that out of modesty he objected to."**

About St. Aloysius, we note that Ismael had chosen him as a role model for his angelic virtue of chastity. This is what Fr. José has said: "Due to his heroic spirit of sacrifice, his restraint in asking for help, and especially his supernatural modesty, he told

* St. John Berchmans (Diest 1599 - Rome 1621) joined the Jesuits in 1616 and was sent to their convent in Rome in 1618. He died very young. He was recommended as a patron saint of youth together with St. Aloysius Gonzaga and St. Stanislaus Kostka. He was a hearth angel, his mother's faithful attendant. His devotion to the Virgin was proverbial. He felt for her a warm, deep, trusting and filial love. In the last year of his life he had taken an oath, subscribed with his own blood, to "affirm and defend, anywhere he might be, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary." He used to say: "I want to be a saint without waiting."

St. Aloysius Gonzaga was born in Castiglione, Italy (1568 - 1591). In 1581 the young Aloysius, a seminarian who was studying to be a Jesuit priest, dedicated his life to the care of the sick afflicted with the Black Plague. One day he found a very sick man in the street, hoisted him on his shoulders and took him to the hospital. Aloysius contracted the disease and died on June 21st, 1591; he was 23 years old. He died looking at the Crucifix and saying: "How happy I was when I was told: we are going into the House of the Lord."

*no one about the terrible sores and ulcers that festered on his back and his legs. It was only by chance that I saw them, and he allowed only me to minister to them.”*¹⁵²

«One day, Aurora brought him a relic of St. Aloysius: “I am placing with you a relic of St. Aloysius Gonzaga. Do you know this saint?” Ismael made an expressionless gesture, but he took the relic and gave it a long kiss.

“How great my surprise—the nurse continued—when I visited his family’s house in Tomelloso and saw the image of St. Aloysius above his bed, enclosed in a frame that he himself had carved! It was his favorite saint!”

*Chastity was one of St. Aloysius’ virtues that Ismael had faithfully tried to emulate, sometimes to the point of heroism.»*¹⁵³

«Apparently an injection he had been given in the thigh, either at San Gregorio or at the hospital, had become infected. “It caused a sore that was slowly becoming purulent.” Ismael never mentioned it, he only “asked every day for gauze and cotton to cover the wound and treated it himself, out of modesty and love of purity. Once when the nurse was changing his position, she lightly touched the wounds, staining her hand with pus.”

— What’s this, Ismael?

*— **Nothing, nothing!**—Ismael replied somewhat confused, trying to dismiss it and hide the wound.*

— What do you mean, nothing? Let me see.

He was unwilling, but Aurora imposed her authority and lifted the sheet somewhat. The thigh had a dreadful wound, so deep that you could put your hand in it. Ismael covered himself right away. Only he knew the pain he felt. The nurse scolded him forcefully:

— Why didn’t you say anything? And here I was, going out of

152. A. Martín de Bernardo, 177-179.

153. Florentino del Valle, 66.

my way for you, trying to nurse you back to health, and you hide this from me...!

*It was like a lashing to his soul. He shut his eyes from which tears were tremulously falling, and out of modesty stopped speaking and resigned himself. He was a victim and must not complain. He was fulfilling his wish: **I want to pass unnoticed. I want to suffer.**»¹⁵⁴*

«Later, in the days just before he died and almost in his death throes, whenever the physician lifted the sheets to listen with the stethoscope, or the nurse did the same when giving him an injection, he would instinctively cover his limbs, calling attention to this weak defense of his chastity, a gesture that let his soul's sensitivity shine through.»¹⁵⁵

«In addition to the physical pain, there was his deep moral suffering.»¹⁵⁶

«Fr. José has written that “he replied to the slights and lack of care with admirable resignation and silence.”

From that day forward, Aurora paid special attention to Ismael. He had become so weak that his looks moved one to pity. Full of pain, without strength and taken by an indescribable anguish, he had become so anemic that he had lost all appetite. Then the nurse became like a mother to him. She would bring him pastries, sweets, marmalades, anything that could be “more easily digested.”

One day when the physician was visiting the patients escorted by a Little Sister, he was surprised to see the delicacies on his night stand, for he knew that he was a prisoner. When he found out that the nurse had brought them, he smiled slyly and said to the Sister, in a cruel voice:

— She must be a Lefty, that's why she does him favors.

Ismael was hurt by the words, but did not speak. He suffered.

154. A. Martín de Bernardo, 179-180.

155. Florentino del Valle, 67

156. Florentino del Valle, 68.

It was as if everyone was against him. Another time, in a corner of the room a German prisoner from the International Brigades raised his voice somewhat and said:

— What's the matter with that kid, that everyone pampers him so?

As if to please him, good Ismael replied timidly:

— It's that I'm very sick; I am dying.

*— Later he said to the nurse: **Don't bring me anything else. I don't want anyone to argue with you on my account.***»¹⁵⁷

«Still, even suffering as much as he did, he could forget his sorrows and his ravaged body to comfort those around him. He was enormously appreciative of the nurse who was going out of her way for him. Wanting to show his gratitude, one day that her ministrations had been greater than usual, for example after she rinsed his mouth to wash away the bitterness of the decaying matter he was coughing up, with a fading voice, but with a grateful look Ismael said:

*— **The Reds could never kill you because it was God's plan that you sanctify yourself by ministering to me and encouraging me as you do. I would like to show you my gratitude for everything I owe you, but I don't have any voice left to do it. You are a Catholic and so you can appreciate the promise of prayers from Heaven. I promise to compensate you from above for even the smallest gesture you are doing for me. Truly, only my mother could have done the same... I am wasted. I have no voice left in my throat. Forgive me if I can't express myself better.***

Emotion and fatigue quickened his labored breathing, and a dry, persistent cough interrupted his words.

There were times when he noticed that she was worried about a relative of hers who was in the Red-occupied zone.

*— **Have faith—Ismael would say to her—do not be a coward. Raise your heart to heaven.***

157. A. Martín de Bernardo, 184-185.

And with a somewhat forced smile, he tried to disguise the same preoccupation that tortured him.»¹⁵⁸

*«Once, during one of her visits to Ismael, Mrs. Pilar told him:
— Ismael, since you are a member of Catholic Action, would you like someone from the local Diocesan Council to come and pay a visit?*

His thin face lit up from joy, and he answered yes.

Soon after, the visit took place. The Council president and secretary came to visit a few days later.

It was as if the pleasant, happy-go-lucky kid from Tomelloso had been reborn. Forgetting his pain, he agreeably spent some time in enjoyable conversation with them. A very appropriate gift made his soul smile.

— We brought you a Catholic Action badge. Would you like it?

*— **Oh, very much! Thank you, thank you so much!**—and he held it in his hands, stroking it.*

Perhaps he thought that if he pinned it to his chest he would receive more attention, or evoke more sympathy from doctors and Sisters. Whatever the reason, Ismael put it in his night stand and never wore it. When the two young visitors left, the nurse found Ismael with an intimate, satisfied smile on his face. As if guessing that Aurora was eager to know the reason for the joy that shined in his eyes, he said to her:

*— **Open the drawer and see what's in there.***

Wrapped in a piece of tissue paper was the Catholic Action badge.

He added:

*— **The Catholic Action boys came to see me and brought me this present**—and he took the badge in his hands, kissing it effusively.*

— Why don't you pin it to your shirt, so you can show it?

158. Florentino del Valle, 70-71.

— No, it would break right away. And I would debase it by wearing it in such a dirty place.»¹⁵⁹

«Ismael did not get to enjoy the emotional ceremony when the badges are awarded officially, because according to the secretary of that C.A. Youth Association, “we have no official record that he was awarded the Association Cross, since there is no information about it in the files, and we have no recollection that it was ever done.” Ismael was registered as a Catholic Action member on April 1st, 1934. He was appointed treasurer of the Association’s general board on February 3rd, 1935; he continued with that appointment until January 6th, 1936, when he resigned and remained a board member.

Later, in an award ceremony held in Tomelloso, since it was believed that Ismael never officially received the Association Cross, he was given the honor of receiving it pinned to a bow, in the folds of the beautiful white C. A. flag.»¹⁶⁰

«“There is one reason why I wouldn’t want to die (he confessed in a moment of intimacy one day to Fr. José), I would like to see the war end and Catholic Action, which is my favorite ministry, grow and expand. After I die I will ask lots of things from Heaven for all my town folk (meaning the local C.A. Center), that Catholic Action may grow and organize in every town. Priests are necessary; without them, the Catholic Action boys must be ready to carry out the program, which is so needed, any time, but now more than ever.”

To kindle the fire, Fr. José would supply him with leaflets and books about his “favorite ministry,” as Ismael called it.»¹⁶¹

«On the eve of the Friday of Sorrows [the Friday before Palm Sunday] that fell on April 7th, his condition worsened and he felt

159. A. Martín de Bernardo, 182-183.

160. A. Martín de Bernardo, 39-40.

161. A. Martín de Bernardo, page 183.

his death imminent. It was around nine in the evening, perhaps a bit later. Everyone in the hospital had retired. He began to cough up a lot of blood. Each time he coughed, he would expectorate putrefied pieces of lung. In that bitter moment, he asked the Sister on watch to call Fr. José. He looked all haggard, his face was in agony but in between the shadows that the pain had drawn on his face, a serene peace was breaking through, like the dawn of a resigned smile.

— *What's happening, Ismael?—Asked Fr. José.*

— ***Stay with me. Tonight I die.***

— *Don't say that, man.*

— ***Yes, yes. Call the chaplain. I already received the Viaticum. Now I want the Last Rites. I feel myself die.***—And he rolled the Virgin's Rosary in his scraggy hands, squeezing it hard. She had suffered so much, and appropriately, the following day the Church was celebrating the feast of Her Sorrows.

Fr. José ran to call the chaplain, who hurried to his bed.

Ismael stood up partially in bed, as much as he could, and answered what he could, reviewing his life. The chaplain stayed a good while, murmuring words of encouragement and reciting short prayers. Since Ismael was not exhibiting symptoms of agony, he went back to his quarters, reminding Fr. José to call him should the patient's condition take a turn for the worse.

Now Ismael and Fr. José were left in sweet intimacy. With a smile that now spread free of pain on his blood-stained lips, Ismael said:

— ***Say, you need something from the Virgin? Because tonight I die, and tomorrow is the Friday of Sorrows, her feast. Tomorrow I'll be with her in Heaven...!***

— *Don't say that, Ismael—said Fr. José, to encourage him.*

— ***You'll see, you'll see. Tonight I die. But I'm happy!***

His happiness was a reflection of the peace and contentment that filled his soul. Forgetting his condition, he began to joke:

— ***Tomorrow as soon as I get to Heaven, if St. Peter doesn't***

let me in because I've been a little devil, I'm going to pull his beard, or trick him and gatecrash. Tomorrow in Heaven...!

In the middle of the night he seemed at peace and his condition seemed to improve somewhat. He asked Fr. José to go and rest. The following morning, when Fr. José went to see him, Ismael said soulfully:

— I'm very sad... I didn't die! And I had so many plans ready!»¹⁶²

During Easter Week—it was April 1938—«*the pain became so intense that it was clear that the Lord wanted to bind him ever more closely to His Passion. Among the many ailments that tortured him and that were somewhat relieved by the nurse who rinsed his mouth often, was a devouring thirst caused by the burning fever that dried up his salivary glands. With a cruel charity, because of the pain he felt, they only allowed him to touch the water glass, or an earthenware jug, with his lips and once in a while would moisten his lips with a few drops that he could barely taste with his tongue.*

The thirst, and all his other pains in general, intensified alarmingly on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Someone thought that it was the beginning of the agony. The suffering was so intense that he had terrible convulsions, his hands and the whole body shaking. At three in the afternoon, the nurse came into the room. Seeing him in that state, she asked, frightened:

— What's happening!

*— **It's Maundy Thursday,***¹⁶³ *he answered spontaneously.*

*With that, he had tried to explain everything. What an appropriate day to join the great victim on Calvary!»*¹⁶⁴

«Good Friday was also a day of intense pain. Looking at him moved one to pity. The wounds on his body were a constant source

162. A. Martín de Bernardo, 186-187.

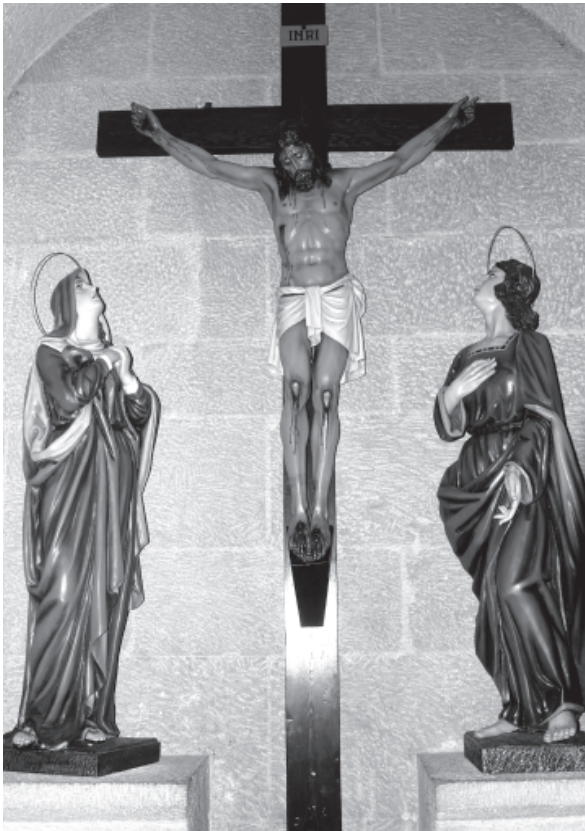
163. It was April 14th, 1938.

164. Florentino del Valle, 71-72.

of torture, especially the sores on the back. But he stifled his grimaces in a self-willed composure.

Like Christ, he was burning with thirst and his shoulders were feeling the pain of scourging; but he bore everything, taking Christ as example. Fr. José found him in a very serious condition. Ismael put on a desolate smile. Bereft and crazy with love, because only those who are in that condition can speak the words that he spoke, he said:

— Finally I have the joy of offering something to Jesus! »¹⁶⁵



The Calvary at the Church of La Asunción of Tomelloso. Jesus, Mary and St. John.

165. A. Martín de Bernardo, 191-192.

«Ismael was on fire; his eyes had lived life; they were ablaze, his face was aflame, a light red color covered his normal paleness.

— Now—he said—listen to a poem to the Sacred Heart that I used to recite in the towns, at the Catholic Action feasts.—And he declaimed it with his usual mastery and identical enthusiasm.»¹⁶⁶

«He suffered like never before until the Saturday of Resurrection, when he returned to his former peaceful state.»¹⁶⁷

Those were the days of the Easter of Resurrection.

«Since the beginning of Easter Week, Ismael no longer lived on earth. All his yearnings were for heaven. The hour of his death did not come with fear or sadness. Faced with the hope of imminent death, he smiled happily.

Fr. José asked him:

— Are you sad that you're going to die?

— No! I'm more prepared than ever, therefore, let death come when it will. I'm sure that Our Most Holy Lady of Pilar, whom I love with all the longing of my heart, will help me to stand before her Son's Court, and for this reason I have no fear.»¹⁶⁸

On May 1st, Ismael turned twenty-one. *«It was his life's last flash. After that, he waned visibly. As the flame was going out, Ismael was gradually detaching himself from earth, including with his mind:*

— Tell me about Heaven: Tell me about the Virgin!—he would affably say to his visitors.

He was already touching the prize with his hands, though he was still sufficiently serene and composed that he could be sensitive about the others. One day he noticed that although the nurse

166. Florentino del Valle, 73. *Author's note:* The poem is *Amor Divino* [Divine Love] by Fr. Félix G. Olmedo, S.J.

167. Florentino del Valle, 72.

168. A. Martín de Bernardo, 195-196.

was extremely tired, and her shift had ended, she was not leaving. Looking benignly at her, he said:

— **Go, don't worry; I won't die tonight.**»¹⁶⁹

«But a thorn pricked his soul: his mind would often travel back to that town of La Mancha that had given birth to him. He felt engulfed by sorrow, weighed down as if by a burden: he was going to die alone, without a mother's kisses and endearments, without the comfort of his loved ones... Perhaps his eyes would be closed by that good nurse, she would whisper the last soothing words; still, he would die without his family's warmth.

He was going back with his mind to his small corner in Tomelloso. The idea of not having his dear ones at his bedside, his mother especially, when he died, would tug at his heart until he expired.

— One day he said to the nurse: **"You would give me so much comfort if you promised me that when the war is over, you'll visit my parents and tell them about their son, tell them that, apart from the pain of the disease, I died in peace, thinking of them."** The nurse promised:

— Even if I have to walk, I'll go. I promise. I will fulfill your last wishes.»¹⁷⁰

«Seeing the gravity of his condition, I managed to talk to the attending physician, asking him to do everything in his power to save a life that showed so much promise for youth.

Ismael knew that he had very little time left, and asked me for a sheet of paper because he wanted to write his last good-bye to his parents who, in that other Spain, would mourn his death. With great effort, because he could barely hold the pencil in his hands, he wrote this letter:

My beloved mother and father, and my brothers and sisters. As I write these few lines, I'm in a sorry state, and because of my

169. Florentino del Valle, 73.

170. A. Martín de Bernardo, 196-197.

*condition I'm writing to send you my last good-bye; for I hope that when you receive this letter I will surely already be in heaven, inquiring after all of you. But do not grieve for me, because, you Mom especially, were not at my side. I found a mother who has given me all the care that my disease needed. She has not left me for one moment... she has been for me the most tender of mothers, and I am sending you my last good-bye through her. Good-bye to all the kids, Antonio, Ana; my uncles and aunts, and my cousins as well; Félix and Francisca, Miguel, Pedro and the others. I have received all the sacraments. Until heaven, where I expect to see all of you, good-bye. Receive this last embrace from Ismael who loves you and does not forget you.*¹⁷¹

And he continued:

— *Since I don't have the good fortune of having my mother here, please pray for me, don't leave me until after I'm dead...*



Aurora in Tomelloso with Ismael's father. At Aurora's sides are Mercedes and Martín Molinero Novillo (in the back). Next to the father are Ismael Montero Molinero, Luis Molinero Novillo and his wife Maria, the writer Jesús Marín Sierra and Tomás Montero Molinero.

171. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 229. AGC-IT.

«I stood by his side from five in the afternoon until eleven at night. When it looked as if his heart had stopped beating, he opened his eyes and looked at me with gratitude, a smile on his dying lips, and with words choked with emotion, said:

—Until heaven, and don't suffer for me, for I'm very lucky...

No one took notice of that moving scene...

I gave him an injection of Cardiazol that gave him a reaction... Since you're feeling a little better, I said to him, I'm leaving. I'll be here early tomorrow morning. He squeezed my hand warmly, as if taking leave, and said:

— May God reward you for everything you're doing for me. And if I don't see you again, I'll ask for you, because perhaps when you come back, I'll be already dead.»¹⁷²

«Mrs. Teresa Fanjul, one of whose sons had been killed in a Huesca town, and who sometimes made the rounds with the nurse, heard Ismael's letter. She was moved and bent over him, kissed him on the forehead, and said:

— Because you don't have your mother at your side, I'm going to give you a mother's kiss.»¹⁷³

«Ismael replied:

— Thank you! I will ask for you in Heaven!

It was at just about that time that Fr. José was evacuated to Bilbao. "Ismael was so sorry when he heard that I was leaving—he has written—that when I took leave of him, all I could do was cry, moved like him." But four or five days later he was again in Saragossa.

Someone had probably told Ismael that anyone who died a prisoner was buried in a common grave. In discussing the matter with Aurora, this is what he said:

172. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 229, 230.

173. Florentino del Valle, 75.

— ***I'm horrified at the thought of being thrown in the common grave when I die.***

— *Don't you worry, kid. Everything will be all right.*

Another time, he said:

— ***When I die, I want to be shrouded in a cassock of the Company of Jesus.***

— *What a crazy idea! Why a Jesuit cassock?*

— ***Yes, because I wanted to become a Jesuit, and since it was not possible, at least let them bury me dressed like one of them, the way that St. Aloysius Gonzaga was buried.***¹⁷⁴

At the beginning of May, «*he had almost finished the list of requests before leaving this world, and without losing his good humor, said:*

— ***The worms definitely aren't going to feast on me!***—He would say that somewhat in jest, looking at his bony, skeletal arms.

On May 5th, he fervently received Communion, as he usually did, and in giving thanks told Jesus that he would see Him soon. He felt he had reached the end.»¹⁷⁵

«*Fr. José did not visit him that day.*

He was fully conscious when he received the Last Rites. With a weak voice alternating with breathing, which he did with painful sighs, the dying man replied to the ritual questions.

As the chaplain was taking leave, Ismael asked him, somewhat worriedly, to stay at his side because he did not want to die alone. He was afraid of that loneliness, and even had a premonition that God was going to purify him with this last trial. That day, the nurse was home sick. The chaplain recited a few short prayers, which Ismael repeated, more in his mind than with his lips. Even so, until his last breath, with an almost imperceptible voice, his parched lips uttered the invocation:

174. A. Martín de Bernardo, 198-199.

175. Florentino del Valle, 75.

— *Mother of Pilar, save me! My God, mercy! Sacred Heart of Jesus, in You...!*»¹⁷⁶

And he died.

The body returned to earth. The soul flew to Heaven to meet the Virgin Mary, and Ismael's silence stayed with us.

In breaking the sad news to Ismael's parents, Fr. Ballesteros related their son's final moments.

"I very much regret having to bring you such sad news, but I must do it, for it was your holy son's wish: before he died, he entrusted me with this task with great concern... I grieve twice as much, because I've lost one of my best friends, and because I can guess the grief that your parents' heart will feel at the news. Please be comforted by the thought that the Lord will keep him close to his throne, where he raised him out of love for him; he was like an angel, and that is how he died. When death took him, he was ready for it like a saint, and like a saint he left behind this place of misery... On the 5th of May of this year, at ten at night, he passed in the peace of the Lord..."»¹⁷⁷

This is what he wrote to Ismael's closest friends: «*It was the 5th of May, the month sacred to the Virgin, when this pure, holy angel joined the ranks of the Blessed.*»¹⁷⁸

Ismael had wanted to be a priest in order to be like Jesus, celebrate Holy Mass, join Christ in the sacrifice of the altar and, at the end, he did celebrate it like Jesus on Calvary, together with Mary, as he had done since joining Catholic Action, sacri-

176. A. Martín de Bernardo, 201.

177. Florentino del Valle, 75-76.

178. A. Martín de Bernardo, 201.

ficing, making sacred (*sacri-facti* = *to make sacred*) each moment of his life.

In his short life, he proved his love for God and his fellow man and he practiced the virtues of joy, purity, and poverty which, although they may not be the most important, do open the door to other virtues. Above all, he lived in complete detachment, he completely surrendered himself to the presence of God, which he found by seeking His countenance. He always lived joyfully, and died in the joyful days of the Easter of Resurrection and the month of May, the same month of his birth, always very close to the Most Holy Virgin Mary.

X EARTH

Like any other saint, Ismael looked at death with hope and joy, for it was his birthday in heaven: death and burial were the necessary steps to resurrection, and this is why he had looked forward to dying.

But he could have never imagined that he would follow in Jesus' footsteps even after dead.

In the morning of May 6th, Aurora arrived at the hospital with Ismael on her mind. At the gate she met Pedro, the caretaker from Socuéllamos, a town near Tomelloso, who told her, before she could say a word:

— «*He died last night at ten thirty!*»

Aurora asked him where they had taken the body; he told her that the prisoners of war were buried in the common grave; just like those crucified on Calvary. Just like what they would have done to Jesus, if Joseph of Arimathaea had not offered his tomb.

She asked Pedro to accompany her to the morgue where she looked for Ismael's body among the soldiers who had died that same night. She found a stiff corpse, dressed in khaki pants and shirt, the army soldier's uniform. His eyes were half-open and on his face shone a great peace and a slight smile that put an end to his suffering. According to what she told his brother Luis, he had a sweet, peaceful expression.

Aurora closed his eyes, with some difficulty crossed his hands over his chest in a devotional pose, and said a short prayer.

She went to call the chaplain and together they called on the

hospital commander to ask his permission to take the body to the city cemetery. The commander raised no objections as long as they paid for the burial expenses, about 500 pesetas; it was a large sum, and neither the chaplain nor Aurora had that kind of money or knew where to get it.

Faced with this dilemma, the chaplain and Aurora turned to the colonel in charge of the Prisoners' Classification Board. Even though Ismael was dead, they asked him to issue a declaration of release. The colonel was unable to comply, for the obvious reason that he could not open a file petitioning the release of someone who was already dead.

The nurse and the chaplain anxiously went back to the commander who told them that there was only one solution: buy a grave for Ismael. He gave them until three in the afternoon.

They finally found some generous souls who lent them the money to buy the grave and a wooden casket. At five in the evening, Aurora and Mrs. Pilar escorted the body to the Torrero cemetery. It was the only funeral that Ismael received.

When they reached the cemetery that eventful day, another obstacle appeared. Burying hours were over, and the cemetery was closed. They would have to wait until the following morning.

But Mrs. Pilar was a resolute woman and Aurora a nurse whose piety and devotion made her find strength in weakness. They persuaded the caretaker to bury the casket in the freshly dug grave.

Finally, they laid his remains to rest in the Torrero cemetery. *«The two women threw the first two handfuls of earth on the casket and shed tears of grief at the separation.»*¹⁷⁹

This is what Aurora wrote to Alberto Martín de Bernardo:

“Don't think that I was easily struck by the virtues of an elect soul, because before taking care of Ismael I had lived in the Red-controlled zone with young men who gladly accepted the martyr's palm; but all that suffering seemed small change, compared to Ismael's...”

179. Florentino del Valle, 79.

This is why, after he died, when I ordered the plate to be nailed to the cross on his grave, I did not hesitate to choose these words:

ISMAEL MOLINERO NOVILLO
SECRETARY OF THE CATHOLIC ACTION YOUTH OF
TOMELLOSO

HE SACRIFICED HIS LIFE FOR GOD AND FOR SPAIN
ON MAY 5TH, 1938

*HE WAS 20 YEARS OLD*¹⁸⁰

R.I.P. ¹⁸¹



Ismael's grave in Saragossa, with his siblings María de la Cruz and Luis, and friends.

180. Ismael was treasurer, not secretary (see note No. 5). He had turned twenty-one four days earlier.

181. A. Martín de Bernardo, 205.

XI HEAVEN

«Fr. José Ballesteros returned to the hospital on May 7th. Running into Aurora in a hallway, she cried:

— Oh, Ismael is dead, he's dead!

I went into the room, where his bed stood empty—the priest continued—I didn't know whether to cry or be thankful. I grieved for my good friend whom I had loved. And I rejoiced because he had gone straight to Heaven.»¹⁸²

As Ismael lay on his deathbed, Fr. José had asked his friend not to forget him, so that he might become a faithful priest after he completed his studies at the Ciudad Real Seminary. Fr. José has always been aware that Ismael never deserted him; he even wrote down the aid he received from him in times of trial. Fr. José died in holiness in Ciudad Real in 1998.

«Let us bestow on Ismael, like a glory crown, the praise that this priest bestowed on him:

“It's a pity that so many years have passed and that time has erased some of the exalted scenes and words that I witnessed in the time that I spent with him.

Still, one idea remains fixed in my mind, one that I cannot erase. Ismael died a saint because he bore his illness like a saint; even more, he went to extraordinary lengths to hide his suffering on

182. A. Martín de Bernardo, 203-204.

account of the modesty that informed all his words and actions, and for this reason the details of his life passed unnoticed.”»¹⁸³

The Saragossa Catholic Action Youth newspaper dedicated several pages to the memory of Ismael under the title: *Un rojo que tenía el alma blanca* [A Red with a White Soul]. The eulogy ended with these words:

«His remains, enclosed in a plain coffin, were transferred to the Torrero Catholic cemetery and interred in plot 52, grave 401. There they rest under the shade of an artistic cross and kind, gentle hands lovingly tend to the flowers that grow on the grave.»¹⁸⁴

«His grave seemed abandoned, until one day it was suddenly found with a girth of bricks and full of flowers. Aurora never gave up on him, not even in death.

Following Ismael's death, the Saragossa Catholic Action Youth Bulletin published a beautiful article in his memory that spoke of his sacrifice, praised his virtues and proposed his death as a model. Even more, his grave was visited often by young men who wanted to pay homage to the simple, unknown soldier who had been treated like a Red prisoner; had suffered like a saint and had died like one.

The wreaths and flower bouquets that decorated his tomb were just one mark of the affection and veneration that Ismael aroused.

The Lord wanted to break once and for all Ismael's admirable silence. He was beginning to glorify his grave as a sincere testimony of the youth's silent heroism.

In 1940, the Catholic Action Youth Association organized a huge pilgrimage to Our Lady of Pilar in Saragossa. More than 20,000 young C.A. men and women filled the lovely Basilica and the square in front of it. A forest of white flags swayed to the lullaby of the morning breeze. It was sublime. I will never forget the scene. I was a young kid attending school in that beloved city. On that day, the

183. A. Martín de Bernardo, 204.

184. Florentino del Valle, 79.

C.A. youth swore to defend, even with their life, the bodily and spiritual Assumption of Our Lady to heaven. On that day, someone publicly proclaimed our Ismael a role model for the Catholic Action youth. I didn't know nor did I hear anything about this.

Ismael's brother Luis and a close friend (Miguel Montañés) were among those who attended the event. They went up to Torrero. In plot 52, grave 401, they found the spot where Ismael slept the sleep of the just. It was blanketed with flowers and they brought even more. Ismael was blossoming.

At the end of November 1942, his mother María Francisca «went silently to pray on her son's tomb. She went with the same preoccupation of the holy women of Jerusalem who had walked to the tomb of the Nazarene. How she would have wanted to lift the coffin from the grave, shroud her son as she liked, and decorate the grave! But her mother's heart suffered a pleasant disappointment: "They arranged it so beautifully!" she exclaimed. A mother's need had been satisfied.»¹⁸⁵

She expressed the wish to have her son's remains transferred to the Tomelloso cemetery "so he can be

María Francisca, Ismael's mother.



185. Florentino del Valle, 80.

closer to us.” On her way back, in Madrid, the night of December 1st, 1942, while sleeping at the Aurora Inn located at Espoz y Mina Street where she was lodged, she joined her son for eternity.

On May 13th, 1950, the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, his mother’s wishes were fulfilled and Ismael’s remains were transferred from Saragossa to Tomelloso. In the towns where the train that carried his body made a stop, ceremonies that were more like a celebration than a funeral were held: Mass at the Madrid Athocha station; a gathering of Catholic Action youths at El Romeral station; prayers for the dead in Alcázar de San Juan, Cinco Casas, and Argamasilla de Alba until finally, on May 15th, the remains were laid to rest in a mausoleum in Tomelloso cemetery that had been built with money raised by the town folk.

«There was a time when it seemed that Ismael’s memory had died; but that was not the case. In April 1942, La vida sobrenatural,



Ismael’s remains are transferred from Saragossa to Tomelloso. In the center: Fr. Francisco Izquierdo Molins, at his right Jesús Barco and Jesús Cobeta; at his left Primitivo Pemán, Pedro Cuesta and Luis Molinero, among others.



Ismael's coffin is carried from the Church of the Asunción de Nuestra Señora to the cemetery, in a ceremony led by the Bishop-Prior Msgr. Emeterio Echevarría and attended by provincial and local authorities.



Miguel Montañés, Pedro Cuesta and other Catholic Action members, praying at the Servant of God's tomb.

an excellent Dominican review on mysticism, published the endearing story of a boy from La Mancha who was offered as a model of the mystical life. Ismael's life and his heroic offering on the altar of silence and pain were divulged to the world. The article was prefaced by a short introduction and the notes of Fr. Ignacio Bruna (chaplain of San Gregorio) and Aurora Álvarez, the nurse who had assisted Ismael in the final, terrible days of his illness. A diocesan priest from Tucumán (Argentina) had sent the article to the well-known review, under the title El miliciano santo.

The Saragossa school where I was a student subscribed to the review. One day one of the brothers said to me:

— “In the refectory we are reading a very good article about a ‘militiaman’ from your province. He was a Catholic Action boy from Tomelloso who was believed to be a Red because he suffered in silence without identifying himself. It’s truly remarkable. It’s a pity that he suffered so much without saying anything...”

I was proud, and when us boys talked about the merits of our respective provinces, I would always bring up the good Ismael.

I went back to La Mancha and for three or four years I heard nothing about my compatriot Ismael, not did I talk about him.

While doing my philosophy studies at the Ciudad Real Seminary, I happened to read the review De bromas y de veras. On the cover of the 1947 issue was the portrait of a young man with the title: Ismael de Tomelloso by Fr. Florentino del Valle, S.J.

And so I remembered the young man and eagerly read the handsome biography published in the review. I was moved to tears. Some of the descriptions are indeed captivating and moving. Almost everyone who has read it told me so: I cried! The modest, joyful and heroic life of Ismael was finally being made public. The Mensajero administrative office was flooded with requests from seminaries, Catholic Action centers, schools, and convents for copies of the biography.” They were printed with a nice, impressive cover and sold immediately. To satisfy the demand, a second edition was printed.

The author sent a few copies of the booklet to Ismael's family and friends. One day his brother Jesús visited His Excellency the Bishop-Prior Emeterio Echevarría and gave him a copy.

The bishop was delighted to have had in his flock a young man whose life had been an example of Christian virtues and who was a role model for the new, flourishing Catholic Action generations of La Mancha. His Excellency cried as well!

He confessed that he had read the booklet more than eight times and each time the good Ismael had moved him even more to tears. It was the only topic of conversation in the towns.

In Manzanares, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Spanish Night Action that was celebrated there, I heard the bishop preach the love that this young man had shown for the Most Holy Sacrament. Between tears, he gave a rousing account of the pain Ismael had endured when he could not receive Communion on St. Joseph's Day at the hospital, and of the happiness, the holy joy he had felt when he had finally received the King of Love in his heart.



Bishop Msgr. Emeterio Echevarría at the arrival in Tomelloso of Ismael's remains.

Another time, the bishop talked about Ismael in the Seminary Chapel. He was encouraging us to wish for a holy priesthood, one that would be heroic and disinterested, just as Ismael's would have been had he been allowed to live. Generous as always, he gave each seminarian a copy of the biography and invited us to read and reread the pages that spoke of those desires and to meditate long and hard on them, in order to feel the divine urge for a holy priesthood, one whose path was being shown to us by a Manchego boy through whose mouth the Holy Spirit had spoken.

But he did not stop there. In November 1947 he made a visit "ad limina." He brought two presents to the Holy Father Pius XII, two spiritual flowers from the plains of La Mancha.

Pius XII received him in Castelgandolfo. After the initial ritual conversation, they shifted to more intimate topics.

"Your Holiness, said the bishop-prior, I am presenting you with the lives of two young people from our diocese. One is María Rosa de la Vega, an angelic girl with solid virtues."

It was an expensive book bound in leather; a gift from María Rosa's parents to the Holy Father. He listened to the bishop's comments about her and smiled with a satisfied air.

"The other book, continued Fr. Emeterio, is not as richly bound, but its content is no less heroic. It talks about a Catholic Action boy with remarkable virtues. Some of the scenes in the book are very moving."

The Pope was leafing through the book: "Is this one of them?"

— This is fine, Your Holiness, but some are better. You'll see.

Fr. Emeterio opened the book and read to the Holy Father the scene where Ismael talks to the San Gregorio chaplain in the concentration camp. The Holy Father was moved. The bishop's voice was shaking with emotion. He was so moved that he could not finish reading the scene.

"I looked at the Holy Father... and he was crying! A trail of tears was falling from his eyes. He mystically closed them and stammered: He's a hero! This is sublime! They are both heroes!"

Later, Fr. Emeterio told him plainly that he hoped that “one day their names would be mentioned under Saint Peter’s dome.”

The best praise of Ismael Molinero is the one that the Pope blurted out:

“He’s a hero!”.

Those who read his biography weep and say: “He is a saint.” What Fr. Ignacio Bruna, the chaplain of San Gregorio, had said, has become true: “When those of us who knew him will make public the events of his life to which we were witnesses, the world will cry in unison: He was a Saint!”»¹⁸⁶



H.H. Pius XII.

186. A. Martín de Bernardo, 208-212.



Bishop-Prior Msgr. Echevarría.



St. Peter's Basilica in Rome; a view of the dome.

EPILOGUE

We have received inquiries from people eager to learn about the signposts that marked our journey through the silences of Ismael de Tomelloso, and although we felt attracted and transported like the small rag ball to which St. Theresa of the Child Jesus liked to compare herself, we will try to recount some of them.

1. EARLY INQUIRIES.

One morning in the summer of 2004, after stopping at Ismael's grave in the Tomelloso cemetery, we visited his brother Luis Molinero Novillo at his home at 15 Calle Independencia. We asked him when his brother had been canonized. He replied somewhat confusedly that he didn't know, but that he had recently met with Fr. Francisco del Campo Real in Ciudad Real, the Delegate of the Causes of the Saints, who had asked him for documentation about Ismael. He had brought it, but had not heard from him since.

We then spoke with Fr. Francisco in the Ciudad Real Bishop's Office. He was very busy with the Martyrs' Causes. He was very kind and showed interest in the figure of Ismael. He told us that the canonization process had not begun for the simple reason that no one had made a petition.

We then asked to meet with Msgr. Antonio Algora Hernando who had just been appointed Bishop-Prior of Ciudad Real. On November 2nd, 2004 we had a pleasant meeting. He informed us that the Church could not initiate Ismael's canonization process without a petition, without grassroots devotion and interest so that

the Church might begin to study the facts of his life. But the first requirement was a biography.

We resolved that the best person to write Ismael's biography would be Fr. Valentín Arteaga Sánchez-Guijaldo who had been assistant priest in the parish of Tomelloso; he was a good friend of ours and a prolific, excellent author and poet. He was Head General of the Regular Clerics, better known as Theatines, whose main office was in Rome. He had a clear recollection of Ismael de Tomelloso. When we explained our purpose, he enthusiastically accepted and asked us for all available background information.

We reported back to Luis Molinero who gave us photocopies of documents, letters, and newspaper articles about his brother, and also a photocopy of the biography written by the Jesuit Fr. Florentino del Valle in March 1947 entitled *Ismael de Tomelloso. La lección de su silencio*.

We forwarded copy of everything to Fr. Valentín, but had not realized that as his demanding position kept him busy and required him to travel frequently all over the world, he would have no time to write the biography. He suggested several authors, some of whom were also our friends, and we turned to them, but none of them accepted.

We then visited Sr. María de la Cruz Molinero Novillo, a sister of Ismael and Luis who had joined the Little Sisters of the Elderly Homeless and lived in the Aravaca Convent in Madrid. She gave us more documents, photos, letters, some old printed prayers for private devotion with Ismael's photograph and some reflections and events from his life. Also, a book by Fr. Alberto Martín de Bernardo entitled *El miliciano que murió como un santo. Vida heroica de Ismael Molinero Novillo*. Sr. María de la Cruz told us many things, but we were surprised to hear her say that her family should have no part in the canonization cause because it would come in God's time. She herself, she said, had written a letter to Pope John Paul II at the end of 1996, in which she had said, among other things:

«... Reading the message you addressed to young people in the Exhortation to the Consecrated Life, reminded me and my family of the apostolic zeal and the holy life of my brother Ismael Molinero...

The distinguishing note of his final years was a love of suffering. He truly loved the Cross, and did so joyfully. His motto was: be silent and suffer for love!

Your Holiness said to the young: “Step boldly into the great currents of holiness. Nurture the yearnings typical of your age, and reply promptly to God’s plan for you.”

This, Holy Father, was my brother Ismael’s IDEAL of the Christian life. This is how he lived until the end, admiring God’s works and setting his sights on the imperishable truths.

Your Holiness, you remind us that the third millennium expects a contribution to faith, that the world may be more at peace and fit to welcome God.

My family places in your paternal hands, our brother’s HEROIC LIFE. It is our greatest treasure, and the best present that we can offer to Your Holiness, as a contribution to faith, so that our present world may be able to accept God.»¹⁸⁷

Because Ismael’s reputation of holiness had begun in Saragossa where he died and had spread from there, and it was there that he had begun to be known as Ismael de Tomelloso, we went in search of people who might have known him directly or might have heard of him. We searched the Catholic Action archives for news about his life, and especially his death, since Ismael had met with local Catholic Action members, in addition to the prison and hospital chaplains who had been eyewitnesses and had written about his reputation for holiness.

We first contacted Fr. Luis Cuartero Lapieza, the Lay Ministry Representative. He thought that Ismael’s was an interesting case and arranged to meet us on December 30th, 2004. We went. He

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had made some inquiries about Ismael de Tomelloso but unfortunately the Catholic Action archives were in the Cathedral, and because repairs being made to the building, the files had been sealed in cartons and it was almost impossible to retrieve them.

2. SECOND ROUND OF INQUIRIES ASSISTED BY OUR LADY THE VIRGIN.

One morning in 2005 we went to the Basilica de la Milagrosa [Our Lady of Miracles] in García de Paredes Street in Madrid. We note here that Ismael had attended the Colegio de la Milagrosa in Tomelloso, receiving there the first principles of Christian education from the Daughters of Charity who taught at the school. We dared ask Our Lady of Miracles to be the patroness of our endeavor and to share her auspices with Our Lady of Pilar to whom Ismael had been so devoted and under whose patronage he had died in Saragossa; with Our Lady of Peñarroya, patroness of Tomelloso until 1942 when the town proclaimed Our Lady of las Viñas its patroness; with Our Lady of Fatima, because Ismael's remains were transferred from Saragossa to Tomelloso on May 13th, 1950; and with Our Lady of Almudena, patroness of Madrid.

Ours was not an extravagant request, since the Virgin was always present in Ismael's life as well as at his death. Special events of his life occurred in the month of May: he was born on May 1st, 1917 and baptized on May 6th; he received the Last Rites and died on May 5th, 1938. His remains were transported from Saragossa on May 13th and had reached the Tomelloso mausoleum where they currently rest, on May 15th, 1950. And the great national tribute that Catholic Action paid to him in Tomelloso had taken place on May 20th, 1956.

As our work was piling up, we asked Jaime Quevedo Soubriet for help. He is a smart, restless, inquisitive young reporter who loves literature. He is the owner and editor of *El Periódico del Común de la Mancha* [The La Mancha Municipality Paper]. We



Our Lady of la Milagrosa.



Our Lady of Pilar.



Our Lady of Peñarroya.



Our Lady of las Viñas.



Our Lady of Fatima.



Our Lady of Almudena.

explained our project: to meet with anyone who might have known Ismael de Tomelloso to collect facts, testimony, and interviews. He showed great interest and generously offered to help.

Among the papers that Luis had given us was a letter written by Fr. Félix Torres Olalla, a priest from Guadalajara who is ninety-two years old (born July 27th, 1917). This good man had been with Ismael in the first months of their mobilization in the provinces of Cuenca and Teruel. He was petitioning the bishop to start a canonization process. He was clearly a good witness of Ismael's saintly reputation. We located the priest, who exhibited good mental alertness and an excellent memory during our telephone conversation. He told us he was glad that someone was pushing the Cause because he was convinced that Ismael was a saint; he regularly visited Ismael's grave in Tomelloso to ask for favors, which he always received.

On December 26th, 2005 we interviewed Fr. Félix in Guadalajara. He is the only living witness who had lived with Ismael at the front. He told us that he remembered him. Above all, he told us that Ismael was "an angel," an expression that he repeated several times with emphasis. He was convinced of Ismael's saintliness and had written several letters to the bishops of Ciudad Real asking them to open the canonization process. He gave us a handwritten memoir that we transcribe here:

«On September 18th, 1937, the 1938 class was drafted. Both Ismael de Tomelloso, a Catholic Action youth, and myself, a seminarian at the time and now a priest, were conscripts in the same group.

We found ourselves in the Cuenca Seminary that had been converted into barracks for the militia. We both slept in the seminary chapel, it was the dormitory for our company, and undoubtedly both of us chose to sleep there because it was a sacred place, even if it had been totally defiled. To tell you the truth, even though I had never set eyes on this young man before, I was struck by his look, for his eyes revealed his inner world. Undoubtedly I had the

same reaction Aurora had when, months later, she saw him at the hospital, already sick: she was puzzled by the look of that quiet young man.

We were all afraid of being singled out as enemies of the ruling, belligerent leftist regime, and this made us prudent and discreet in our actions. We hid our status of practicing Christians. But I felt that this young man was different.

I spoke with and met not just Ismael but also his mates from Tomelloso who had been drafted in the same batch. They respected Ismael because he did not hide his religiosity.

Ismael, some of his mates and myself, nineteen boys in all, were assigned to Embid, a town about five miles from Cuenca. We were to join a Signals Company. They sent us back to Cuenca a few days later as we were no longer needed in Embid. We were frustrated, though unlike most of us Ismael was obedient and patient. The young man was different in both outward demeanor and state of mind. He did not enjoy the juvenile, ribald banter of his mates, and did not take part in it. He patiently kept his silence.

Ismael was assigned to the guard detail that watched the barrack gates. The sentries had orders to be very strict and prevent anyone from leaving the premises, by any means. We all wanted to escape from that cage where we were subjected to all kinds of detail such as sweeping, loading and unloading, cooking, cleaning, etc. One day when I wanted to go out the sentry, one of Ismael's mates ordered me to stop. We began a heated discussion that could have unintentionally ended in a brawl, but Ismael, who was watching us, stepped in and with his angelic ways and words that I assure you are engraved in my mind—he had the look of a saint—composed the quarrel.

Around the middle of November, 1937, a group of six, myself included, was taken to the Teruel front where we fought in the first line until February 6th, 1938.

Fear is an element of war. I was taken to the Miranda de Ebro Concentration Camp. One day the chaplain stopped by. I told him

that I was a seminarian and that I wanted to get out. The only thing that mattered to me was to leave, not to consort with the other prisoners, for had they found out that I was a Catholic or studying to be a priest, they could have stabbed me to death. We couldn't talk because our fellow inmates, who had lost the war and were now prisoners of the Nationalist Army, were capable of anything. For this reason, I told the chaplain that I was a seminarian and wanted to leave. They asked questions, I gave them the names of people who could vouch for me, and I was released.

Ismael never told anyone that he was Catholic, not when he was on the Republican side nor when he was taken prisoner by the Nationalists. He wasn't like me. I was hostile to the Republican camp and rooted for the Nationalists. He, on the other hand, rooted for neither. What is clear is that at no time did Ismael ever express political ideas of any color. He never mentioned that he belonged to a Catholic movement, something that would have helped him win release from the concentration camp.

When the war was over, I went back to the seminary. Later, as an army chaplain in Toledo, I met some nuns who were reading a book about Ismael. I then went to the Bishop's Office in Ciudad Real—this was in 1957—and told them that I had served with Ismael and that I wanted to pray, to say a novena, to ask him for a favor. I asked them to tell me what I should do. However, nothing was done at the time.»¹⁸⁸

Fr. Félix's alertness, his excellent memory, his calm and balanced demeanor despite his advanced age, made a big impression on us, but even more so on Jaime who said that what he had enjoyed most in the interview was the fact that Fr. Félix had emphasized Ismael's cheerfulness and congeniality, and had insisted that he had the look of "an angel."

Toward the end of January 2006, Luis Molinero reported that his sister María de la Cruz was very sick. She died on February

188. Memoir by Fr. Félix Torres Olalla. AGC-IT.

5th. We mourned the loss because her presence could have aided the Cause, but in the end her death compelled us to use whatever time we had as best we could, thus we began to search for other people who might give us new testimony in Tomelloso, Ciudad Real, and Saragossa.

In February we sent to Msgr. Manuel Ureña Pastor, Archbishop of Saragossa, the records we had collected; his office forwarded them for review to the Piarist Fr. José Luis Cepero Ezquerro who was the Delegate of the Causes of the Saints.

Fr. Leopoldo Lozano Rivas, a former assistant priest in the Church of the Asunción in Tomelloso, sent us two letters.

One was a handwritten, undated memoir from Sr. Felices Sánchez, the headmistress of the Colegio de la Milagrosa, the school where Ismael had learned his first prayers and the alphabet. She recounted some events in Ismael's life, including the night when he said goodbye to the Sisters who had taken refuge in the home of Miguel Montañés Rodero, then president of the Tomelloso Catholic Action, the night before he left for the front. This is what she has written:

«Ismael de Tomelloso. Anything we can say about our beloved Ismael is pale, because appreciating a spirit as full of God as was Ismael's is a difficult task. He began later than some other people, but he ran and climbed to the top very quickly.

I admired his spirit of service; one could see that that was his charisma. He was always willing to serve, to do whatever was needed, at Catholic Action or for anyone who needed help, as long as he could be useful to others.

How he enjoyed being of service! He did it willingly. He was always so dynamic, cheerful and content, and his trademark youthful spirit endeared him to all.

***His obedience and solid faith.** As a member of the C. A. board along with Miguel and Pedro, he always considered himself their faithful servant, Miguel's especially; whatever Miguel said, Ismael accepted unhesitatingly.*

Ismael had an artistic spirit, and his talents were very useful in the catechism classes we ran at the church; he had a wonderful way of teaching children. During his free time he designed and set the stage with unmatched flair.

We all loved Ismael!

He faithfully loved the parish church and all its activities.

His departure. *It affected me greatly. The night before he left for the front, he came to Miguel's house, where two of us sisters were housed (we had taken refuge there). He asked for a medal of the Virgin and sewed it himself between the fabric of his vest. I let him do it and his action, which I never forgot, became for me a subject of meditation.»¹⁸⁹*

The second letter was from Fr. Ángel Moros, a priest from Saragossa. He was planning a trip to Tomelloso for July 10th, 1980, a day trip with about two dozen youngsters. They would ride by bicycle from Saragossa to visit Ismael's grave, celebrate Mass in the parish church, and thank Ismael, his family and his friends for the vocation to the priesthood he had received through the example that Ismael had given with his life.

We continued our documentation-gathering work with tape recorder, pen and paper and camera. We visited anyone who could give us any information about Ismael.

We told the parish priest of the Asunción de Nuestra Señora Church in Tomelloso, Fr. Matías Rubio Noblejas, about our efforts. Although he was laconic and very cautious during our first meeting, he encouraged us to continue to gather information. As our conversations became more frequent, he gradually showed more interest, until one day he confessed that while studying at the Seminary he had taken a Spiritual Exercises course with Fr. José Ballesteros who had known Ismael, had assisted him in his final moments, and still had Ismael's words engraved in his mind.

Another visit we could not dispense with was to Fr. Rafael Torija

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de la Fuente who had been bishop-prior of Ciudad Real for 27 years (1976-2003). He is now bishop emeritus. During our first meeting he told us that he knew Ismael well, having read, learned and used his thoughts and his life example in the talks and homilies he had given while a seminary student and during his pastoral life. We told him about our meeting with Fr. Félix Torres Olalla. He replied that Fr. Félix had been his teacher at the Toledo Seminary and had told him about Ismael.

The reality of the legal process curbed our growing enthusiasm somewhat, for we were reminded that the canonization process could not be initiated in Ciudad Real; according to canon law, it had to be initiated in Saragossa, where Ismael had died. We were still of the opinion that Ciudad Real was the better venue, since there the memories of his childhood and the devotion to him were still strong, and his family and friends still living. We asked for a meeting with Msgr. Manuel Ureña Pastor, Archbishop of Saragossa.

In May 2006 two interesting meetings took place.

On the 12th we had a pleasant meeting with Fr. Rafael Torija and Fr. Félix Torres. In between the joy of those two priests meeting again



*Msgr. Rafael Torija de la Fuente,
Bishop Emeritus of Ciudad Real.*



Fr. Felix Torres Olalla.

after so many years, and recalling the times they had spent in the Toledo Seminary in the nineteen-forties, they talked about Ismael, their memory of him at the Seminary and his reputation of holiness. At the end of the meeting, they had become convinced that the first order of business was to collect testimonials from the individuals who had known him, and to publicize his life.

Four days later, on the 16th, we met with the bishop of Saragossa, Msgr. Manuel Ureña, who was a tireless worker. We had asked for a meeting; he called us informing us that since he was going to be in Madrid on the 16th, we could meet him there.

He had read the documents about Ismael that we had forwarded to him. We had the boldness of suggesting that he support our request of initiating the canonization process in the diocese of Ciudad Real, where the memories were strongest. He proposed to ask Fr. José Luis Cepero Ezquerro for advice on what steps were more suitable. We thanked him for his graciousness and enthusiasm, which increased ours. We attest here that Ismael's Cause owes much to Msgr. Ureña who very effectively supported it from the very first, along with his secretary Fr. Gonzalo Ruipérez.

Msgr. Ureña put us in touch with Fr. Juan Ramón Royo who was Director of the Diocesan Archive. We met several times with him in order to locate the files pertaining to Catholic Action. They contained books and reviews that we searched without finding anything significant. We also reviewed the documents held in the files of Fr. Francisco Izquierdo Molins who had been the diocesan Advisor to the Catholic Action Youth. Fr. Francisco had been present at the exhumation of Ismael's remains on May 13th, 1950; he had spoken to the Catholic Action kids urging them to imitate Ismael's heroic virtues, and had expressed his wish to see him on the altars one day.

As our work continued to mount and we had no experience in this endeavor, nor the means to continue such an important project, we asked for help from anyone willing to listen to us.

During this collaborative effort, we became persuaded that the

canonization process ought to be formally initiated by a group of lay people formed into a lay association of friends and relatives of Ismael, in order to rekindle—according to the Real Academia Española the word means *to poke the fire, to stir the brazier with the shovel looking for the embers* still hidden under the ashes of time—and collect facts and testimonials. With a lay association as the official promoter, anyone could join in the canonization effort from the very beginning and help spread devotion to this Servant of God.

When we explained our idea to Fr. Matías, he thought it was a good one. He asked us to draft a letter to the bishop of Ciudad Real, requesting the opening of the trial.

We met again with Fr. Matías on August 17th, 2006 to show him the letter and the Association by-laws. As we entered the rectory through the only open door (the portal was closed due to restoration work being done to the façade), we saw the altar dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus with St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, and the image of the Virgen Milagrosa on the left. It was the same image that Ismael had first contemplated when he was in elementary school.

On August 25th, 2006, we attended High Mass for the feast of the Virgen de las Viñas, patroness of Tomelloso. After the mass, we signed the letter officially requesting the bishop-prior of Ciudad Real to open the trial and formally institute the Association for the Beatification and Canonization Cause of Ismael de Tomelloso. That same afternoon, we met Mother Asunción, the Abbess of the Conceptionist Sisters of Manzanares who had known Ismael and who had asked us to sign the document as well.¹⁹⁰

190. It was signed by Olga Alberca Pedroche, Fr. Valentín Arteaga y Sánchez-Guijaldo, Blas Camacho Zancada, Alejandro Cañas López, Tomás Casero Becerra, Asunción González Burillo, Nicolás González Burillo, José López Martínez, Leopoldo Lozano Rivas, Luis Molinero Novillo, Jaime Quevedo Soubriet, Rogelio Redondo Paulet, Rosario Ruiz Lomas, Ana María Santamaría, Msgr. Rafael Torija de la Fuente, Félix Torres Olalla, and Inés Villacañas.

The following day in Madrid, we paid a visit to Fr. Luis Carrión Sastre, a priest in the Opus Dei Prelature, who had been diagnosed with a serious illness. We told him about the Cause and showed him a private devotional tract. As he was slowly reading each thought out loud, he was meditating them. Finally, he said to us: “This boy is a saint. What’s his name?” When we told him his name, he began to say it out loud in a Hebrew accent, Hebrew being one of the languages he writes and speaks well: “*“ISH MA EL,”*” which means “Man of God.”» We asked him to write the name in Hebrew and used it as illustration in the short biography we forwarded to Rome. When we visited him again on June 2nd, 2009, he was writing a book about the women in the Gospels. He was surrounded by sheets of paper handwritten with his fountain pen. We asked him to write again the name Ismael. He then embarked on a conversation about the People of Israel and the canonization process of Queen Isabel the Catholic. For this reason, he added these two names and their meaning, which we have included in this biography, all in his handwriting.

He then explained to us what Sacred History says about Ishmael. He was the son of Abraham and Hagar and the Father of the Moslems who recognize Jesus as an important prophet and His mother Mary, and worship the same God that we worship. He made some comments about the Jewish origin of the name, and about Ismael’s last names Molinero and Novillo. We were not surprised, because in Tomelloso, and La Mancha in general, all three religions and cultures—Jewish, Christian and Moslem—have cohabited for centuries. As to the canonization process of Queen Isabel, it looked as if the road to truth, deviated for so many years, was beginning to be straightened out, though there was still some resistance. The good priest concluded by reminding us that the Jewish People are the depositories of the Revealed Word and of the Promise of the Old Testament, which was fulfilled in the New.

In early September 2006, Fr. Félix Torres Olalla called to in-

יִשְׂמָאֵל
ISMAEL

HOMBRE DE DIOS

אִשָּׁה
EL ALI
ISABEL

MUJER DE DIOS

יִשְׂרָאֵל
ISRAEL
PUEBLO DE DIOS

Luis Carrión Sastre

2 de JUNIO DE 2009

Hebrew names transcribed to Spanish, with their meaning, by Fr. Luis Carrión Sastre.

form us that he had received a letter from a friend, Colonel Luis Alcalá-Galiano who had sent him a play written in 1954 by a priest, Manuel Liñán Carrera. The colonel had found the script in the church of San Pedro de Alcántara in Marbella, Málaga. Entitled *El miliciano de Amaponte. Joven modelo de Acción Católica*, it told the story of Ismael de Tomelloso, whose name had been changed to Miguel de Amaponte.¹⁹¹

On September 12th, 2006 we called Fr. Ángel Moros Álvarez whom we hadn't seen since summer; we were told that he had died on the 10th. It was another hard hit, together with the passing of Sr. María de la Cruz.

We were able to locate Mari Luz Frauca Cacho, the nurse who had tended to Fr. Ángel in the days just before his passing. She told us some details about his life: the joy and comfort that he received even when suffering from excruciating pain, each time he looked at the picture of Ismael that he kept above his bed. He died holding the image in his hands. She also gave us the itinerary of the bicycle trip the good priest had made in 1980 when he had visited Ismael's grave and told us that his friend Fr. Domingo Legua, currently the Episcopal Vicar in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, had tagged along.

On November 4th, Bishop-Prior Msgr. Algora signed the decree approving the Association by-laws. On November 15th he provisionally appointed Fr. Bernardo Torres Escudero and Fr. José Martín Sánchez de León to the positions of, respectively, Judge and Notary. They were to receive the testimony of the elderly witnesses who had known Ismael.

The Association's constituent assembly was held on December 17th, 2006 at the Colegio de la Milagrosa. Seventy-eight people attended, including Bishop Emeritus Rafael Torija de la Fuente. One resolution, among many, called for requesting registration of the Association in the Registry of the Justice Ministry in order to make it legally effective under state law. The advice of Fr. José

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Luis Cepero, to petition the archbishop of Saragossa to grant an extension of jurisdiction to the diocese of Ciudad Real in order to initiate the Cause, was accepted; Fr. Valentín Arteaga was appointed Postulator; and the executive board was appointed.¹⁹²

3. THIRD ROUND OF INQUIRIES WITH A SURPRISE.

In early 2007, the Judge Delegate and the Notary took the statements of the oldest living witnesses. Since the process called for writing a short biography to be sent to Rome together with the petition for the “Nihil Obstat,” the Association entrusted the Delegate of the Causes of the Saints, Fr. Francisco del Campo Real, with the task, but since he was very busy handling the causes of the Civil War martyrs, who were going to be beatified on October



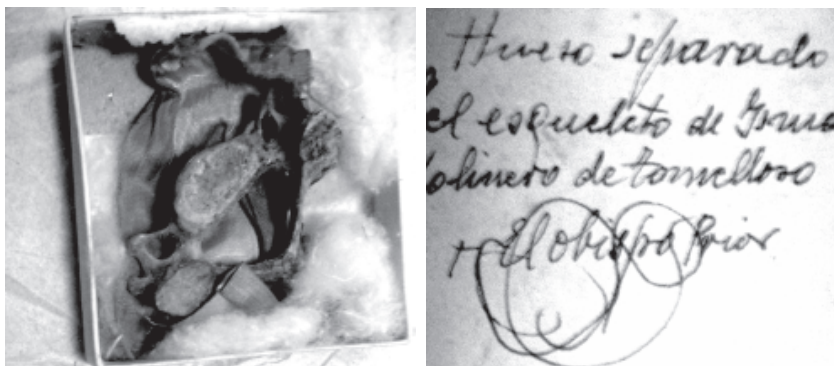
The Association's Constituent Assembly.

192. The executive board members were Olga Alberca Pedroche, Tomás Casero Becerra, Natividad Cepeda Serrano, Miguel Huertas Torres, Dionisio Lara Porras, Luis Molinero Novillo, Joaquín Navajas Jiménez, Fr. Matías Rubio Noblejas, Rosario Ruiz Lomas, Faustino Sánchez Navarro, and Rocío Torres Márquez. Jaime Quevedo Soubriet was elected secretary and Blas Camacho Zancada president.

28th, he could not begin the biography until the end of the year and it would take him several months to complete it.

On August 3rd, we took on the task of writing the short biography for Rome. We delivered the draft to the Bishop's Office of Ciudad Real on September 27th, 2007, the feast of St. Vincent de Paul. As soon as we reached the bishopric, the Judge Delegate Fr. Bernardo Torres told us he wanted to show us something they had found in the safe. The safe was opened before him and three more priests; a very old small package wrapped in white paper was extracted. It had been inscribed and signed by Bishop-Prior Emeterio Echevarría, who had written in his own hand: "*Contains a rib of Ismael de Tomelloso.*" When they unwrapped the paper and opened the box, they found a piece of paper, also in the bishop-prior's hand and with his signature, which read: "*Bone taken from the skeleton of Ismael Molinero de Tomelloso.*" We were startled. When Ismael's remains had been transferred from Saragossa to Tomelloso in 1950, Bishop Echevarría had ordered the removal of a rib to hold as a relic. It's an affecting, devotional tradition that the Church reserves for its children who die in a halo of saintliness.

Reassured, we asked the judge for permission to mention the finding of Ismael's rib in the short biography that we completed on October 12th, 2007.



Box containing a rib from Ismael's remains, and the signature of Bishop-Prior Msgr. Emeterio Echevarría.

On December 28th, 2007 the bishop-prior signed the “Nihil Obstat” petition addressed to the Holy See; it was mailed on January 2nd, 2008.

In January and February 2008 we traveled to Saragossa to meet with Msgr. Manuel Ureña. Thanks to his very efficient secretary, Fr. Gonzalo Ruipérez, we met with several older priests who might give us information about Ismael and Catholic Action. We spoke with Fr. José Luis Cepero, Delegate of the Causes of the Saints, with the diocesan archiver Fr. Juan Ramón Royo who was in charge of all the historical documents relating to Catholic Action, and with Fr. Mariano Mainar Elpuente who had been the postulator in the canonization cause of St. Genoveva Torres Morales and was currently postulator for the canonization of the Martyrs of Aragon. His generosity, experience and wise advice have been very useful.

Luis Molinero Novillo, a brother of Ismael’s, is an extraordinary contributor to our efforts, and deserves to be mentioned. Although he is eighty-six years old, his efficient activity, unusual for his age, has rejuvenated him. He works with so much hope, that once in a while he would say: “The only thing I ask of God is to allow me to see Ismael’s process of canonization started.”

On March 14th, 2008 we went to the Basilica de la Milagrosa in Madrid. It was the Friday of Sorrows and we were surprised to learn that the Vincentian Fr. Fernando Espiago was celebrating the feast of St. Louise de Marillac, which falls on the 15th. When Mass ended, he explained that since the 19th was St. Joseph’s and Wednesday of Easter Week as well, the Church had moved St. Joseph’s feast to Saturday the 15th, and for this reason St. Louise de Marillac’s had been moved to the 14th.

Although we had never discussed Ismael’s canonization cause with him, we now told him, in broad strokes, that Ismael had been schooled by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. He interrupted us to say that he had preached Spiritual Exercises in Tomelloso and knew about Ismael’s life and had read his biogra-

phy. He showed us a print that bore in the upper left corner, a relic of Ismael's coffin.

At twelve noon the Judge Delegate called to inform us that he had just received the "Nihil Obstat" from Rome; this meant that the process of beatification and canonization of the Servant of God could begin.¹⁹³

We were so delighted that we thanked God and also St. Louise de Marillac. We immediately gave Fr. Matías and Luis Molinero the good news. We broached the topic to Luis by telling him that now he could walk to Heaven with his brother Ismael, because the prayer he had made to the Lord had been fulfilled. His witty, quick reply was: "Jokes aside, now I'm asking Him to allow me to see him made a saint."

The following day was March 16th, Holy Saturday. At the Easter Week Proclamation we had the opportunity of proclaiming the good news in the Church of the Asunción de Nuestra Señora in Tomelloso, which was gladly received.

The bishop-prior appointed the permanent Ecclesiastical Tribunal and the History and Theology Committees.¹⁹⁴ On May 5th, 2008,

193. We have transcribed the original letter written in Latin:

«Romae, die 6 Martii A.D. 2008.

Exc.mo ac Rev.mo Domino, D. Antonio Algora Hernando. Episcopo Civitatis Regalensis.

Litteris, die 28 mensis Decembris anni Domini 2007 editis, Excellentia Tua ab hac Congregatione de Causis Sanctorum quaeris utrum, ex parte Sanctae Sedis, aliquid absit Causae Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Ismaelis De Tomelloso, Christifidelis Laici, qui vita anno Domini 1938 functus est.

Re explorata, placet mihi Excellentiam Tuam certiore reddere, ex parte Sanctae Sedis, NIHIL OBSTARE quominus Causa Beatificationis et Canonizationis eiusdem Servi Dei Ismaelis De Tomelloso peragi possit, servatos "Normis servandis in Inquisitionibus ab Episcopis faciendis in Causis Sanctorum", die 7 mensis Februarii anno 1983 ab eadem Congregatione.

Excellentiae Tuae addictissimus in Domino,

Iosepheus Card. Saraiva Martins. Praefectus».

194. Tribunal: Presiding Judge, Bernardo Torres Escudero; Promoter of Justice, Francisco Javier Sanzol Díez; Acting Notary, José Martín Sánchez de León.

a Monday—it was the seventieth anniversary of Ismael’s death—at five in the afternoon, the solemn opening session of the Canonization Trial took place in the Bishop’s Palace in Ciudad Real. It was presided by Bishop-Prior Msgr. Antonio Algora Hernando. The hall was crowded with attendees from many towns from the province, in particular from Tomelloso, Ciudad Real, and Saragossa.

The document received from the Holy See was read out loud and the members of the Tribunal, the Postulator and the Assistant Postulator all took their oath.

The various phases of the Trial were explained. We closed the



The Trial’s opening session, headed by Bishop-Prior Msgr. Antonio Algora Hernando. Sitting, from left to right: Fr. Francisco del Campo Real, Fr. Bernardo Torres Escudero, Msgr. Rafael Torija de la Fuente, Msgr. Antonio Algora Hernando. Standing to speak: The Postulator Fr. Valentín Arteaga, at his right Fr. Miguel Esparza and at his left Fr. José Martín Sánchez de León and Fr. Matías Rubio Noblejas. Also present were Fr. José Luis Cepero, Delegate of the Causes of the Saints for the archdiocese of Saragossa.

Historical Committee: President, Francisco del Campo Real; Mariano Mainar Elpuente and Luis Núñez Burillo. Committee of Theological Censors: Msgr. Joaquín Martín Abad and Lorenzo Trujillo Díaz.

session in Tomelloso with a thanksgiving Mass and remembered the Servant of God in the seventieth anniversary of his death.

Now the testimonials that had been collected provisionally had to be officially ratified, and new ones collected. In early July, the Tribunal moved to Saragossa to hear more witnesses, something that would have seemed unthinkable just two weeks earlier. From these new witnesses we learned the names of some priests and Catholic Action members who in turn testified about Ismael's reputation of saintliness, the sites where Ismael had been a prisoner, the hospital where he had died, and his grave.

We again received the generous assistance of Archbishop Msgr. Manuel Ureña, his secretary Fr. Gonzalo Ruipérez, the diocesan archiver Fr. Juan Manuel Royo, Fr. Mariano Mainar and Fr. José Luis Cepero.

Also in July, new witnesses were heard and their testimony ratified, both in Tomelloso and Ciudad Real. In the course of the summer new data, news and incidents were collected and added to the supporting documentation for the Cause.

4. WE ARE NOT ALONE.

Even if the best news we have received so far is the "Nihil Obstat" from Rome that officially authorized the opening of the canonization cause, subsequent events clearly show that we are not alone. It is befitting to recount some of these free, extraordinary acts of assistance and to thank all the individuals who are helping the cause of Ismael de Tomelloso.

4.1. This year, the earliest document about Ismael's life was found: it is an article published in the Dominican mystical studies review *La Vida Sobrenatural* (Year XXII, Vol. XLII, Nos. 257-258, May-June 1942) founded by Br. Juan G. Arintero, O.P. Thanks to the diligence and generosity of Br. Ricardo de Luis Carballada, director of Editorial San Esteban, the publishing house of the Dominican Convent of San Esteban in Salamanca, we have an original copy that he kindly gave us.

The article was written by a diocesan priest, Fr. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez,¹⁹⁵ who sent it from Tucumán (Argentina). It was published in the section *Examples of Supernatural Life* under the title *Ismael Molinero Novillo, El Miliciano Santo*.

We think it fitting to reproduce the introduction in full:

«My dearest reader, neither my pen nor my madness play a part in the pages I am offering you. I only have the honor, which has not diminished, of presenting them to you. They bring you the summarized history of the last days, what am I saying, of the first days, of a brave, heroic young Catholic Action man, Ismael Molinero, secretary of the Catholic Action Center of Tomelloso, Ciudad Real, Spain. An anonymous hero, like so many others who offered their lives in sacrifice, a pleasing victim in the eyes of God, during that terrible war.

I offer these facts to you without comment, just as I received them from the already blurred pages written in pencil by the military chaplain of the concentration camp who ministered to Ismael in his last moments. What should I say about this find?

Just one word of introduction. It was a morning in March, about a month and a half after the Red forces had been routed from Barcelona. I had just finished blessing the crucifixes that were about to be hung again in the School of the Theresian Mothers, an order founded by Fr. Enrique de Ossó [now canonized] located in Rambla

195. Fr. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, born in Macotera (Salamanca), a diocesan priest, was rector of the Seminario Menor of Toledo, the Seminario Metropolitano of Seville, and the Seminario Mayor of Salamanca. He moved to Argentina where he was active in Tucumán as Advisor to the Catholic Action Youth and to the Young Catholic Workers Diocesan Committee. When he returned to Spain, he was appointed pastor of the Church of San Cristobal in Madrid's Parque Móvil. He was also secretary general of the Christian *cursillos*. Fr. Clemente wrote several books, including *El Sacramento del Orden* [The Sacrament of Ordination], *Del catecismo al seminario* [From Catechism to Seminary], *Joven, Cristo te llama* [Young Man, God Is Calling You], and *¿Otra carmelita santa?* [Another Carmelite Saint?].

de Cataluña at the corner with Diagonal. After giving a pep talk to the student girls, one of the older ones said that she needed to talk to me. She came to the Seminary in the afternoon and told me in great detail how she had met and tended to Ismael. In the end, she gave me some notes that the hospital chaplain had jotted down, and some that were hers, and two letters that Ismael had written to his parents on his death bed, asking me if I could put those papers in order, give some shape to those exemplary facts and publish a short biography of that hero, that might serve as a stimulus and an incentive to the Catholic Action youths.

However, as they say, man proposes, God disposes. The vow of obedience cast me into the ocean and I ended up in Tucumán where the difficulties I encountered broke all communication with the Mother Country and upset my plans.

Today, driven by admiration and affection for the Catholic Action youngsters—which they deserve, especially the local ones under my care in Tucumán—I decided to dust off those old papers, because I believe they can help our youngsters and be of comfort to the C.A. Advisors.»¹⁹⁶

Fr. Clemente's brother, Juan Sánchez Sánchez, also a diocesan priest, currently lives in Majadahonda (Madrid). On December 22nd he turned ninety. He is the former Superior of the Saragossa Seminary; in Rome, where he lived for more than twenty years, he was postulator for more than seventy beatification and canonization causes, including those of St. John of Avila, the patron saint of the Spanish secular clergy, St. John of Ribera, patriarch of Antioch and archbishop of Valencia, and St. Theresa of Jesus de Jornet e Ibars, the founder of the Little Sisters of the Elderly Homeless and patroness of the elderly.*

On October 12th, 2009, just as we were finalizing this biogra-

196. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez, 218.

* Fr. Clemente and Fr. Juan have three sisters who are nuns. One of them, Sister Teresa, lives in Alba de Tormes.

phy, Fr. Juan Sánchez told us with respect to Ismael's cause, "*as far as I know, it's one of the clearest cases I've seen in my years as postulator; his heroic virtues will bring many souls to God, especially to the priesthood.*"



Fr. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez with his siblings: From left to right, Fr. Juan, a diocesan priest; Sr. Teresa, a Daughter of Charity; Sr. Maria Cruz, a Dominican; Fr. Clemente, and Sr. Mónica, a Disciple.



Fr. Juan Sánchez Sánchez.

4.2. Another unusual event about Fr. Florentino del Valle, whose surprising presence we partially recounted in the preamble, occurred. To better illustrate it, we are going to mention some additional details about our visit to him in Villagarcía de Campos.

When, on May 19th, 2009, we asked him over the phone if we could come visit, he replied good-humoredly: *«If you're coming to see me, fine. They keep me here; if you want to come, I'm not leaving. I'll be 102 this September 27th.»* We reminded him that that was also the feast of St. Vincent de Paul, who had been a good “friend” of Ismael, and he confirmed that with a cheerful, steady voice. Remembering that unfortunately, Sr. María de la Cruz Molinero and Fr. Ángel Moros were no longer with us, we visited him the following day.

We arrived at the Jesuit retirement home located in Villagarcía de Campos “muy de mañanita” [very early in the morning], as Fr. Florentino likes to write. The brother in charge of the door took us to his room. He was not there and we looked for him in the dining hall, where he invited us to coffee. Later, we walked the sixty feet from the dining hall to his room, sat down and exchanged a lively, animated conversation with him for two hours. In closing, he said:



Fr. Florentino del Valle, June 19th, 2009.

«I learned—if I can call it that—about Ismael from Fr. Martín Brugarola who founded with me Fomento Social, a social promotion group. He knew about the Saragossa hospital where Ismael had been a prisoner; in particular, he had talked at length with Aurora, the nurse, who had given him a lot of information about Ismael. Fr. Brugarola put all the information at my complete disposal.

Fr. José Julio Martínez of the Mensajero thought that Ismael's life could be part of a book series on the lives of young people.»

Later, we asked him:

— *«Are you devoted to Ismael?*

— *Yes.*

— *Do you pray to him?*

— *I do. I put myself in contact with him, with his figure.*

— *Do you talk to him?*

— *I tell him what rises inside me, the topic, let's say, that worries me. And I make contact. Other times, it's more like a kind of rush. You talk as if...»*

We ignore how he was able to find Luis Molinero Novillo, Ismael's brother who was in the army in Madrid at the time, so that he could accompany him to Tomelloso, but Fr. Florentino visited Ismael's home, spoke with his father, his brothers and sisters and his friends, in particular with Miguel Montañés the Tomelloso Catholic Action president, with Pedro Cuesta the secretary, with José Antonio Martínez, Alfredo Salinas, Santos Burillo, etc. He met all of them several times, and to them he dedicated the biography *Ismael de Tomelloso. La lección de su silencio*.¹⁹⁷ His first visit to Tomelloso lasted three days, according to Luis Molinero who took advantage of the priest's research to ask for a few days'

197. The dedication reads: "To Miguel, Pedro, José Antonio... whose healthy friendship won Ismael to Christ; and of whom Ismael had grateful memories when he left this world."

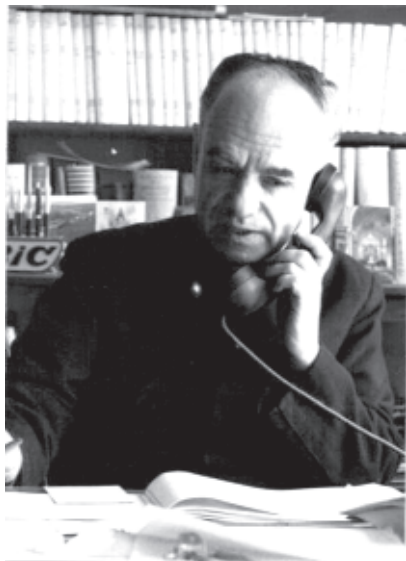
leave and visit his fiancée. Fr. Florentino returned several times to Tomelloso on his own, and told us:

- *«Now I had all the information from the Tomelloso folk.*
- *Ah! you were the one who did the research.*
- *Of course.*
- *And there you asked...*
- *I inquired at the Shelter, I asked the nuns of the Tomelloso Shelter. I inquired with Montañés, Cuesta, Luis, his brother...*
- *You spoke with the nuns, with Ismael's brothers and sisters, with the bishop of Ciudad Real.*
- *I did.»*

He went several times to Ciudad Real to meet Bishop-Prior Emeterio Echevarría, and in Saragossa he talked to the archbishop and to Fr. Ignacio Bruna who had been the concentration camp chaplain and the parish priest of San Juan de Mozarrifar, where Ismael had been a prisoner. He also spoke with Fr. Francisco Izquierdo Molins, the Catholic Action Advisor and a man of authority, who confirmed Ismael de Tomelloso's reputation of holi-

ness and the frequent visits and pilgrimages of the Catholic Action youths to Ismael's grave. All of this, to say that Fr. Florentino del Valle had made extensive inquiries about Ismael's life, with the people and in the places of his childhood, at the front, in the concentration camp, and at the hospital where he died.

An article from the April 18th, 1950 issue of the Ciudad



*Fr. Florentino del Valle López
as a young man.*

Real *Diario Lanza* reported the speech that Fr. Florentino gave at the Cervantes Theater of Tomelloso, during the preparations to transfer Ismael's mortal remains to his home town: «*He modestly told the Catholic Action youths that his only merit had been to publicize the memory of Ismael, and he had been well rewarded because he was already known as the author of that booklet in the places he visited, and Ismael's name preceded him everywhere. With great eloquence, he explained the three lessons to be drawn from a life that was as short as it was fertile: cheerfulness and good humor; silence, and pain, magnificent lessons that you should take to heed because, what wouldn't Ismael have done if he had had another Ismael before him?*»¹⁹⁸

This is the substance of our meetings with Fr. Florentino del Valle, who kept us good company and stimulated our work on behalf of the canonization cause.

Still, as we were revising the second edition, we couldn't omit mentioning that when we received the first proofs from the publisher we went to Villagarcía de Campos to show them to him. Holding the proofs in his two hands and leafing through them, Fr. Florentino visibly objected when he saw the two photographs we had taken on May 19th and June 19th, 2009. This happened the morning of October 31st.

The excellent male nurse that ministered to him, Br. Primitivo de Miguel, told us that Fr. del Valle was weak, and we indeed found him so in that short visit.

On November 6th, we were in Tomelloso at a meeting of the Association's executive board when Jaime Quevedo Soubriet brought in several boxes with copies of the biography fresh from the press. Around nine at night, as we were leafing through it and commenting it, we received phone calls from Fr. Fernando López Combarros, the director of the Villagarcía de Campos Rest Home, and from Br. Primitivo de Miguel, informing us that Fr. Florentino del Valle had just died.

198. AGC-IT.

The following Sunday, November 8th, we escorted Fr. Florentino to his funeral and his burial. We mourned this holy priest who had gone to heaven after offering his life to the Church and the Company of Jesus. He had been and would always be an essential reference point in the canonization cause of the Servant of God Ismael de Tomelloso.

4.3. Fr. Alberto Martín de Bernardo wrote a biography of Ismael entitled *El miliciano que murió como un santo. Vida heroica de Ismael Molinero Novillo*.¹⁹⁹ Although he was inspired by the article of Fr. Clemente Sánchez Sánchez which had appeared in *La Vida Sobrenatural*, he wrote it after reading Fr. Florentino's biography, as he himself confessed in chapter XI, p. 135 ff. of his book. He had spoken with Fr. Ignacio Bruna, the nurse Aurora Álvarez, Ismael's family and friends from Tomelloso, and the priests and Catholic Action youths who had known him, all of whom had con-



The Holy Father Paul VI receives Fr. Alberto Martín de Bernardo, 1970.

199. AGC-IT.

firmed the contents of the previous biography and given him supplementary information.

Driven by a missionary vocation, Fr. Alberto went to Cuba and, later, to San Juan, Puerto Rico where he died. He was chaplain in the convent of the Little Sisters of the Elderly Homeless, whom he assisted spiritually along with the elderly in their care; he was also chaplain of the Oso Blanco prison. The Sisters spoke of his affection for the elderly guests and his good actions for the prisoners. He used to ask the Sisters to prepare good meals for their guests and special treats to take to the prisoners. And he invited them to pray the Way of the Cross together with the prisoners whose respect, affection and gratitude he had won. Ismael was pivotal in Fr. Alberto's vocation to the priesthood and in his devotion to the homeless elderly and the prisoners.

4.4. Fr. Manuel Liñán Carrera, the ninety-three-year old author (he was born March 3rd, 1916) of the play *El Miliciano de Amaponte*, was for over twenty years the chaplain at Our Lady de las Flores Retirement Home in Álora, Málaga which is run by the Franciscan Hospitaler Sisters of Jesus of Nazareth. When we visited him, we verified that indeed he had an excellent memory and was skilled at the computer, on which he still writes books with exceptional skill.

He told us that Ismael is very present to him in the care and attention he pays to the aged and the sick under his spiritual care, a position to which the bishop of Málaga had appointed him. His only complaint was that his limited movements also limit his ability to be useful.

He learned about Ismael de Tomelloso when an Asturian lady from the Spanish community of Oporto gave him as a birthday gift a copy of Fr. del Valle's biography.

He was so impressed by Ismael's life that in 1954 he wrote *El miliciano de Amaponte. Joven modelo de Acción Católica*. The play was first performed by Spanish tourists in Portugal; later, by

the seminarians of the Redemptorist Seminary in Oporto. He translated it into Portuguese and was a success. In 1960 he added two female characters but strangely, did not publish the revised play until 2005, unaware that the Cause had been initiated. However, he has kept up a regular correspondence about the play with bishops, clergy and nuns, which he documented by delivering some of that correspondence to us (AGC-IT).

We walked with him to the chapel where he was celebrating Mass at noon. Riding in his wheelchair, he kept telling us about the influence that Ismael had had on his life. As he walked into the chapel with the aid of a walker, he slowly and with visible effort reached the altar. We were impressed by the authority he projected and the strong, clear voice with which he read the sacred texts. He sat the whole time except for the consecration.

4.5. We followed the itinerary, the texts and the prayers given us by Mari Luz Frauca, Fr. Ángel Moros' nurse, of the 1980 bicycle ride to Tomelloso²⁰⁰ that Fr. Ángel had made as a thanksgiving



Fr. Manuel Liñán Carrera recently and when he published El Miliciano de Amaponte.

200. AGC-IT.

for the vocation he had received through Ismael. We also located the Episcopal Vicar of Santo Domingo, Fr. Domingo Legua, who had accompanied him on the trip. He sent us an e-mail from the Dominican Republic in which he explained the vocation of both priests. It is an interesting letter, and we transcribe it here.

«Domingo and Eusebia, Ángel's parents, married very young. They were born in a village on the banks of the Jalón River in the province of Saragossa. They worked for the railway as grade crossing keepers at a National Highway II crossing located in Jubera, a small town in Soria, past Medinaceli going from Madrid to Saragossa.

Their house was a modest railway cottage, just a few yards from the highway and the tracks. It was whitewashed, clean, and surrounded by flowers, the poverty hidden by beauty and cleanliness. The train schedule at the time was unpredictable, the ten o'clock train could very well come at two o'clock, at four or even later, and the keeper had to be ready to shut the crossing gate in order to avoid an accident.

The couple already had two children, Pepe and Antonia, and a third was on the way. The wife, by her reckoning, was expected to give birth in mid-July. The family was somewhat anxious, made suspicious by the unusual movement of military vehicles, both on the road and by train, that passed before their eyes and which they could not ignore. Given the uncertainty of the situation, giving birth at home was not a good idea. To avoid any danger, they decided to move to the mountain with the two children. A few days later Ángel was born: it was July 15th, 1936. He was born in a cattle barn. Three days later, on July 18th, the Civil War broke out, so the child did not make his entrance at an ideal time, still... Given the situation, and believing that the conflict would be a long one, Eusebia returned home with the three children to wait there for her husband. They resumed their usual life, which although harsh, was the life that had been meted out to them. The father

worked on the railroad, installing railway ties, sometimes several miles from home. He was man of character and a hard worker.

In addition to the household chores and the children's education, Eusebia also had to lower and raise the crossing gate.

Ángel's childhood was poor but uneventful. He spent the first years of his life with his mother, a quiet, calm, prudent woman not given to gossip, and by osmosis learned from her the language of silence that was customary in their region at the time, and which Ángel absorbed deeply. With his mother, day after day he would watch the endless string of train cars ride over the iron skeleton. He would count the cars; there was a movement of war trucks and tanks on the highway and by train. The airplanes startled and frightened him. Eusebia would share the little they had with whomever stopped by their tiny home.

There is an anecdote about Ángel's childhood that he told us many years later, about a walking stick. We always used to see behind the entrance door to his house, a walking stick. Sometimes he would set it in a visible place in the dining room. One day, during the homily, after reading the Gospel, he picked up the walking stick that no one had seen him bring in. Holding it, he told us the story. One day when he was a small child, a beggar had stopped by their home to ask for food. Ángel's mother asked him to wait awhile because soon dinner would be ready. After setting the table, she called the beggar in, but he was unwilling to come into the house. His mother replied that the only way he could get some food was to come in and eat at the table with the family. After dinner, as he was getting ready to leave, the beggar, wanting to thank her for the meal and the kind treatment, said: Ma'am, I have nothing to offer you for what you've done for me. I'm giving you my only possession: my walking stick. That stick stayed with Ángel throughout his childhood: he played with it, and it came to be a sign (a life sacrament for him) of his mother's love for God and for our neighbor.

The family was relocated from the Jubera cottage to one at

Morata de Jalón, where Ángel went to school. He had excellent grades, and everything indicated that he was a promising, responsible child who applied himself and worked hard. Given his intelligence and quick mind, his parents had placed all their hopes in their youngest child, for it seemed that finally things were getting better and the future was going to be more promising. Still, the parents were not aware that after reading the biography of a young man from La Mancha, Ismael de Tomelloso, written by the Jesuit Florentino del Valle, a book that Jesús Marín Sierra had given him as present, Ángel was having a change of heart.

In the nineteen sixties, a book was published that soon became a best seller. I am referring to Sanz Vila and José Luis Martín Descalzo's ¿Por qué me hice sacerdote? [Why Did I Become a Priest?]. The authors had interviewed well-known priests and asked them about the origin of their vocation. It was after reading this book that, as an eighteen-year old in the midst of searching, I had asked Fr. Ángel Moros Álvarez, a recently ordained priest from the archdiocese of Saragossa who had been assigned to my church in Andorra de Teruel, in 1965, Ángel, why did you become a priest? Who influenced you? To whom do you owe your vocation? With great self-assuredness and composure, convinced of what he was saying, he told me about Ismael and the impact that reading his biography had made on his life.

Ángel's vocation was a mature, adult vocation. It was the word engraved in the heart of those who choose the seminary past their teenage years. When he was eighteen he had read Ismael's biography²⁰¹ and that had changed his life plan. Coming from a railroad family, Ángel had started working for the National Railways

201. Fr. Florentino del Valle's biography of Ismael was given to Fr. Ángel by Jesús Marín Sierra, a native of Saragossa and a Catholic Action Youth member who currently resides in Barcelona. Eighty-three years old, he has an excellent memory, still writes, and published his most recent article on Ismael in the June 2009 issue of the review *El Pilar*. He used to spend his summer vacations with his grandparents in Morata de Jalón, where he had organized a lending library.

too. The book about the life of the Manchego boy, the Tomelloso Catholic Action kid, had such a powerful influence on him that he reread it several times and it helped him in a decisive, definitive way, to understand and cement his vocation. With the composure that comes from saying what one truly believes in, every time Fr. Ángel was asked about his vocation he always mentioned Ismael de Tomelloso. In the forty-three years of my friendship with Ángel, I always saw above the headboard in his room, a picture of Ismael de Tomelloso. He gave the picture, a precious bequest for him, to Mari Luz Frauca Cacho²⁰² who heroically assisted him, day and night, in the last four years of the cruel illness, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, that took his life. Ángel was a marvelous priest. He was a decisive influence on my vocation to be a priest. Tied to him by a deep friendship for over four decades, he was my teacher and my witness of the love for God and for one's neighbor and of an immense love for the Church, so much so that he became for me a standard without which I would have been lost.

In the early nineteen-eighties, a few years after working as a priest in the Church of the Presentación de la Virgen in the Bozada section of Saragossa, like someone who has a debt pending, Fr. Ángel organized a pilgrimage on bicycle from Saragossa, passing through Morata de Jalón where he had lived as a teenager and a young man and where his mysterious, deep friendship with Ismael had been forged, to Tomelloso, the La Mancha town that had given birth to Ismael.

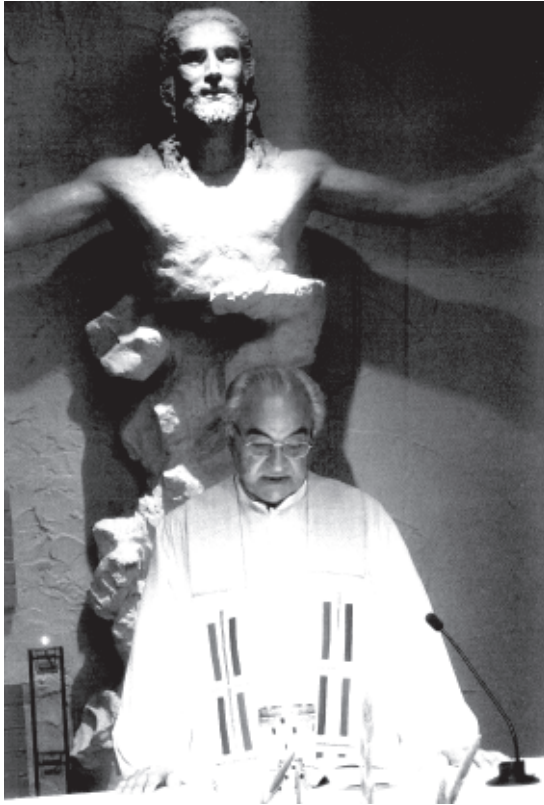
Myself and a group of young people from his church, some young men who were aspiring to the priesthood and a small group of

It was there that he met Ángel Moros, younger than him, and a fan of reading. Because he had been impressed by Fr. Florentino's book he gave it as a present to Ángel and confirmed to us that as soon as he finished reading it, Ángel told him that what Ismael had been unable to achieve—become a minister of Christ—he would be in his stead.

202. Photograph donated by Mari Luz Frauca to the Association for the Canonization Cause of Ismael de Tomelloso.

priests cheerfully joined Ángel's thanksgiving pilgrimage and escorted him to Tomelloso. There, in the Church where Ismael had prayed regularly and before a large number of parishioners, he publicly gave thanks to God and to Ismael for his vocation to the priesthood.»²⁰³

Three coincidences, three lessons at the very least, picked up from the letters, correspond to three virtues that both Ángel and Ismael learned and practiced in their respective families: the virtues of poverty and of altruism, symbolized by the beggar's stick



Fr. Ángel Moros Álvarez.

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and the offering of the best child to God, and the virtue of silence inherited from their respective mothers and lived heroically amidst the terrible physical pain that plagued both of them.

4.6. Two of Ismael's good women friends who knew him as a child or a teenager, kindly allowed us to have conversations with them and authorized us to faithfully transcribe them:

— Mother Asunción González Burillo, Abbess of the Cloistered Conceptionist Nuns of Manzanares, Ciudad Real, who was born in Tomelloso in 1929:

«I'm glad that Ismael's canonization process is under way. He is a saint. We saw him often in my parents' home and I owe my vocation to him. He was a cheerful lad, with a lot of charisma. He made a nice impression on people.

I remember when he used to go to the Shelter and got all the old people excited; he would feed them... and my father followed in



Mother Asunción González Burillo greeting Fr. Rafael Torija. In the back, at left, the Asunción parish priest Fr. Matías Rubio; at right, Fr. José Luis Albiñana. January 31, 2009.

his steps. He used to feed an old man who was all bent out of shape... My father would bring a record player from home and Ismael would dance with the old guests and the old ladies. He liked the bandurria and guitar a lot. He played and sung quite well. He radiated peace and good cheer. Not like someone who says foolish things and is only good at partying. With Ismael, there was always something more.

Ismael came often to my house. When he visited in the evening, he would sit with the neighbors on the stone bench by the door. Sometimes he had supper with my mother who was a very religious woman, discussing spiritual things.

I remember that in one of our bedrooms we kept a box that held his religious objects. He had given it to my mother for safekeeping when he left for the front. I almost seem to see it: in it he kept books, notebooks, and other items, including a cilice. He left it to my parents. They didn't have to, but they gave it to Miguel and Pedro anyway, when they came to ask for it after the war, except for the cilice, which my brother kept.

He had a cheerful nature and was a joker. He had a lot of imagination, and radiated a sense of peace, of calm and trustworthiness. Whoever talked with him stayed with him. My mother was very religious, and she would spend hours with him, and I'd say, What, he's still there?

There is something else that's beautiful, from when I began to feel the vocation. I felt it in a Sacred Hour. It was a Sacred Hour, and like Ismael I was very devoted to the Eucharist. He would write lovely lines about it and he would pray and look at the door of the Tabernacle... his great love for the Eucharist shone through. Something special affected me, and I tried to ascertain if I truly had a vocation: I went to evening dances, and Fr. Eliseo, the parish priest who was my confessor, would say: "Listen girl, if you're a Catholic Action delegate, you're a Tertiary. What will people say when they see you there?" "Still, I'm going," I'd reply. And they made me an elegant dress, but it didn't excite me. It was a

calling, something special. It was special because, I'm telling you, every night Ismael would say to me: "You have to be a nun." One night, the second night, the third night.

It's Ismael's fault if I live here now...

Still, above all, what impressed me was his great love for the Eucharist. He loved it very much.»²⁰⁴

— Sr. Aurora Serrano López, Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, born in Villanueva de los Infantes in 1920, has told us the following:

«The strongest memory I have of Ismael is when us Tomelloso girls paid a visit to the Holy Sacrament and would find Ismael there, he looked like an angel. This is what the girls used to say then, they were maybe ten years old or a bit younger.



Sr. Aurora Serrano.

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When we left, we would wait to see what he'd say to us, something childish, but he'd say: "Hey girls, do you love Jesus a lot?" "Of course, that's why we're here, because we love Him," a spunky girl would say. "Sunday we have a play at the Sisters' school," Ismael would continue, "the ticket is 5 cents." And he would add: "You know what we're going to do? You get ready with your girlfriends and then we'll give the money we collect to Sr. Felices for the missions." And he would leave us with that smile, that angel face. I remember Ismael's face...

He loved Our Lady very much. He absolutely loved the poor. I can still see him, in winter when you kept warm any way you could, with a coat, I see him wearing a very light raincoat from El Siglo, the store where he worked, walking back from the parish church. The kid had talent, he had art in his blood. He had a wonderful way in arranging shop windows and endeared himself to all the neighbors. Everyone, I mean everyone. He had talent as an actor, you can't imagine the skill with which he'd recite the poem Mi vaquerillo, and everyone crying. "Well, when this is finished, we'll start something else." And he would segue into another poem..."

It would be something magnificent for the glory of God and of the people, if they could see that there's holiness in this corrupt world.

I clearly remember all the good things he did, his ministry was through this congeniality that he had, this modesty, he would disappear when they were about to applaud him. He was always smiling, always, never a stern face. Ismael had wonderful qualities, but he became a saint through five friends of his.

He went through a period of coldness toward religion, not that he was rejecting it, but he was cold. Realizing this, his friends took him to see a priest who is now a martyr, Fr. Bernabé Huertas, who won him over to God. When the boys were in his "office" and one of those kids came in, Fr. Bernabé would look at the Crucifix and say: "Lord, don't let this one run away." Another kid would come in: Fr. Bernabé, we brought this friend, he wants to be in our

*choir because he's got a good voice. "Ah, good, good," and this is how he formed the group. It was Miguel Montañés who put him in touch with Fr. Bernabé. There were five of them.*²⁰⁵

Do you know how they prayed? They would write the prayer topic on a cigarette paper and would throw it down the cellar grate to their friends.

This is how they did their meditations. They would go from house to house and drop the small paper down the cellar grate; this is how they prayed until the war broke out and each one had to go to their assigned camp. But Ismael was passionate, this is what stood out in him, this motherly anxiety he had. Don't you realize that he said, "I craved martyrdom and I finally succeeded. Not because I am shedding my blood for the Faith, but because of the desertion, the drawn-out suffering, the anguish of dying without my saintly mother at my side."

Ismael was Catholic Action treasurer. I picture him with a flag. You know, I fantasize that when they make him a saint, they will surely build him a statue. Yes, he will have everything, because Tomelloso is all push and shove, but they are generous.

Tomelloso has always done huge acts of charity without trumpeting them, without publicizing them but they have, I believe so.

Whenever I went to cemetery, as God is my witness, I would stop by Ismael's grave, kneel and say to him: "Ismael, remember your town's young people, don't forget them." And I would say good-bye to him with these words: "Ismael, you know what? You owe it to your town's young people, don't forget us." I always said this to him, and I believe that it's because of this that I persevered all these years.

The Lord is making us a beautiful gift, after so much desertion, because Ismael was deserted. He was really deserted. It was martyrdom. I love Ismael a lot, we'll see him on the altars. Yes, take my word, we'll see him on the altars.

205. Miguel Montañés, Santos Burillo, Pedrito Cuesta, José Antonio Martínez, and Alfonso Salinas.

It's important to excite the young generation, that's what the Pope did in Australia. And when World Youth Day will be celebrated in Madrid, in three years, Ismael has to be there.

I was very friendly with his mother. They lived in poverty but accepted their situation with quiet resignation. No one knew that they were going hungry. They were all very quiet, didn't spare words. "Mommy, tomorrow is Sunday." Yes, honey, I know." "Tomorrow we get half an orange." Each Sunday, the mother would give them half an orange each. "True, things are bad, but that doesn't mean we have to stop serving God. We have our health and we're fine." "So tomorrow you'll give us half an orange?" "Yes, of course," and she would give them half an orange for desert. Ismael's mother was a very good woman. It's the mother who shapes the child, both biologically and religiously. That's what I believe. We owe everything to our mothers. She was a very, very good woman. A true Tomelloso woman.

When she died, a lot of people went to her funeral.

Ismael's mother wanted to see her son's grave in Saragossa. When she finally made the trip to the cemetery, she was moved, seeing how well it was tended. She fell ill the following day on her trip back to Tomelloso, and died. She died while on her way home.

Ismael's father was a man of medium height, dark haired, a serious guy. That's what I remember. They lived in Independencia Street, just as we did. We lived at number 7, they at number 13, if I remember correctly.»²⁰⁶

4.7. Among previously unknown, recent publications, are two by the priests who ministered to Ismael: Fr. Ignacio Bruna Peribáñez and Fr. José Ballesteros Estero.

The priests we interviewed, as well as the people who knew Fr. Ignacio in the Saragossa churches where he did his ministry, in particular Nuestra Señora de Altabás, the last church to which he was assigned, concur in saying that he was a saintly priest.

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In the first interview published in the *Catholic Action Youth Bulletin* of Saragossa, Volume XVI, No. 128, June 1951, conducted by Jesús Marín Sierra,²⁰⁷ Fr. Ignacio said:

«His body was a skeleton, all skin and bones, but his clear conscience and his diaphanous spirit shone through on his face with a pure, shadowless joy. Ismael's smile rode on the wings of his inner happiness and bathed everyone who ministered to him in a halo of peace and kindness. Ismael died with a smile on his face. His dying was like a lovely dream; this was my impression; I am not exaggerating.»

«Anything outside of the usual we consider peculiar. Ismael lived his life by spending it on God. He had learned to die to many legitimate pleasures and things. He gradually left this life in peace and silence. He slowly wasted away in a quiet, peaceful, deep, gentle martyrdom. He did not seek the martyrdom that he wanted, nor the time or the moment; he willingly accepted the how and the when that God asked of him. Ismael was not a victim of his desires or his will, but of God's. The best kind of death, even the sacrificial one, is the one that God asks of you. For Ismael, God wanted a silent death, and for that reason Ismael hid himself and did not speak. Isn't this peculiar? I've never met a case like Ismael's: he looked for relief to his pain by seeking more pain.»

In another part of the interview, Fr. Ignacio stressed that Ismael *«was a likable fellow. Grace, which does not destroy but rather perfects nature, had so magnified his congenial personality that it was enshrined in his pure, luminous eyes, his white lips through which his even whiter soul spoke, and his peaceful, serene features. His body was tortured, wrecked and sunk-in but without disagreeable contortions. All of this exerted an irresistible attraction. The beauty of a landscape, the sweet stirrings of a melody*

207. Jesús Marín Sierra, as explained in note No. 201.

are no match for the beauty of a soul smiling from the cross. Ismael was on the cross and he was smiling.»

Fr. Ignacio was asked if the idea of dying prematurely could lead a young person to make the kind of silent sacrifice that Ismael had made. He replied: *«No. In no way. If someone was unable to lead an elevated life, the idea of premature death could lead him to repent, to reject his former life; still, great heroism calls for great love of God, and love of God is nourished by the cross. Under ordinary providence, someone who was unable to give, to consume himself, to spend himself for love until he reached the cross, could not suffer in silence. Like everything else, spiritual life also has its own principles and corollaries. To a heroic death must correspond a life lived heroically.»*

Asked whether Ismael had done any ministry during his stay in the Concentration Camp, he answered: *«No and yes. Do not be alarmed, there is no contradiction here. While I am not aware that he did any overt ministry among the prisoners, it wouldn't surprise me, since the direction of his life was silence. But I do know that he performed a great ministry for them. Indeed: he prayed and he suffered; as we read in the biography, in his prayers and in his illness he also suffered at the thought of all the young people who were losing their way. Like the woman with a hemorrhage [Luke 8:43-48], he was constantly touching Jesus to pull from him the saving virtue. Don't you think, Marín, that by suffering in silence, and by his praying sunk deeply into God, he was attracting a divine radiation from heaven over the souls of the young people that he worried so much about? As you know, the quietest, most hidden action that bears the seal of the love of God, neither fails nor is lost. What do time and place matter? It will bear fruit.»*

«They were his first steps in the spiritual life. His education was deficient, and he lacked the stamp of pain and of the Cross; that would come later. But if God had given him a longer life,

notwithstanding his suffering, he would have made a lot of noise among you with his noiseless, fuss-less ministry that was yet full of dedication and zeal. Isn't he perhaps doing just this, now that he's dead?»

«The physician had assured me that probably he would not reach Saragossa alive. His opinion influenced me, and I didn't pursue the matter. I see in this the mark of Providence: I would have tried to comfort him as much as I could, but that was not in God's plans.»

Fr. Ignacio learned that Ismael had died *«when the nurse brought me the reference letter I had given him for the hospital; she had found it hidden in his clothes, after he was buried.»*

He compared his experience with Ismael's: *«When I meet superficial, fickle young people who are quick to excitement and anger and are like lifeless and empty; when I see young people who carry a banner but live only the exterior life and are excited by the things of this world; or those who live inside themselves and only worry about themselves, I cannot avoid comparing them to Ismael. Poor kids, they are really adrift! I am also reminded of Ismael when I meet, with great spiritual pleasure, young people who are pursuing the beautiful ideal that Ismael lived.»*

When Marín Sierra asked him if he had any hope that the Church would one day elevate Ismael to sainthood, he replied: *«If I consider my hope and my wishes, I do have a very great hope. But it's you who must deserve this grace, this happiness for the new Catholic generation, bringing your lives closer to Ismael's, making yours the heroic virtue of doing much but talking little, suffering and keeping silence, throwing yourselves into an apostolic activity that before taking off plunges into God through prayer, and making yours the words of the Apostle: "not me, but Christ lives in me."»²⁰⁸*

He closed the interview by noting that, although he had said good-bye to Ismael in the Concentration Camp, he had remained

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united with him for the rest of his life and was grateful for the promise Ismael had made to him: “*Go on **Father**, I’ll bless you from Heaven.*”

In the *Guión del Militante* [The Militant’s Script], Year IV, No. 6, published by the Spanish Catholic Action Youth Council in Ciudad Real on May 20th, 1956, Fr. Ignacio Bruna wrote:

«I am currently the parish priest of one of the more religious communities in the diocese of Saragossa. When I met your countryman Ismael, I was chaplain at the Concentration Camp where Ismael was detained and where he died a hero. My current parishioners make me happy, still, their fine attentions cannot erase from my mind the nostalgia for that past. The fact is that I have yet to meet another Ismael.

In my office on the prison grounds, my dear prisoners would come to visit every day. The newly arrived knocked on my door suspiciously; they came into my office shyly, trembling like a guilty defendant brought before a judge. Was it hate?... Lack of self-confidence?... Shyness?... Suspicion?... A little of everything, I guess. They had been told so many lies about us! The prisoners who had been there longer, on the other hand, looked forward to their minutes of intimacy with the chaplain as something special.

They would sit with me at the desk, and in the sparseness of my quiet room, after several sessions and interviews, they would open their soul to me, tell me their big and small problems which always overwhelmed them; meticulously report on their pains which in the end always turned out to be serious. They poured into my heart the storms of their own and asked me for a solution to their problems.

Whenever I saw them shed quiet tears, I tried to help them find solace to their physical and moral pain. I would sit next to them and try to cheer them up, kindly explaining to them that as a priest I was not going to skimp on affectionate words, and offering my disinterested, unconditional help.

Unless you have lived in the microcosm of a concentration camp

or a prison, you cannot fathom the doubts and the emotional and moral torments that engulf those wretches.

I noticed that even when surrounded by hundreds of fellow convicts, some days they felt alone. A too eloquent silence embittered their existence even among all the noise at recreation time. It was at this time that intimate images of the home where they were born, of the mother who had taken them in her arms, of their old friends, and their entire life would cross their mind like fleeting shadows. The torture! The trumpet that knew nothing of feelings or intimacy, reminded them that they were not home, but in a penitentiary where they were serving long sentences. I came to feel their problems in my flesh, and resolved to try and comfort them as much as I could, since I had no power to solve their problems. I was thinking that while the sick belong all to the physician, just like beauty belongs to the artist, those men were mine. My only work would be to sacrifice myself for them; my only pain was theirs; my only hope, to show them the right path and help them take it. All of this helps us to more correctly assess the value of Ismael's sacrifice, because he gave up everything. He had a well-defined, strong personality, he could make choices with respect to his vocation to martyrdom, and he said Yes! and accepted all the consequences, come what may, and went through with it on top of everything else. He had a great, resolute, tough, persevering, steely soul.

Ismael's meditated, deeply rooted Yes! enabled him to do everything; it made him act resolutely; it gave him the strength to endure, despite the discomfort, the exhaustion, even the apparent futility of his sacrifice.

Whenever he had the chance, he chose suffering for the love of God, and put his unshakeable will at His service.

God marked the path which his clear, clean conscience lit up. His soul felt a force that pulled him to the heroism of suffering in silence, without uttering a word. He made his choice, acted upon it and persevered until the end. The first step, choosing, is so plain and easy that we all do it; the second, acting on one's choice, is

more painful, therefore less frequent. The third step, persevering, is where we lose heart. Ismael did not.

You too, young Manchego, must have reflected many times, collected yourself for brief moments, heard the voice of God, and with that a force, a special grace that, like your countryman, cried Let's go! Jump in the water! Cast off! Embrace the ministry with energy and effort! If you are one of the brave, if you belong to the same school as Ismael's—because I have no doubt that Ismael's conduct has inspired the Manchego youths especially—you did cast off and persevered like him up to the end. If you are one of the weak, you failed to conquer unexpected obstacles, contradictions and fatigue and gave up, and fell down defeated.

I never meet a more physically defeated man than Ismael the first time I saw him in the concentration camp. In essence, although his will was strong, he could master neither the elements, nor the men, nor his body that was wasting away like a sugar cube dissolving in water; still, his spirit acted with the energy that comes from feeling God at your side, even more, inside you.

Young man of La Mancha! Live for the day! If there is something that you can do, it must be done; and if not, the example of your countryman Ismael must make it doable. Do what needs to be done; even more, what you fear or are afraid of doing. May danger attract you, and may difficulties spur you on.

What the world understands by heroic presupposes less and costs less than a daily self-sacrifice that requires an ongoing effort of the will.

There are two clear, distinct kinds of perseverance: one never falters; the other always rises. Both of them are stupendous. Which one was Ismael's? Which one must be, or can be, yours? You must study, reflect, meditate, so that the fruits of the great days that are approaching for the young men of La Mancha may make you worthy of that young man who marked out an itinerary for you.»²⁰⁹

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The other person interviewed was Fr. José Ballesteros Estero, born in 1918. He met Ismael in 1935 when the Spiritual Exercises, which Ismael attended, were given for the first time in the Ciudad Real Seminary. He met him for a second, and longer, time at the Saragossa Doctors' Hospital where he was being treated for a war wound to his leg; at the time, Ismael's condition was extremely serious.

«I met Ismael for the first time in 1935. At the time, I was studying at the Ciudad Real Seminary where he had attended a Spiritual Exercises course. I remember that Ismael was perhaps seventeen or eighteen at the time. Despite the penitential nature of some of the exercises, I noticed his cheerful, outgoing attitude, his innate optimism; he was a young guy who made friends everywhere, and as I was able to confirm later, he had the heart of those men who give themselves totally to everyone and for everyone.

After that first meeting, I lost track of him until we both found ourselves patients at the Saragossa hospital: I had been wounded by a shot I had received at the front and his illness was in an advanced stage. It was there that I had several conversations with him and became aware of the true spirit of holiness and self-sacrifice of this young man, which stayed with him until his death.

What impressed me most was his cheerfulness even in the face of suffering, and his strong belief, in the parting moments of his life, that he would go to Heaven.

I remember that in one of the many conversations we had at the hospital, he envied my good luck because I was going to be a priest, while he was going to die without having done anything useful in life. He told me that the only reason he regretted dying was that he wouldn't be able to become a priest like me. I replied that should he die, he should petition Heaven for me, that I might not lose my vocation, being exposed as I it was to all the moral dangers of life at the front. He promised. I am so convinced that he kept his word, and that he helped me from Heaven, that I never offered a Mass on

his behalf because I believe he is still asking things for me, therefore he doesn't need a Mass.

When his remains were transferred to Tomelloso, I was there. I knocked with my knuckles on the coffin that held his remains, and thanked him for the help he had given me from above, which I believe was influential in my persevering in my vocation in those trying times.»²¹⁰



Above, Fr. José Ballesteros Estero with a patient at the Ciudad Real Hospital where he was chaplain; below, celebrating the Eucharist. In the back, Bishop-Prior Msgr: Juan Hervás.

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When the war was over, José Ballesteros Estero returned to Ciudad Real, completed his studies and was ordained a priest.

The national tribute that Catholic Action paid to Ismael de Tomelloso in 1956 culminated at his gravesite. The event was reported in the May 26th, 1956 issue of the periodical *Signo*:

«Fr. José started by kissing the tomb, to remember that day, March 23rd, 1938, when he had met Ismael at the Saragossa hospital. Then he gave a brief summary of his recollections:²¹¹

— I asked him: Offer your death for my vocation and for all the young people of La Mancha.

And I am sure he did. Many are the times when I sensed his wonderful intercession. I never prayed an Our Father to him. It would be a crime for I'm sure he doesn't need it. My prayer consists in touching his tomb with my knuckles and telling him: "Ismael, don't forget your promise!"

Many of those who attended the ceremony could not hold back their tears. As if adding its own tribute, Mother Nature opened the clouds, but it wasn't a sad, melancholy rain: that would have been out of character. It was a joyful, sporty rain full of gusts that made us laugh and run. We knew that Ismael was enjoying all this.»²¹²

On June 22nd, 1985 *Lanza*, the Ciudad Real daily, published a tribute to Fr. Ballesteros on the occasion of his retirement as Provincial Hospital chaplain: *«He ministered to the sick for thirty-two years, leaving behind a living imprint of his love for the sick. When the bishop appointed him to the post, Fr. Ballesteros said that he had accepted only out of obedience, because it was the job that he enjoyed less in his life; still, when he retired he recognized that it had marked the best years of his priesthood.»*

He also said that he had been “obligated,” in obedience to the Bishop, to travel to Lourdes escorting the sick, something he was

211. *Author's note:* For his recollections, see chapter IX, pp. 110 ff.

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not eager to do. Still, towards the close of his life, after many pilgrimages and many years of service at the hospital, he recognized that he had received many graces through the sick who were in his care, to whom Our Lady is generous because “it is through suffering that love is reborn.” The press has called him “a priest preoccupied by suffering.”

The love that Ismael felt for the priesthood was rooted in his own vocation; for this reason, he helps priests serve God and humankind, especially the elderly who suffer from their physical ailments and from the desertion of their families. All the priests who knew, dealt with, or approached Ismael, were encouraged by his example to have more faith and be holier, and they have recognized the strength that they received through his living example.

To conclude, and to document how the life of Ismael de Tomelloso had become known throughout Spain at the time, *Espiga*, a publication of the Palencia diocese (No. 26/1956, June 24th), published an article that is still relevant today, entitled *En un lugar de la Mancha* [In a Place in La Mancha]:

«... To honor the memory of that Catholic Action youth, as thousands of friends in faith and in ministry have done at his baptismal font, this past Whitsunday.

To dissipate the false and pervasive, ideology that to be a saint, an altar saint! is no longer fashionable, what better thing to say that this young man died in 1938?

To give the lie to those who believe that the tree of Christian heroism only flowers in the greenhouse of a monastery, why not say that this young man never wore the cassock and was buried in his soldier's kakis?

YES, ISMAEL MOLINERO NOVILLO WAS A LAY MAN, A YOUNG MAN, AND A SAINT ALL IN ONE!

We want to say it out loud to the young people of our Palencia and province. If you are interested in this life, ask for the biography of this young man written in a pleasant, captivating style by

Palencia's Fr. Florentino del Valle. The author was born in Villamoronta and currently lives in the Jesuit Writers' Home in Madrid.»

This is how the article ended:

«...now is the time to tell about the rare, truly heroic and challenging conduct that Ismael kept in that critical time. In this country of influence, recommendations and pulling strings, that Manchego boy found the mysterious strength to withdraw, hide his Catholic Action activist card, refuse to make himself known or to ask for help from his own town folk. Like St. Alexius in his own home, he lived among his own and they did not know his name... But he was betrayed by his virtues, by the sweet and cheerful patience with which he endured pneumonia and the tuberculosis that took him to the grave, and by the confession that they saw him make in the hospital room, that "Mother of Pilar, save me! My God, mercy! Sacred Heart of Jesus, in You I place my trust!" that escaped from his dying lips...»²¹³

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HEAVEN AND THE FEAST OF OUR LADY THE VIRGIN OF FATIMA.*

