

12-1985

## Father José Maria Felgueiras, (1911-1956)

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### Recommended Citation

da Rocha, N. (1985). Father José Maria Felgueiras, (1911-1956). *Spiritan Papers*, 19 (19). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol19/iss19/6>

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## **AN AUTHENTIC SPIRITAN HERO FATHER JOSE MARIA FELGUEIRAS (1911-1956)**

F. Nogueira da Rocha, cssp.

José Maria de Vasconcelos Baptista Felgueiras descended from an ancient noble rural family of Entre-Douro-e-Minho, which had maintained over the centuries the family manor, Casa da Seara, near Braga. Yet the little José Maria was not born in this lordly house, for his father, a lawyer and executor of wills, had his office in the neighbouring little village of Caldas de Vizela – a spa town also – in the same sector of Guimaraes. For this same reason he did his primary schooling at Vizela and began secondary studies at the school in Guimaraes.

When his father died in 1928 at the age of 52 the children were nearly all small. Prematurely the mother got the job of steering the family ship. She braved and overcame all difficulties, for she was the 'perfect woman' of the Book of Proverbs. Of her eight children, one continued the family name in his father's profession, two of the boys became religious missionaries – José Maria and João, one a Spiritan the other a Jesuit –, three of the girls became religious missionaries, another girl became a Carmelite and the last is a consecrated layperson still exercising a pastoral and charitable ministry in the world. At the end of her life the mother received the papal medal from Pius XII for 'extraordinary correspondence with grace'.

José Maria's Carmelite sister says: *'While still very young he began to speak of holiness. I can say that around fourteen he had already begun the work of his spiritual perfection, from the strength he received in prayer and in frequenting the sacraments. During his secondary school years he had always been a regular communicant and even, especially in his last three years, a daily communicant. If he happened not to have time to go to church for communion and return home for*

*breakfast, he just took a piece of bread in his pocket and ate it on the way from church to school after his lengthy thanksgiving'. It was only some years later, in 1929, that José Maria, then 18 – he was born on 6 March 1911 – left the secondary school of Guimaraes to enter that of Braga, where he persevered until his secondary studies ended, in 1931. At Braga he first put up in simple lodgings in Largo dos Penedos, but only for a short time. He was soon accepted as a guardian at the orphanage school of St Caetano; he lived there until his secondary course was over. He would only have some Sundays and vacation time for his family at Casa de Seara.*

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#### STUDENT

A bright student, always among the first in his class, he was soon valued for the help he was ready to proffer his weaker or less able companions. One of his fellow-students of the time says: 'He could always be approached for settling difficulties or explaining the lessons to those who needed it. He never showed the slightest annoyance – so much so that they never left him in peace. But this spirit of service gave him a standing with his companions, who marvelled at his knowledge, calmness and smiling availability. It was a god-send not only for the less gifted but also for the less studious and even the dunces. These youngsters would normally be given to thoughtlessness and disrespect, the type to make fun of everything, even the seeming virtues of certain people; but when it came to José Maria they immediately felt that here was someone different, someone manly; great things were portended for him'.

At this time the Holy Ghost Fathers were just beginning to restore the Portuguese province, which had been destroyed by the 1910 revolution. They had begun simply not far away, at Quinta do Charqueiro on the outskirts of Braga. It was a small foothold – eleven students of an apostolic school for the year 1919-20 – but it was also a little centre of missionary promotion, called 'missionary propaganda' in those days. The Association of Our Lady of Africa, which had flourished before the revolution, was restored and considerably ex-

tended. It was decided to begin forthwith a magazine that would both speak of the missions and be the association's bulletin at the same time. This magazine, suitably called 'Missions of Angola and the Congo', appeared from January 1921, under the name of the provincial, Fr Moisés Alves de Pinho, as editor, but in fact almost entirely edited and produced by Fr J. Alves Correira. Lady Isalda, on whom José Maria played many a trick in his childhood, and who had prophesied that he would become 'either a devil or a saint', was promoter for this mission magazine in the Guimaraes area.

José Maria's love for the missions kept pace with his piety and spiritual progress. He read Lady Isalda's magazine regularly, but he especially liked the pictures illustrating it showing the missionaries at work. He said to his sisters: 'What about us too going to help the missionaries? What do you think?' He kept on cultivating the little plant of the missionary vocation that had sprouted in his heart for some years. It was sown by God, no doubt, but by what intermediary? His mother's training and influence? Lady Isalda's 'sermons' and example? His missionary reading in the Holy Ghost Father's magazine? Or rather the emotions aroused by the photographs? According to his sisters, these latter 'moved our young hearts the most'. We simply do not know. True to character, he never told anyone. He was always shy and introverted, something I am inclined to attribute to his desire for perfection.

Surely it was at Braga, under the inspiration of Our Lady of Sameiro, that he made the final decision. One day towards the middle of his first year there, the sixth in his secondary course, his mother visited him. He took the occasion to disclose his secret. At the end of the evening, when it was time for her to say goodbye and leave, he accompanied her to the bus. While waiting there, José Maria, in a supreme effort, succeeded in conquering his shyness and said in a low voice, 'Mother, I have something to ask'. 'What is it?' 'Next year, at the end of secondary school, I want to enter the Holy Ghost Missionaries'. 'Yes, son, if you think it is really God's will, fine; go ahead'. The months passed, and the vacation, and another school year. Secondary studies ended. José Maria got excellent marks as usual in the exams, said goodbye to his schoolmates and the orphans of St Caetano, and took the road for Guimaraes, where his family lived.

He cut a dashing figure. He had put on a dazzling new

deep-blue suit and a new shirt of the latest cut, collar ironed and starched in the style of the time, shining new shoes embellished with shining gaiters, fully in fashion. A real dandy! He even carried a walking-stick, the thing to do that year; finally a tidy little moustache gave him an air of smartness. 'We were flabbergasted', his Spiritan sister admitted. No one expected this. It was another of his jokes. He was probably weeks preparing it, long before the exams, and he played it out to perfection. He chuckled to himself, all the time playing his role gravely and maintaining a jollity before his circle of friends. Meantime he was in correspondence with the director of the scholasticate at Viana, both parties settling the details of his entry. He spoke to his mother aside, calming her fears and worries; she, in turn, understood and tolerated his antics.

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#### PRIEST

The holidays were coming to an end. His sisters never doubted his decision until September, which he left pass without speaking of going to the university. Then suddenly, in October, he took leave of his family and friends and set off for the scholasticate at Viana. 'Mother, if I am found suitable and if the Congregation accepts me, I'll stay. If not, I'll be back'. But he did not come back; or, rather, he came back nine months later for holidays, soutane in bag. He had taken the religious habit on 20 April 1932, by a unanimous vote – 42 in favour out of the 42 entitled to vote, and 6 favourable votes out of the six members of the local council, director and staff. The next steps took the usual form of the time. He completed his philosophy course in 1931-32 and went to Orly, near Paris, for his novitiate. He made the journey with his sister, Arminda Branca, who was entering the novitiate of the Holy Ghost Sisters. On 8 September 1934 he made religious profession after an excellent report on his 'perfect' regularity, his 'trusting and charitable' relationships, his 'conscientious' application, his vocation which 'seems very solid'. Thus he returned, a professed scholastic, to Viana to do his course of theology.

That was where I met him in the following year, after four years interval during which I had to have treatment for tuberculosis in the mountains. I was beginning theology, he was in the second year, but we were fellow-students for most of the classes, which were done in rotation as far as possible. Now, precisely that very year, the theology course was being given by a young teacher newly graduated from the Gregorian university, deeply convinced of the importance of his 'tuyau' (the name given to the box containing the diploma) but also of the need to adopt a certain 'pose' in order to make up for his lack of experience and help him to 'influence' his students. This called forth the old playful streak in my friend Felgueiras, which he had had to smother in the novitiate and repress for so long. He decided to play a trick on the professor; we agreed to go along with it. On the chosen day we were all in class, as serious as judges and curbing our curiosity. The lecturer entered, books and briefcase under his arm. After the usual prayer he went to sit behind the rostrum. This was the moment we were waiting for. A pin nicely positioned at a strategic angle shot him into the air with a yelp. He turned a gimlet eye on the chair. The wily Felgueiras came forward, full of concern. 'Something wrong?' 'The chair', said the lecturer, pointing to the innocent piece of furniture. 'Why, of course, I'll bring you another!', he said, hurrying to a corner of the room where he had astutely prepared another chair beforehand. He replaced the former one and the class proceeded without further incident. The young professor never knew who played the trick on him. If he reads this little story, he will know now!

Towards the end of his theology course, at the beginning of the last year, as was the custom then, he received priestly ordination on 26 September 1937. The 17 April before, he had taken perpetual vows, with a dispensation of six months of temporary vows so as to be ordained subdeacon. He had the joys of ordination and 'first Mass' celebrated, again according to tradition, with great popular feasting at Caldas das Taipas. There followed consecration to the apostolate at Viana do Castelo on 3 July, whereat he received his 'obedience' to the Angolan mission. He spent a month with his family before leaving; he found Lady Isalda bedridden and dying - the good old lady who had complained 25 years earlier of the intolerable scamp whose teasing was annoying her no end. He undertook to bring her holy Communion every day. She

changed her tune. 'Ah, Mariquinhas', she said to his mother, using a former name for Maria, one used by the elderly, 'your son will be a saint'.

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#### MISSIONARY

He was appointed to the Prefecture Apostolic of Cubango, which, by the Missionary Concordat and Agreement of 1941, would give rise to the two dioceses of Nova Lisboa and Silva Porto, and whose territory today is spread over seven dioceses. He embarked at Lisbon on 24 October 1938 on the old packetboat, Quanza, with fifteen more Spiritans, under the leadership of Mgr Daniel Junqueira, Prefect Apostolic of Cubango, and future first bishop of Nova Lisboa from 1941. He was sent straightway to the Cuanhamas in the middle of Angola, which had only two missions – in Ovampo, among the Cuanhama tribes: Mupa and Omupanda, both of which belong to the present diocese of Ongiva.

Ovampo (or Ovambo) is a vast area of southern Africa of about 1500 sq km, which at the famous Berlin Conference (1885) had been apportioned between Portugal (Angola) and Germany (Damaraland, in the African south west, today Namibia). The division followed the line of parallel that, starting from the waterfall of Ruacaná, in Counene, would reach the river Cubango; it disregarded the peoples who inhabit the area to the extent that on each side of the boundary tribes exist that belong to the Ovampo group of the great Bantu race. This group, or sub-race, was divided into several tribes, more or less important, more or less populous. One of these – perhaps the most important, at least the best-known – was the Cuanhama tribe. They called themselves 'children of the sun': tall, handsome, strong, brave, intelligent, sociable, living on stock-farming as well as raids on the neighbouring peoples.

The Spiritans founded the very first mission on Cuanhama land, under the leadership of Fr Duparquet, after long journeys, long negotiations and tiresome discussions, between 1879 and 1883, quite near Ongiva, the present episcopal see. But it was short-lived. Towards the end of the first half of 1885,

on the occasion of a chief's death – who was certainly assassinated –, and of his succession, all the mission personnel were massacred and those Christians scattered who were able to escape the general massacre. A fresh attempt was made in 1903, which fared no better. On 2 December 1904 the Brother was assassinated by a bullet and the Father, on the advice of his superior, withdrew, bringing the 66 Christians with him. Yet another start was made at another spot, among the Evals. Lack of water made life difficult, but the missionaries held on until the repercussions of the 1914-1918 war and the skirmishings and altercations between the German and Portuguese troops obliged the population to retreat into the territory of the mission of Cuchi, towards the north. But these fugitives always dreamt of returning; they felt exiled, missing their sandy, verdant plains in the rainy season and their traditional food and drink. They kept their ears open for news; they knew at once when the war ended in Europe and therefore in Africa too; they knew the government had brought peace to the area, that there was no more hunger or trouble in their country. They set about returning.

Fr Devis made a reconnaissance trip in Cuanhama country in 1923. He was well received. When he reported to the prefect apostolic, Mgr Keiling, the latter decided to restore the mission of Cuanhama, this time on the site of Mupa. The Spiritans finally succeeded in becoming implanted there in Cuanhama country, so well that in 1928 the government proposed to hand over two settlements to them – heretofore occupied by official services who were now abandoning them – of a former German Lutheran mission, whose personnel had departed during the course of the war. Thus came about the second mission in Cuanhama country, the mission of Omupanda, 40 km north of the border with former Damaraland. Mgr Junqueira decided to send Fr Felgueiras to the mission of Omupanda; as we said, he had arrived in the prefecture at the end of 1938. He got to work energetically, enthusiastically, but he remained there only one year and a half, from 23 December 1938 to 22 June 1939, to be exact. Then he was given charge of the new foundation of Cuamato, about 80 km south east of Omupanda and barely 40 from the South African border.

'It was not a job for him', says his friend and companion, Fr Bernard Keane, 'but one rather for a veteran of the missions, experienced and hardened'. He was less than 30 years

old, less than two years a priest, one and a half years in Africa. But he never questioned or hesitated; he set to work simply, courageously and conscientiously. He began by building a 'residence', that is, a little hut like a beehive, with a little chapel, all in adobe - blocks of mud-clay dried in the sun. In a few months he had acquired sufficient mastery of the local language with its strange sounds and rudimentary syntax. Daily he travelled long distances to meet scattered segments of the population, speaking with the elders and chiefs, sharing the pains and joys of the mothers, laughing with the children, visiting and consoling the old and infirm. He was quick to like them and they, in turn, understood and liked him too. They went further: they felt that he loved them because he loved God first and often spoke of God, always with moving sincerity. His most eloquent sermon was his own life. Always of distinguished bearing, spotlessly groomed - which, in the bush, smacked of the miraculous - always with a smile, always self-effacing so as to throw the spotlight on others, he never seemed to think of himself. Constantly on the road, on foot, on horseback, on ox-drawn carts, he was by no means a 'shirt-sleeve priest'. His spiritual duties took first place in his life. He ate little, he curtailed sleep from both ends, he spent hours in silent prayer in his little bush chapel. In short, he was a man of God! Nevertheless - I say it once for all - Fr José Maria was no weakling. Certainly not. Plenty of Iberian red blood ran in his veins. He could combine delicacy and courtesy with the subtle charm of holiness. He could be as tough as steel when it came to having an abscess lanced, a tooth extracted or a painful injection. In conversation he never raised his voice or contradicted, but he would register disagreement if agreement was not possible. He wore gentleness like a garment, but on horseback he was as good as his mount and, if the animal broke into a wild gallop, he was well able for him.

These years in the bush were the happiest years of his life. He devoted himself conscientiously to his work and became deeply attached to his dear Cuanhamas, so deeply that for the rest of his life he preserved the memory of this first love engraved in his heart. He liked to speak of it, although, in his usual fashion, he played down his own part and highlighted that of others. We possess a letter he wrote in 1948 to the superior general; it epitomizes what we have just said.

*'Omupanda, when I arrived here, was already one of the*

most flourishing missions in the south. Fr Mittleberger's zeal and supernatural skill brought about the many conversions of Protestant catechists. This increased greatly our number of catechists in the bush. For the first six months I was in charge of the mission school; some time later I could begin to visit the villages (one of the most delightful ways of exercising the apostolate). I travelled by horseback or ox-drawn cart. As for community life, ah! I remember the provincial, Fr Nique, telling us during our novitiate at Orly in 1934 in one of his conferences during visitation that we should ask of God as a special grace to have a good superior when we would arrive in Africa. I asked and was heard. My first superior was Fr Mittelberger, and I could not wish for better, either as a missionary or as a mature religious. How happy we were at Omupanda! – our fraternal conversations on pastoral work and the ministry, our monthly meetings and the constructive ideas in the theological conferences, the unforgettable moments of our recreations and hours of relaxation, our exchange of opinions about the customs, traditions and religious understanding of these people! It was too good to last!

On 22 June 1940 he was transferred to take over the new foundation of Cuamato, where he remained alone until October. Then he got a companion, a Dutchman, Fr Strouss, of whom he said to the superior general:

'For five years he has been a true brother for me in the highest and best sense of the word. We worked and suffered together. The training of the boarders so as to prepare good catechists, the visits to the villages, the care of the sick, the building of the mission – we did it all in common. Finally, in October 1945, I received orders to leave my poor dear mission of Cuamato (Our Lady of Peace) for the seminary of Nova Lisboa. I was to go at once. I really loved my first-born Ovambádia. I wept, but I went with a good heart. I feared the responsibilities, while valuing the work of the seminary highly. It has been hard for me to adapt again to the sedentary life of the seminary and long continuous hours of study. But I recalled the words of our dear master of novices, who used often say: 'Paratus ad omnia: ready for everything, good at nothing! If each of us puts all he can into it, God will supply what is missing'. My beginnings were difficult. In particular, the school year 1946-47 was marked by material difficulties and others of all kinds. I was afraid of doing wrong. I sought advice, and I still retain the wise things Fr Clemente

*said: 'Follow your bishop's directives but, if he says nothing to the contrary, you can always be inspired by our rules and constitutions; train good seminarians as you were trained yourself; never forget our Venerable Father's wise and prudent rules'.*

I apologize for that long quotation, but it shows, better than I could, the soul of José Maria, what characterized his life as a religious and a missionary. While it is true that the seven years he spent in charge of the seminary at Nova Lisboa did not generate the same relaxed and carefree joy that enveloped him and made him perfectly happy at Cuanhama, he knew how important was the work entrusted to him. The training of the indigenous clergy is the first priority of the missionary Church, the indispensable and irreplaceable basis of every new local Church that the missionary must found. Thus he could sacrifice himself, his personal tastes and preferences, for the general good of the Church. He persevered, although feeling bound to his dear Cuanhamas, his simple, free Cuanhamas! The day he left Cuamato, a huge crowd of Cuanhamas followed his ox-drawn cart for 40 km to the main road, where a car was waiting to bring him to Nova Lisboa. He knew that day he had left them for good and, as on many other occasions, had turned a page and closed the door definitively on the past.

His influence was quickly felt in the seminary, but the graces of the apostolate, as is well known, have to be paid for dearly. They are always accompanied by the cross of misunderstanding as well as the feeling of frustration. These weighed on his weak shoulders. He began to sense his victim role, in obedience to the Father's will, with no idea how far it would eventually lead him. He multiplied his visits to the Blessed Sacrament and his nights of silent prayer before the tabernacle. Like the great missionaries, like Francis Xavier or Peter Claver, like his model, the Venerable Father Libermann, he had the heart of a contemplative. Thus, even in the very midst of his intense and tiring activities in the senior seminary of Nova Lisboa, the subtle temptation that has always haunted missionaries of that calibre came to him, namely, that he could do much more for the good of souls by withdrawing into a life of silence and prayer as a Carthusian or Trappist. These were difficult years, years of trial and dark night. But nobody could have guessed. Fr Felgueiras remained himself, calm, smiling, likable, tactful. He knew what he had promised, and nothing,

neither misunderstanding nor doubt, could induce him to fail in fidelity. It was there at that seminary, which he cherished wholeheartedly despite the difficulties, or perhaps because of them, that providence came to find him, in ways that were unforeseeable for they are not our ways. 'Your ways are not my ways', says the Lord (Is 55:8).

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#### GOD WRITES STRAIGHT WITH CROOKES LINES

The General Chapter of the Congregation in 1950 in an effort to develop the Congregation had expressed the desire to found new provinces. It gave priority to certain countries, indicating what older provinces would take responsibility for each. Spain figured in the list, to be founded by the province of Pourtugal. Once the initial study was made and a preliminary programme set up, the next step was to propose names. The first in this list was, precisely, Fr Felgueiras. But the bishop objected; Fr Felgueiras was needed, could not be replaced, the seminary could not do without him! Recourse was had to other names. The foundation of the Spanish province began without him. But providence would intervene.

About this time in Angola, Fr Braud was drawing up an unfortunate formal denunciation of some confreres for alleged scandals and, as he suspected that his own signature would not suffice, he sought the names of respected and prestigious colleagues whose signatures would give the document credibility. He chose two who seemed easiest to wheedle into it; one of his victims was Fr Felgueiras. The newly elected superior general, Very Reverend Fr Griffin, got a shock when his friend, Fr Daniel Murphy, procurator general to the Holy See, sent him on this report, on behalf of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, with the traditional instruction, 'pro responsione et voto'. He knew nothing about it. He despatched an 'extraordinary visitor' to Angola, Rev. Fr Clemente, who examined the situation, made enquiries and interrogations, all the time pretending to have come on other business. He saw the baselessness, even at times the wrongness, of the accusations made against the missionaries. He called those in charge and some more who were mentioned

by name, made known his conclusions (which he was going to send to the Sacred Congregation) and wept openly in front of them 'for joy', he said, at finding nothing serious in the list of accusations; they were nothing but inventions, or at most petty faults, the kind inevitable among human beings everywhere, but scandalously inflated. Nevertheless, some gesture had to be made, to give satisfaction to the 'public opinion'. So the three Fathers who had signed the unfortunate report must leave Angola!

It turned out, then, that Fr Felgueiras, in ways unforeseen and unexpected, had to pack his bags once again in haste, close the door on his past and set out for Europe. The authorities of the province, fully apprized of what had gone on and in no way disturbed, far from hesitating took a prompt decision. No sooner was Fr Felgueiras ashore at Lisbon than they proposed that he take the place meant for him at the head of the foundation of the Spanish province. It was the place he had been selected for from the start, waiting for him for two years. He accepted in all simplicity, without a second thought. Why hesitate when it appeared so obviously God's will? All of us at Lisbon, as well as himself, saw that 'Deus escreve direito por linhas tortas' (God writes straight with crooked lines).

On 3 November 1953 the provincial introduced him to the confreres of the Madrid community, the first and, at that time, only Spiritan community in Spain. 'Now you are at your right post; we trust you will like it. We will spare nothing to give you satisfaction. The house is not big but it is enough and it is welcoming; the neighbourhood is quiet, peaceful, select; the people are bright, religious, friendly; you like work and, thank God, there will be plenty of it!'

One evening the following summer the two of us were relaxing after a busy day, making future plans. We sat in two armchairs in the little inner garden of the house - it was not really taking the fresh air, for on the Iberian plateau there is never fresh air in the summer, only infernal heat, as it is always cold in the winter. He was reminiscing on his missionary life in Angola. I presumed on our old friendship to say: 'One of these days you must tell me the strange story of Fr Braud's famous report'. I regretted the words at once for his eyes filled with tears. He broke down and sobbed. I apologized for reviving old sorrows; now I saw too late, alas!, that the wound was not healed and here was I sticking the knife in

it again. 'Let it be; forgive me and we will change the subject'. 'No', he said, 'it was all right to bring it up. The affair was my fault. I was misled. I walked into the trap. Fr Braud said so many awful things, so many times and so convincingly, that in the end I said, "All right, if those things are so..." I made a dreadful mistake to sign. I have to pay for it'. 'Ah, no, my dear friend; I don't agree. You acted in good faith, so there is no fault; or whatever fault there was was a 'felix culpa', as the Church sings of Adam's fault in the Exultet of Holy Saturday. God wanted you here at the head of this work, it is your providential place. Now that you are here, you are here by God's will, the right man in the right place'. But neither of us knew, no one knew or guessed to what extreme God's will would call him, as it was waiting for him there in the Iberian plateau, in the interminable heat of the Castillian plain, to consummate his sacrifice.

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#### IN SPAIN

Meantime he had set to work, conscientiously, as usual. First he had to get used to the place, the language, the people. That did not take long; he soon had the good will of those he dealt with. His long, flowing beard, his tight-cropped hair and, above all, his ascetical appearance, without exaggeration or whimsy, his simple, sincere and deep piety – as our Venerable Father recommends – his affable and winning manners, correct without any trace of presumption, his courtesy, his extreme politeness without affectation, his spontaneous and beguiling cheerfulness – all of this, which came so natural to him, charmed and captivated everyone.

The mission of Sapin had begun, the promotion work was launched. A little magazine was already in production, and a weekly programme on the radio. The Association of Our Lady of Africa and the Archconfraternity of the Holy Spirit were spreading. Lists of benefactors and promoters were drawn up and some vocations began to appear. All these initiatives had to be intensified and new ones launched. Fr José Maria, shy by nature, did not feel quite at ease in this kind of work. It meant being on the road, meeting people,

visiting towns, villages, schools and seminaries throughout Spain. He had to widen horizons, beat new paths, open closed doors, meet new faces. The subtle temptation reappeared, returned.

**'Is my presence here really useful? Wouldn't I be better occupied in Angola, among my dear Cuanhamas, where the work suffers for want of missionaries? Perhaps I can never return to Angola? Then would I not be better in the Cistercians or Trappists? Here I do not give the same returns'. 'It pains me', he used to say, 'it distresses me to take to the road, to accost unknown people and places; but since it has to be done, I'll do it'.**

That last statement could well summarize the dispositions and calibre of this chosen soul. On he went – by train, bus, bicycle, foot. He covered all the provinces of Spain: Galicia and Andalusia, La Mancha and the two Castilles, Catalonia, Asturia, Aragon and the Basque country. The hieratic figure moved everywhere, dressed in soutane and cincture like a true Spiritan, with a small concession to local adaptation: like the other priests, he adopted the traditional headgear of the Spanish clergy, the typical sombrero, known familiarly and affectionately as 'la toja' (the pipe). He was an arresting figure, recalling the famous Don Quixote – but on foot and without the companionship of the stout Sancho! Like the hero, he pursued his dream, his life's dream; he had offered his life and was in the process of sacrificing it to God for the most abandoned souls. He used to say:

**'There are too many people who do not know what they are about in the world; they keep on walking because they have two feet to put one behind the other; they speak because they have two jaws between which to move their tongue up and down. But we are not of that type, we bear a message we must proclaim everywhere'.**

The superiors of the founding province had given clear orientations. Look for vacations among young people more advanced in their studies, who could be admitted directly to the novitiate; leave until later the possibility of a junior scholasticate – a work to be left to the Spanish Fathers when we

have some. For the moment, let us seek out more advanced young men so as to have Fathers soon. The apostolic school would delay us and take too much personnel, which we do not have.

Ecclesiastical, religious and missionary vocations were teeming in Spain at that time, whereas in Portugal, on the contrary, older vocations were scarcely to be found. Instances like Fr Felgueiras' own were very rare, really sporadic; this made the apostolic school, in Portugal, the only means of recruitment, but not in Spain. Fr Felgueiras found it hard to accept this. His 'Spiritual dream' (not at all a castle in the air) could not live without the junior scholasticate. The two of us spoke about it in detail, weighing the pros and cons. I tended to take sides against his idea. He propounded his main reasoning. 'Formation to religious and apostolic life must begin as early as possible – in the cradle, if it could be done; then it comes easy, natural; one reaches perfection almost without realizing it; whereas to begin late, like me, means never reaching perfection. These people will always have a wooden leg – 'come un servidor!' (like me!) – a wooden leg that juts out under the soutane'. I simply could not agree, I who had had to climb the whole ladder and go through all the steps of the junior scholasticate one by one. And I had often observed the wooden leg beneath the soutane of those who did do the junior scholasticate! I argued back, showing him the flaws, but never succeeded in convincing him.

His colleague at Madrid, Fr Augusto Teixeira Maio, recounts the following. 'One day towards Christmas 1954 we had sent greetings to all the bishops of Spain for Christmas and the new year, asking their blessing on our work. The first to answer was the Bishop of Palencia, Mgr José do Souto Vizoso. He made the offer of a house in his diocese at Paredes de Nava, 25 km north of Palencia, if we wanted it for a junior seminary. Fr José Maria was thrilled, he saw the providential sign he was waiting for. He went to see it; when he got back to Madrid he was walking on air! The plan, accepted at his request by the superiors of the province, followed the usual procedures. Fr José Maria added this care to his present ones. He looked after the repairing and fitting out of the house, the buying of furniture and the thousand items needed. The province sent two young Fathers and a Brother. The Spiritan junior scholasticate of Paredes de Nava was inaugurated on 11 October 1955. The little town welcomed the

Fathers with affection and tenderness beyond all expectations. They were spoiled! Clergy, civic authorities, business people and farmers (Paredes is in the centre of the great wheat plain of Castilla) – everyone hailed our arrival and provided for our every need. More than anyone else, Fr José Maria experienced satisfaction and rejoiced in the opening of the school. He continued to reside at Madrid, of course, for the general administration of the work, but whenever he had a few free days he would spend them with his children of Paredes.

The school year ended and the children went home on vacation. The usual vocations campaign took place and all was set for the reopening. The day fixed was 4 October, a Thursday. The day before, at Madrid, Fr Felgueiras received a letter from Fr Camboa, the sub-director, with the bad news that the director was in bed with high fever; the doctor spoke of paratyphoid and threatened appendicitis. Fr Camboa was practically alone to receive the children and their mothers, who were to arrive the following day, since his companion, a young Father recently arrived at Paredes, spoke as yet little Spanish. Could Fr Felgueiras come and help him to receive these people? Fr Felgueiras wanted more detailed information. He telephoned and asked for 'a conference with Paredes'. Half an hour later he had Fr Camboa on the line. The sick man was improving but would not be well for a few days. Fr Felgueiras' presence seemed essential. 'All right, I'll go', he said. 'Then the best thing would be to take the correo gallego (the Galicia mail-train), leaving the North station of Madrid at 11.15 p.m. You will meet five boys of Andalucia with their mothers, already on the way; they left Jaén this morning; they will take that train tonight from Madrid'.

All went as planned. Fr Felgueiras set off from Madrid with the little Andalusians in the same third class coach. They got to know each other and talked. All the children were neighbours, from the same village of Jódar in the province of Jaén. They chatted a little, but travel weariness soon overcame them and they slept, as the train sped northwards through the vast Castillian plain.

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\* \* \*

## A HERO

5 a.m. It was still dark, but they had arrived. Fr Felgueiras awakened the youngsters as the train drew into Paredes. It came to a halt. They took their luggage and began getting out. There was no light at the station. As usual, the third class coaches stopped away from the station. As usual, the third class coaches stopped away from the short platform. They would all have to jump in the dark. Fr Felgueiras went first, to help with the luggage; then the women jumped, then the children. But the train moved off too quickly. Usually there are very few passengers for Paredes on this train. No one could see anything in the dark. No one thought there could be eleven passengers getting out of the same door. The first ten jumped safely, but the last, Lino Diaz Diaz, eleven years old, was missing. He would have to jump from the moving train. He hesitated, but was on the point of jumping. Fr Felgueiras saw him and sensed the danger: the little lad would jump and fall back under the train! He did not hesitate; he ran forward alongside the moving train, stretched out his hand and grasped the child. But his own soutane caught in the train. He saved the child, but the train rolled over himself – cruelly, as he counted the coaches still to come. In the confusion, no one saw clearly what had happened. Everyone surrounded the child, whose arm was seriously damaged (some hours later the doctors at the hospital would amputate it). Suddenly there was a cry, 'Where is Fr Felgueiras?' He was not around. They searched in the dark and heard a feeble groan. They came on him further along the sleepers, between the rails, where the train had left him after dragging him a good twelve yards. His right leg was literally in pulp, his left leg broken in two places, his foot twisted and dislocated, the rest of his body covered with wounds, the largest being on his back, exposing the right kidney and much of the vertebral column. They carried him back to the platform and left him on the ground until a car could be got to bring him to the hospital at Palencia, 25 km away.

Stretched there on the ground on the station-platform, disregarding his own condition, he inquired about the boy. 'The boy! What has happened Lino?' 'Be at ease, Father; the youngster is all right'. 'Then why is his mother crying?'

*'His arm is badly hurt, but that will be looked after'. 'Please look after him well, don't worry about me'.* At that hour of the morning, Paredes was asleep. It took ages to procure a taxi. But it gave time to waken the village. The parish priest brought the last sacraments. Finally the taxi arrived and carried him gingerly to the hospital, along with the little Lino. Both underwent emergency operations, both suffered amputations: the boy of the left arm, the priest of the right leg; they tried to save the other leg but three weeks later had to amputate it too, now gangrened.

He lay in hospital between life and death for 54 days of agony, until 26 November. His younger sister, gentle Cidó, and a Brother of the Congregation watched day and night. We all visited him as often as possible especially Fr Teixeira Maio, his colleague from Madrid, the community of Paredes, who took turns each day so that he could see them all, the provincial, who took up residence at Paredes so as to be nearby. At that period I was at Lisbon, but I arranged to go and spend three days with him. I had barely opened the door gently when he saw me and his eyes filled with tears. Piece-meal and sketchily he repeated what he had already told those around his bedside, his confreres, his sister and his older brother, who often visited him.

*'I was aware of being dragged by the train and left in bits on the sleepers. I counted the wagons still to pass over me until the end of the train, but the presence of God never came so clear and real to me as at that moment. My dispositions? I felt overcome by a twofold sentiment. First, I saw with shattering clarity that the Lord Jesus is the sublime High Priest, he sacrifices his victims when and as he wishes. At the same time I understood as never before that obedience is everything in our life; without that, nothing counts. We make lots of plans, we fantasize many things, we make ourselves important; then all of a sudden Our Lord comes forward to demonstrate that he can get along without us, and that perfectly well'.*

This reflection was an illumination he received at the moment of the accident, the moment he thought was his last. It impressed him so deeply that he lived in the light of it during his last weeks, more than seven weeks of agony preceding his death. He took the prescribed medicines in a spirit of obedience; when it proved physically impossible he humbly asked to be dispensed, apologizing. *'I certainly do not want to be*

disobedient, but it is impossible'. He wished to be obedient through and through – he even went so far as to ask his superior permission to die. To his sister he said, 'Please ask the Blessed Virgin to come and take me to heaven'. The doctors were unhappy about this, they feared that his strong desire to see God would negative the effects of the medicines. But the illumination he had had was stronger than he. *One day Fr Maio was at his bedside. Seeing his sister and Fr Maio, he said, 'Sing for me'. 'What will we sing?' He mentioned a popular Portuguese song to Our Lady: 'I will go to heaven to see her'. The two of them began:*

*One day I'll go to see her  
In the fatherland above,  
Yes, I'll go to see Our Lady,  
My joy and my love.*

*The sick man joined in the chorus: In heaven, in heaven, in heaven, I'll go to see her one day. He cried out, 'Louder, louder', and they continued.*

He received holy Communion every day from the hospital chaplain. He had been anointed when he came to the hospital on the morning of the accident; fully conscious, he had followed the rite reverently and then thanked the chaplain profusely for the sacrament. At the hospital, and even outside, people anxiously followed his long agony. In the early hours of 26 November he said goodbye to the surgeon, who had come to visit him. Afterwards the surgeon spoke to the provincial in the corridor: 'I would give anything to save that priest's life, but I am helpless. I would also give anything to accompany him where he is going if I were sure of going like him'. In the evening he made his profession of faith and renewed his religious vows; then, holding the provincial's hand, **he offered his life to God, for holy Church, for the Congregation, for the work in Spain, for the missions, for sinners and, without it being suggested to him, he added 'and for the martyrs of Hungary'**. It was Sunday 25 November, in the afternoon. He passed a very painful night, groaning and crying in pain, he who had heretofore won the admiration of all for his courage and heroic patience. The end was approaching. He repeated over and over, **'Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit'**. The provincial asked him to bless everyone once more before dying. He lifted his hand with difficulty, traced vaguely the sign of the cross and murmured, **'Yes, all, I bless you all – those here, the absent, my fami-**

**ly, the Congregation, the missions, young people, so that they may generously replace those who fall'**. He suffered a lot all the morning but grew calmer in the afternoon. The Passion of our Lord according to St John was read aloud to him. He listened attentively, right to the end. Then he breathed his last; it was exactly 3 p.m.

One of the doctors who had looked after him in his last agony, and who attended his last moments, said, '*We have never seen anything like this; it was the most Christ-like image we ever contemplated; a saint has died*'.

Fr Nogueira da Rocha, C.S.Sp.