

# Carmelite History in the Making

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As we begin this twenty-first century at the age of 85, I, Fernando Beltrán Mallol, a Carmelite religious for seventy years, look back in time, and as my life passes before my eyes as if in a film, I would like to tell you briefly, how my life is part of the history of Carmel, this Order of Mary which I love so much.

I was not quite ten years old in 1926, when I asked my father to bring me to the Carmelite friars, with whom my brother Leoncio had begun his formation. I wanted, to be like him, at the Carmelite Marian Seminary in Villarreal, Castellón in Spain.

And in fact my father did bring me to Villarreal where I studied the humanities for five years. By then Spain was divided into two irreconcilable groupings: the right and the left wings. The latter were also known as “El Frente Popular” which gathered in the FAI, anarchists, socialists and communists. All of these were open enemies of the Church.

The city of Castellón fell into the hands of the “Frente” and checkpoints were immediately set up in every town of the Province in order to arrest and kill those who opposed their ideals. When, in May 1931, a systematic burning of convents was initiated, all the students stationed in Villarreal were sent to their homes.

In August of the same year, the Superior of Villarreal wrote me a letter, requesting that from my assigned convent of El Carmen in Onda, I leave as soon as possible for the convent of El Henar, located in the Province of Segovia. Nine of us who had been classmates gathered in El Henar to make our novitiate. We celebrated our Clothing with the Habit on November 22, 1931. Our Masters of novices were Fathers Juan Cervera and Dionysius Bonfill. The latter was to die a martyr during the ensuing war. We pronounced our profession of vows on November 28, 1932.

After we had finished our novitiate year, we stayed in El Henar in order to begin the course in philosophy. A year after, we again were sent to Onda Carmel to continue philosophy for two additional years, and then to take up two years of theology. Just as we finished these studies, on July 18, 1936, Movimiento Nacional declared war. At the time in Onda we were 30 religious: 4 priests, 20 professed students, 2 novices, and 4 lay brothers. 15 of these 30 were to be martyred.

As we became aware of uprisings and riots throughout Spain, we began our dispersion on July 24, following the example of other Carmelite houses and also houses of other religious Orders. My brother Leoncio and I, 22 and 19 years old respectively, returned to our village of Alcora, only 17 kilometers away from Onda. We carried our suitcases on our shoulders; they were filled with our religious belongings – our habits, white cloaks, crucifixes, breviaries, etc. We knew that all of these objects presented an imminent danger, since if we were recognized and searched we would be killed on the spot. We started our trip going through hills and fields, avoiding the highway and checkpoints.

After a few hours on the move, we arrived at a farmhouse called “Mosen Pascual,” in “La Llidona,” halfway from our village. Leoncio kept walking to our village to let our father know about us; in the meantime I spent the night in the farmhouse guarding our suitcases and

waiting for my family to come for me. And the next day, July 25, the Feast of St. James the Apostle, I arrived home in Alcora with my father. For several months I remained hidden in my home, avoiding being hunted out by members of the Frente Popular. At that time, in my village of Alcora, which had a population of 5,000, 35 people were killed. My whole family prayed the rosary daily; asking our heavenly Mother, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, to help us and soon restore peace to Spain.

At home at the time were my two religious sisters, Carmen and Consolación. They made a belt of cloth for me, and near the buckle they sewed the scapular of Carmel, so that I could always recall Our Lady and invoke her constantly. I did so, entrusting myself to her protection every day.

In September of 1937 I was forced to join the militia of the Frente Popular. Together with those of my village, I was sent to Madrid, to the bariio of Hortaleza, housed in a convent of Paulists, of which the FAI had taken possession. A few days later I was inscribed in the "70 Brigada Mixta." We were sent to the province of Guadalajara and assigned to several villages which we were to guard, at times finding ourselves in the trenches of the first line of battle. While in Horche (Guadalajara), shortly after my arrival, we were ordered to the front to attack the enemy.

As everyone was answering the call to arms, they all sang the Communist "Internacional" and "A las Barricadas." I was surprised to say the least, and could not but reject the singing of the worst blasphemies that I had ever heard. As the chorus lustily sang its insults to God and the Blessed Mother, I remember thinking within myself: "How will they ever win the war with these insults and blasphemies against God and against the Mother of Our Lord?" I remember praying to God to have mercy on us all.

While stationed in Horche, I got word that my brother Leoncio had been captured by members of the Frente Popular, to which I myself belonged, and that as he was seriously wounded, they were thinking of cutting off his leg due to gangrene. I came to know that he was in the hospital of Huerte (Guadalajara), I left ranks to pay him a visit. I went 50 kilometers on foot, but once I arrived at the hospital I was crushed to learn that he had already been evacuated to Madrid. Those were hard days for me physically, morally and spiritually.

On my return to Horche, we were sent to places very close to the front lines of battle. One village I always remember is Sacec3n, where we used the parish church as our campsite. I had a tangible experience of God and Mary's protection, as I was able to sleep at the foot of the altar dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, to whom I had been addressing my prayers every night before sleep.

During our stay in this village, I witnessed something that totally revolted me. A soldier day after day went up to the half destroyed tabernacle, and intoned obscene songs which the rest of the company joined with enthusiasm. All these outrages and blasphemies which I observed, and also my firm conviction of my faith and of Mary's protection, stirred within me

the desire to escape in order to join the opposing group of Nacionales. This idea began to grow on me more and more.

The opportunity presented itself when we were stationed in the trenches near the village of Cerezo. During my first days in the trenches, I planned my escape. I examined the terrain, studied distances and also the difficulties involved. I realized that in fleeing I was risking my life. However, my decision was steadfast, and I fixed on a particular night when I would escape. I had decided that it was better to die than to listen to the blasphemies against God and against the Blessed Virgin Mary.

During the preceding day, I prayed and prayed one rosary after another entrusting myself to the protection of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. I made many acts of contrition asking God to forgive my sins, since I had not been able to find a priest in all of two years.

I was a sentinel that night, serving on the front line. I put two grenades in my cartridge belt in case I would have to defend myself. I began running towards the side of the Nacionales, in the darkness I had to dodge the wiring to which small bells were attached in order to warn of the trespassing of people. There was also the danger of stepping on a land mine buried in the earth. Some soldiers did see me running away. They shot at me, but the bullets whizzed by me and missed me. After a run of two kilometers I came to the position of the Nacionales.

I was stopped and brought to the commander's headquarters, where I had to make a declaration of my intentions. It was October 3, 1937, the eve of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. The first thing they did was show me a newspaper and they asked me to identify the person whose photo was on the front page. I answered that I did not know him and had never seen him before. They asked how could I not know him since I was a friar. My reply was that we clerical students were not allowed to read newspapers nor to talk about politics. I later learned that the man on the front page was General Franco. They accepted my explanations, as well as the information which I gave them about the positions of the artillery of the Frente Popular which I had just left. They gave me some food, and I realized how hungry I was. Through all these events I was convinced of the protection of Our Blessed Mother.

At dawn of that same day I was brought to Sigüenza, where those who came from Valencia and had escaped, were celebrating the Feast of Our Lady of the Abandoned, Patroness of Valencia, with solemn sung Mass in a chapel of the Cathedral, which had been bombarded. The music of the Mass was that of Ravanello. What a joy for me to be able to participate in the Eucharist after two years without the Mass. Then a smaller but very real joy: I was able immediately to join the choir, since I knew the music very well, having directed the Mass several times in our Carmelite seminary. There I was also able to get to confession. Thus I experienced the goodness of God and the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary through this great grace after a bitter, difficult and hard night.

From Sigüenza I was brought to Soria, where I stayed for a few months, until assurances about me arrived from my village of Alcora. I was sent to Jaca, to the 19<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Galicia. I served on several fronts until the end of the war when I was dismissed.

Back in my hometown of Alcora, I received a letter from the Fr. Provincial Spiridion Cabrera asking me to report to Collugada (Zaragoza). Four of us clerical students from the Arago-Valencia Province came to be re-united in order to apply ourselves to a 2nd year of Theology. The next two years we spent in El Henar (Segovia) in order to complete our 3rd and 4th years of Theology. Of the nine who had received the habit way back in 1931, there were only two of us left, Fr. Bautista Llorens and myself. Five of the nine had been killed by the Communists in Carabanchel (Madrid) and currently their cause of beatification as martyrs is at a good stage.

My desire had always been to continue as a Carmelite religious. And so upon completion of the necessary studies, I received the minor and major Orders in Segovia at the hands of the diocesan bishop, Mons. Luciano Perez Platero. Fr. Alfonso Lopez Sendín was in charge of us. I sang my first Mass in December of 1941 at the Carmelite Marian Shrine of El Henar, and some days later in my hometown, in January 1942. My classmate and good friend, Fr. Clemente Cardador, was preacher. My father had died only two months previously so my brother Leoncio (who had left Carmel due to wounds he had suffered during the war) and his wife Ramoneta, supplied as sponsors for my father. I had the joy of the presence of my mother and my two sisters, both religious.

In September of 1942 I was assigned to Villarreal in charge of the Mariani, the minor seminarians. I was there until 1946 when I was asked to be in charge of the clerical students of two provinces, my own Arago-Valencia and Betica; they numbered 20 at the time. In September of 1949 I was assigned as Prior of the Carmel in Onda.

We celebrated our Provincial Chapter in June of 1950, when Fr. Enrique Esteve was elected provincial. He appointed me to Puerto Rico, to the Commissariate of the Antilles. I was the first to be sent since 1933; after me other friars arrived as well. Once in Puerto Rico, the Vicar Commissary, Fr. José Sanchez, assigned me to Ciales as pastor. I stayed there from June 1952 until 1963. The first year I was alone, in charge of all the pastoral work of a village of 18,000 inhabitants.

I became more and more aware of the real needs of the parish. I saw the need for several smaller chapels, built in strategic places in order to favour evangelization. I found my support in the Blessed Mother as my first project was to build a Hogar Catolico, which was meant to be a shelter for those who came to celebrate the liturgy from the shantytowns of the periphery and to shop in the center of town. To make up for the lack of facilities in the shantytowns, we built five chapels: Pozas, Hato Viejo, Toro Negro, Cruces and Pesa. The project was not without its difficulties and suffering, but with God's help I was able to raise enough money from around the island to pay for these chapels.

Next, the parish church was in urgent need of repair. It had been built in 1895 and was in a bad physical state, really about to collapse, due to exposure to the natural elements had taken its toll. Because of this it had been closed for worship since 1957. The religious celebrations and the celebration of the sacraments took place in the Hogar Catolico. We had the choice of trying to restore the previous structure, or tearing it down and building a new, larger

church, taking advantage of free land on both sides of the building. Once the case was studied by professional technicians, we agreed to tear down the existing structure and to build a new church. But it was not all that easy I had been praying to the Blessed Mother, and continued to do so, that our project be successful. However, our petition for permits was rejected by the Institute of Puertorican Culture. Mustering what little energy I had left and appealing to the Blessed Mother, I turned to the Government Planning Commission, which finally gave us permission to demolish the old church.

Demolition began on the day we celebrated Our Lady of Fatima, May 13, 1959. A year later, on May 8, 1960, we had the blessing and laying of the cornerstone, a ceremony presided over by the Bishop of San Juan, Mons. Jaime P. Davis. Work was finished the beginning of 1963. For the two intervening years I had scoured all over the island begging for financial help, at the same time I oversaw the construction, to which the parishioners were wholeheartedly committed. February 22, 1963 was the day marked for the inauguration of the new parish church.

The new church, of three naves, is 40 meters long and 21 meters wide. The Tower is 21 meters tall with a set of five bells imported from Holland. The tower is topped by a cross, 7 meters high. The parish house is a semi-detached structure next to the church. Ten artistic, enameled stained glass windows provide light and ventilation. They represent several saints of the Order: Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, St. Simon Stock, St. Andrew Corsini, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Jesus, St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, etc. In the interior there is an outstanding opal enameled and iron framed Way of the Cross, the work of a cousin of mine, Vincent Mallol.

Bishop Alfredo Mendez, of the diocese of Arecibo, presided over the dedication of the church. He was accompanied by his Vicar General and a goodly number of priests. Fr. Raphael Lopez-Melus, who expressly came from the Dominican Republic for the event, did the preaching. Carmelite brothers from the communities of Morovis and Santurce were also present, as well as Carmelite sisters from the Julia Clinic and from the school of Rio Piedras. The inauguration was an occasion of rejoicing and partying for the village, since they had never witnessed such an extraordinary ceremony before. I was happy my best wishes for the People of God had come true. I was particularly grateful to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel: not only had she protected me during the war years, but she also led me to Ciales in order to achieve these deeds for the upbuilding of the Church in Puerto Rico. The first page of the memory album of the Hogar Catolica reads: "We offer our special gratitude to Rev. Fr. Fernando Ma. Beltrán for the efforts invested in such a beautiful work. There is no conquering without effort, and for this reason his tenacity is the reaffirmation of his apostolate of faith and of sacrifice."

Once this mission was finished, I returned to Spain in 1965. After some contributions to Valencia as parish priest (1968), and to Onda as parish priest of the church Virgen del Carmen (1969-1971), I was assigned to Valencia in 1977. Here, in our parish of St. Isidore, I have been happy to serve as a member of the pastoral team I am able to minister as a Carmelite, filled with joy for the blessings of mercy and tenderness that God has used towards me.

These pages bear witness to my story, constantly lived under the shadow of Carmel. It is a story of someone without merit of his own, given his incapacity in so many things, accomplishing something beautiful for God, for which I constantly bless him. At the same time I give thanks to the Blessed Virgin, Mother of Carmel who called me at the young age of nine to become part of her family, and to be counted among her brothers. I hope and pray that all this has been done for the glory of God and the praise of our Mother Mary.