

**Bl. Esther Paniagua Alonso
(Spain/Algeria) (1949-1994), Martyr**

*Trained as a nurse and assigned to a hospital in Algeria
where she cared for handicapped children.¹*



Esther Paniagua Alonso was born on June 7, 1949, in Izagre, Leon, Spain, to Dolores Alonso and Nicasio Paniagua. At age 18, Esther joined the Augustinian Missionary Congregation. She made her perpetual vows in August 1970. She was trained as a nurse.

Sister Esther was assigned to a hospital in the Bab El Oued neighborhood of Algiers, Algeria, where she was especially drawn to handicapped children. When asked about the situation in the country she answered, *“No one can take our lives because they have already been given...”*²

The wave of violence that broke out in the 1990 in Algeria, and which mainly affected religious missionaries, was so extreme that the bishop of Algiers, Henri Teissier, recommended that the religious communities consider leaving. Sister Maria Jesus Rodriguez, then provincial superior of the Augustinian Missionaries, traveled to Algeria to discern with the community about their future. After a few days of reflection, the three members of the community freely decided to continue in Algeria *“out of fidelity to the Gospel, out of love for the Algerian people who had welcomed them, because they were sharing faith and life with the people and did not want to flee but to run their same fate,”* explains Sister Maria Jesus who directly experienced the martyrdom of Sister Caridad and Sister Esther. On the afternoon of October 23, they planned to attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in the chapel of the Little Sisters of Foucauld, a few meters from the house of the Augustinian Missionaries. They traveled in pairs, as the embassy had recommended. Caridad and Esther went ahead and behind them the provincial superior and Lourdes, the third sister of the community, *“Caridad and Esther turned the street and we lost sight of them. At that moment two shots rang out. Moments later, people began to run and a lady took us into her house. We heard crying and learned that a Christian had died. We went up to the roof of the house, from where the chapel of the Sisters of Foucauld could be seen, and we saw the bodies of Caridad and Esther lying on the ground.”*³

On October 23, 1994, Sister Esther was shot three times in the head by *Armed Islamic Group* while walking to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass on Sunday in Bab-el-Oued neighborhood of Algiers, Algeria. She was 45 years old. Also martyred with her was the Augustine Missionary, Sister Caridad Alvarez Martin (1933-1994) who had served in Algeria for more than 30 years caring for the elderly and poor.³

Sister Esther was declared venerable with the promulgation of the decree of martyrdom on January 26, 2018, and beatified on December 8, 2018,⁴ by Pope Francis. The beatification ceremony for the 19 Martyrs of Algeria was held at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Holy Cross in Oran. (Memorial - May 8)

Nineteen (19) Martyrs of Algeria (1994-1996)

There were three nurses among the 19 beatified martyrs of Algeria killed between May 8, 1994, and August 1, 1996. The martyrs were men and women from eight different congregations. Through their martyrdom, they witnessed to the universal love of Christ.¹

The 19 martyred are: Sister Paul-Helene Saint-Raymond, Brother Henri Vergès, Sister Esther Paniagua Alonso, Sister Caridad Álvarez Martín, Fr. Jean Chevillard, Fr. Alain Dieulangard, Fr. Charles Deckers, Fr. Christian Chessel, Sister Angèle-Marie Littlejohn, Sister Bibiane Leclercq, and Sister Odette Prévost; The seven Trappist monks of Tibhrine, who were kidnapped in March 1996 and killed in May 1996: Brother Luc Dochier, Brother Christian de Chergé, Brother Christophe Lebreton, Brother Michel Fleury, Brother Bruno Lemarchand, Brother Célestin Ringear, and Brother Paul Favre-Miville. Their story was dramatized in the 2010 French film *Of Gods and Men*. The last of the 19 to be martyred was Bishop Pierre Claverie, a French Algerian, the Bishop of Oran from 1981, who was killed on August 1, 1996.²

References:

- 1) "Blessed Esther Paniagua Alonso". CatholicSaints.Info. 15 September 2018. Web. 8 December 2021. <<https://catholicsaints.info/blessed-esther-paniagua-alonso/>>
- 2) SSVM. (2 Jan 2019). "I choose to stay"" Starting 2019 with the Newly Beatified Martyrs of Algeria. Accessed 18 April 2022. <https://ssvmusa.org/index.php/2019/01/02/i-choose-to-stay-starting-2019-with-the-newly-beatified-martyrs-of-algeria>
- 3) Theresa Garcia. (6 Dec 2018). ArchidiocesisBurgos. The Burgos nun Caridad Alvarez, assassinated in Algiers in 1994, will be beatified on Saturday. Accessed 18 April 2022. <https://www.archiburgos.es/2018/12/06/la-religiosa-burgalesa-caridad-alvarez-asesinada-en-argel-en-1994-sera-beatificada-el-sabado/>
- 4) Hagiography Circle: An Online Resource on Contemporary Hagiography. Martyrs of Algeria (1994-1996). Esther Paniagua Alonso. Accessed 16 April 2022. <http://newsaints.faithweb.com/martyrs/Algeria.htm>

Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses (www.ciciams.org / www.nacn-usa.org): to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls. May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka