

Bl. Maria Pilar Gullon Yturriaga

(Spain) 1911-1936, Martyr

Lay woman. Cared for the sick in their homes.

*Trained and served as a Red Cross nurse
at the front in the Spanish Civil War.²*

Three Red Cross nurses killed in the Spanish Civil War
“The Martyr Nurses of Astorga”

Maria Pilar Gullon Yturriaga was born on May 29, 1911, in Madrid, Spain to Manuel Gullon and Pilar Yturriaga. She was the eldest of four children born to their union. She was baptized in

the parish church of San Genesio on June 28, 1911, in Arles with the names of Maria del Pilar Peregrina Matea Maximina.³ She made her First Holy Communion at the Blanca de Castilla school in Madrid. Maria Pilar’s father worked as a lawyer and was a member of the Liberal Party in the National Parliament for the constituency of Astorga.

Pilar remained single and cared for her parents, particularly her father who was ill. On July 16, 1936, the family returned to Astorga. There Maria Pilar was a member of Catholic Action and the Daughters of Mary in the Diocese of Astorga, Spain. She also taught catechism to children and cared for ill and infirmed in their homes. She trained as a nurse and served as a Red Cross nurse at the

front during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

On October 27, 1936, she was imprisoned, abused, raped and ordered to renounce Christianity by the anti-Catholic militia. She refused. When she was given one last chance to renounce her faith she responded, “Long live Spain, long live Christ the King.”² At the age of 25, she was executed by shooting at noon on October 28, 1936, by female militia who volunteered to kill her and fellow nurses: Octavia Iglesias Blanco and Olga Perez Monteserin Nunez.

Martyrdom: On October 8, 1936, the women arrive at the hospital in Puerto de Somiedo (Pola de Somiedo-Asturias) to serve for eight days. Their time completed, they remained at the hospital in the midst of a very harsh anti-religious atmosphere prevalent during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

At dawn on Tuesday, October 27, 1936 attacks intensified on the front where the small hospital was located. They could have fled but Pilar, Octavia and Olga decided not to abandon the wounded. They placed their own lives in danger as they continued to assist the wounded. When the hospital was overtaken, the wounded were shot and the medical personnel arrested. The three nurses were taken, after a long march, to Pola de Somiedo with other prisoners which included the commander, chaplain and doctor who were killed. Although the women were Red Cross nurses and should have had immunity in combat per the Geneva Conventions, they were handed over to the local War Committee and then to the militiamen who demanded they renounce their faith. When they refused to renounce their faith, the nurses were abused and raped throughout the night. Naked, they were taken to a meadow near Pola de Somiedo, Asturias, Spain, at noon on October 28, 1936, and shot while proclaiming “Christ the King.” After killing



them, the militia women shared the clothes of the three nurses. Their bodies were degraded and left in a common grave dug by some men from the town who were forced to do so by the militiamen.

This was one of the first murders of Red Cross nurses since usually nurses and other health professionals were given immunity. All three declared themselves openly to be Catholic and that they belonged to the Daughters of Mary, the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul and Catholic Action. According to an account of Maria Pilar's nephew Manuel Gullon:

The Red Cross volunteer nurses rotated every fortnight, and they had the opportunity to return to Astorga and take turns with other young women to care for the wounded from the [Spanish] Civil War at the Hospital de Sangre de Pola de somiedo. They asked to stay on the second shift as well. That was when the Republican militiamen attacked... They were taken handcuffed and tied up in the village. The leader of the expedition, nicknamed 'El Patas' offered to set them free and return to Astorga if they renounced their faith and joined his party. When they refused, they locked them in a house in Pola, which still exists, and 'El Patas' told the militiamen to do with them what they wanted during the night. They raped them and their boss even drove a bullock cart through the village so that the screeching of its axles made it more difficult to hear the screams of the three nurses. The next day, on October 28, 1936, at noon, they were shot naked.⁵

The three are known as the martyr nurses of Astorga.⁵ Their fame spread immediately in the ecclesial community. On January 30, 1938, the remains were interred in the Cathedral of Astorga, Spain. On June 28, 1948, at the request of the National Assembly of the Red Cross, they were transferred to a new mausoleum in the chapel of St. John the Baptist in the Cathedral.⁵

During his interview, Manuel Gullon explained that he was not aware of any miracle specifically attributed to the three nurses. However, his father, Pilar Gullon's brother, composed a prayer for the nurses to intercede for the health of his mother. Nine days after his father prayed the prayer, his mother recovered completely.

Octavia Iglesias Blanco and companions were declared venerable with the promulgation of the decree of martyrdom on June 11, 2019, and beatified on May 29, 2021, both by Pope Francis.⁷ (Memorial - November 6)

According to the Catholic News Agency, the Spanish Civil War was fought from 1936-1939 between National forces, led by Francisco Franco, and the Republican faction. During the war, Republicans martyred thousands of clerics, religious, and laity; of these 11 have been canonized, and more than 1,900 beatified.⁸

References:

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- 2) Aciprensa. (15Oct2020). The three lay martyrs of Astorga will be beatified on this date. Accessed 10 April 2022. <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/las-tres-martires-laicas-de-astorga-seran-beatificadas-en-esta-fecha-97177>
- 3) Hagiography Circle: An Online Resource on Contemporary Hagiography. Martyrs of the Religious Persecution during the Spanish Civil War (1934, 1936-1939). [199] Maria del Pilar Gullon Yturriaga and 2 companions from the Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Astorga. Accessed 10 April 2022. <http://newsaints.faithweb.com/martyrs/MSPC55.htm>

4) Catholic News Agency. (1Jun2021). Spanish Civil War Martyrs of Astorga 'didn't let themselves be overcome by fear.' Accessed 18 May 2022. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247857/spanish-civil-war-martyrs-of-astorga-didnt-let-themselves-be-overcome-by-fear>

5) Congregazione delle Cause dei Santi. Maria Colon Gullon Yturriaga and 2 Companions (1936). Accessed 4 June 2022. <http://www.causesanti.va/it/santi-e-beati/maria-colon-gullon-yturriaga-e-2-compagne.html>

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