

# **The Voluntary Christian Martyrs of Ninth-Century Muslim Córdoba**

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## **Abstract:**

The aim of the current study is to understand from a historical point of view the life of the Spanish Christians in the 9<sup>th</sup> century under the Muslim rule. After the fall of the Visigoth kingdom in Spain, since 711 a new life began for Spanish Christians under the Muslim rule. Due to the Islamic laws governing their country, Christians lost many rights and civil liberties. Under this socio political context, the case of martyrs in the capital Umayyad of Córdoba (756-912), reveals itself as a complex phenomenon caused by the oppressive situation in which Christians lived. Their sufferings are depicted in the work of St. Eulogius of Córdoba († 859), *Memorialis Sanctorum* and continued in the work of his friend Alvaro Paulo, *Indiculusluminosus: in defensione servorum tuorum, Domine*. Starting with Saint Perfecto's martyrdom in 850, the accounts of the martyrs of Córdoba ended with the very suffering of St. Eulogius in 859.

## **Keywords:**

Christian martyr, Muslim rule, 9<sup>th</sup> century, blasphemy, Spain

Since the beginning of Arab supremacy, the city of Córdoba has been chosen as the capital of Muslim Spain<sup>2</sup>. At the city entrance, as some chronicles report,

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<sup>2</sup> After a long period of prosperity and stability marked by important figures of kings, such as Leovigildo (571-586) and Recaredo the Great (586-601), the Visigoth Kingdom of Spain fell to a deplorable condition at the end of the eighth century, marked by instability, corruption, provincial divisions and plots. The great social inequalities, which generated deep crisis and feelings of apathy over everything that represented public life in Spain,

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the Muslims destroyed all Christian churches except for the city's cathedral and the church of Saint Acisclo<sup>3</sup>. Since in 748 half of the cathedral was converted into a mosque, and in 784 the entire cathedral had become a mosque, Christians were given the right to refurbish some churches in ruins or even to build new ones. Thus, during Emir Abd al-Rahman II (822-852) reign, there were several churches and monasteries in Córdoba and in its surrounding areas, as gathered from contemporary writings of Saint Eulogius, his apprentice, Alvaro from Córdoba, Dean Sanson, and the calendar of Bishop Recemundo. Besides these eight churches and two monasteries in Córdoba and in its nearby area, there were still some monasteries in the mountains that surrounded the capital, Tábanos being the most prestigious one<sup>4</sup>.

Saint Eulogius was the most influential personality of Christian life in Córdoba. He is thus closely related to the case of the martyrs from this city in the 9<sup>th</sup> century being the one that preserved the Christian faith and the Latin culture. His friend Paul Alvarus in Córdoba wrote his biography in a warm manner. According to Paul Alvarus' testimony, Eulogius was born around 800 in Córdoba from aristocratic parents belonging to senatorial family of Christian Goths. About his grandfather, Eulogius remembered that when he heard the muezzin's voice calling at the mosque from the top of the village tower, he immediately would make the sign of the cross and repeat the words of Psalm 82, 1-2: "God, who will be like Thee? Do not shut up or rest, you God! For behold, your enemies have become angry, and those who hate You have lifted up their heads"<sup>5</sup>. His mother was called Elizabeth and she had five other children beside Eulogius. As a young child, the saint was committed to serve God in the church of Saint Zoilo, entering the ranks of those who were training to become clerics. Wishing to improve his knowledge in the study of the Holy Scriptures, he became the disciple of the

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created an ideal climate to be able to look indifferently to any regime change, be it one brought by the Muslim invaders. Moreover, this regime change has become desirable to the Visigoth domination. In 711 the Muslim invasion takes place in the Iberian Peninsula, and by the end of 714 all of Spain, apart from what is known today as the Principality of Asturias, a small mountainous territory in the northwestern part of Spain, fell under the Arab-Muslim rule. The city of Córdoba, the homeland of the famous bishop and counselor of the Holy Emperor Constantine the Great, Osius from Córdoba, was chosen to be the capital of Spain's new government.

<sup>3</sup> Zacarias GarciaVillalda, *Historia Eclesiastica de España III*, Editorial Razon y Fe, S.A., Madrid, 1936, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Fray Justo Perez de Urbel, *San Eulogio de Córdoba*, Ediciones Fax, Madrid, 1942, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

famous abbot Esperaindeo. Here, in the years of apprenticeship, he met Paul Alvarus, his future friend<sup>6</sup>.

The following events in St. Eulogius' life have a close connection with the martyrs of Córdoba, so that his life cannot be narrated without the wonderful works of the martyrs, to whom he dedicated his most important work, *Memorialis Sanctorum*. In this work Eulogius recounts the martyrs' sufferings in the Andalusian capital<sup>7</sup>. Most of them were voluntary martyrs. Others fell victim to the Muslim law, which stipulated that a child born of a Muslim father and a Christian mother had to follow the religion of the father; otherwise he was sentenced to death. Some others were forced to tell what Christians believe about the Muslim prophet Mohammed and by confessing the truth, they paid with their lives. Nonetheless, let's see how it all began in that Córdoba, full of the ninth-century Islamic arrogance.

### **The beginning of the persecution and the first martyrs**

Despite the semi-independence enjoyed by Christians in practicing their religious beliefs and religious cult, the relations with Muslims became increasingly tense in the first half of the ninth century, which ended in confrontation in the second half of the century. The resistance of the Mozarabs to Muslims, the reinforcement of Muslim political power with the emperor Abd al-Rahman II's coming on the throne (822-852) and the decline of the relations between Muslims and free Christians in the North gave rise to a severe persecution of Mozarabic Christians<sup>8</sup>. In the tense environment, recently built churches were destroyed, the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> The term *al-Andalus* refers to the territory occupied by Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula from the 8<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Its borders varied due to the conquest battles of both Hispanic-Muslims and Christians in the northern Christian kingdoms. Currently one of the autonomous communities of the Kingdom of Spain is named Andalucía with its capital in Seville.

<sup>8</sup> The name *Mozarab* has been the subject of many controversies and attempts to clarify over the centuries. The term appears for the first time in history in the act given to the inhabitants of Toledo by King Alfonso VI (1065-1109), the one who took back from the Muslims the ancient Visigothic capital in 1085: <<*Ad Totos Muztarabes de Toletto, tam cavalleros quam pedones*>>. From here on, all Hispanic-Latin documents will use this term. In order to name the Christians, the Arabs used other terms, such as: *acham* or *achemieis* (barbarians, strangers), *naçranies* or *Christians*, *Romyis* or *Romans*, *moxriques* or polytheists, *dimmies* or those subject to the pact, *moahides* (allies, clients, tributaries), finally, *mosalimes* (those who accepted peace, who live in peace with others - to distinguish them from free Christians who, according to Islamic law, must be fought until total obedience). As far as the etymology of the term "Mozarab" is concerned, it is certain

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taxes were increased, and the Christian clergy began to be persecuted. No Christian could live peacefully and safely. For instance, when a priest had to leave his church and enter the city, as soon as he was recognized, he was insulted, and the Muslim children threw stones at him. When hearing the Christian bells, Muslims began to curse and defame Christians. It seemed that the unbelievers wanted to destroy the Christians religion in their kingdom<sup>9</sup>. The prisons were full of priests, many churches remaining without ministers. This is the image in which Saint Eulogius depicts the atmosphere that preceded the huge number of martyrs in Córdoba, many of them, volunteers<sup>10</sup>. The hatred of the Muslims, and of the Christians converted to Islam, the Muladies, grew in intensity whenever there was any news of victory from the free Christians in the North against Muslim troops or of any revolt of the Christians in Toledo or elsewhere.

### **St. Perfectus, the martyred priest (850)**

This priest was in charge of the administration of the goods of St. Acisclo's church and often went into the city after what the community needed. One day, as he was crossing the streets of the city, some Muslims came to him asking what the Christians believed in and what they thought of Jesus Christ and the prophet Mohammed. After exposing his Christian faith in Jesus Christ, he added, "About your prophet, I dare not say what Christians believe; because I have no doubt that I will hurt you with my words. However, if you promise to keep the secret I will tell you what place your prophet deserves in our law and how Christians honour him". Once the promise made, Perfectus spoke to them in Arabic, pointing out that Mohammed was a false prophet, as the Lord told us that many God's enemies would come full of evil and desire. He called him immoral, as he had seduced Yaynab, the woman of his slave Zaid, by invoking for this deed the command of the angel. Mohammed was a prophet who corrupted the hearts of those who

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that it is a term of Arabic origin for Christians. The opinion that has been imposed on the previous ones is that *Mozarab* comes from the Arabic *mostarab* idiom that translates *into introduced between Arabs, half blood Arabic, or Arabized*. According to Francisco Javier Simonet, *Historia de los mozárabes de España I*, Ediciones Turner, Madrid, 1983, pp. VII-XII.

<sup>9</sup> A famous Muslim teacher, Abdelmelic ben Habib, born in Granada and apparently among the Muladies, dead in 853, prophesied that a descendant of Mohammed from his daughter Fatima would come to reign in the Peninsula, conquer Constantinople and he will kill all the Mozarabians in Córdoba and the surroundings by selling their wives and daughters. According to Francisco Javier Simonet, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Eulogius, *Memorialis Sanctorum* in Augustin S. Ruiz, O. B., *Obras completas de San Eulogio*, Edición bilingüe, Real Academy of Córdoba, Córdoba, 1959, pp. 105-107.

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followed him, leading them to eternal damnation. Trapped by the promise they made, the Muslims kept silent. However, after a few days, Perfectus went into the city again on business, and this time, those who had challenged him before, surrounded him and accused him of having denigrated Mohammed. Perfectus had a moment of weakness and denied allegations before the Muslim judge. Despite that, he, the cadmium, imprisoned him thinking to send him to death at the end of Ramadan.

Once in prison, Perfectus spent a long time there in vigils and prayers, reinforcing his faith. On April 18, 850, at the end of the month of the Muslim fast, Perfectus was brought in the middle of the square, and he was beheaded after having bravely confessed his faith in Christ. The revenge of those who witnessed his killing was so great that they crushed his body in his own blood. The Christians took and buried him in his parish church<sup>11</sup>.

The following year, the Christian merchant John was brought before the court, accused of repeating the name of Mohammed disrespectfully, while advertising his products. As the accusers did not have reliable witnesses, the judge ordered that John to be whipped, and then to be carried on the back of a donkey across the city to show what happened to those who did not respect Islam. More dead than alive after five hundred whips, John was carried through the market to teach the others a lesson and then he was imprisoned. There he met Saint Eulogius, who had been sent in prison by the Metropolitan Bishop of Seville, Reccafredus, as Eulogius encouraged the voluntary martyrs. Eulogius' testimony about his death is not clear. Recalling the martyrdom of Saint Perfectus, he added, "The venerable priest Perfectus, whom I spoke of before, and whom John followed in martyrdom, sent to prison, and then: The voluntary martyrdom of this very one encouraged others to fight spontaneously for the faith"<sup>12</sup>.

An illustrious voluntary martyr was Isaac who was well educated and fluent in Arabic. Before entering the monastery, due to his qualities he quickly became *exceptor*<sup>13</sup> in the Moorish government. He resigned, becoming a monk at the Tábanos monastery, seven miles away from Córdoba. After three years of living in the monastery " he was suddenly lit up by divine grace and ran to appear before the Muslim judge ...". In front of the judge, he confessed: "I wish I could make a good believer of Mohammed if you want to explain the faith of your prophet and the principles of his doctrine." The judge replied: "Mohammed is the founder of this religion, who, taught by the archangel Gabriel, received from God the prophecy that he had to preach to people, wrote the law, and taught about Paradise

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> His job was to collect taxes from Christians

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and the Kingdom of Heaven, full of pleasures and populated with virgins". Hearing this teaching, Isaac the monk replied, "You are lying! May the curse of heaven fall upon the one who, stained by such a great crime, has influenced so many that he takes with him to hell. Mohammed, a diabolical man, devoted to the arts of magic, encouraged drinking from the cup of the evil, is taking his eternal damnation. If you had been warned why don't you keep away from such dangers? Why don't you give up the mischievous doctrine, and choose the eternal health of the gospel's faith? "Overwhelmed by what he heard, the judge lost his temper and began to strike the confessor. Warned by those around, he calms down and asks whether he has said such a thing due to drunkenness or madness, knowing that whoever confesses such things was receiving the death penalty. With courage, Isaac acknowledged, "I'm neither drunk, nor crazy. Longing for the love of truth, of which I have seen that your prophet and you have no idea, I presented it to you clearly. If I have to die for God I will suffer it gladly and willingly, without making the slightest move to avoid the sword. I did not forget what the Lord said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"<sup>14</sup>.

After ordering his imprisonment, the judge informed the Emir, and he proclaimed an edict condemning to death all who dared to address profanities to the prophet Mohammed, the founder of the Muslim religion. Monk Isaac was beheaded on June 3, 851, his body being tied up with his head downwards for the crowd's show. A few days later, his body was burned, and the ashes thrown into the Guadalquivir River, to avoid Christians to venerate him.

Two days after Isaac's death, the young Sancho was crucified. Two days later, the elder Peter and the deacon Walabonsus came out of Cuteclara monastery, the eldest Sabino and Wistremundo from Zoilo monastery, from the settlement of St. Christopher, the elderly man Habencio, and from Tábanos monastery, its founder, old Jeremiah. These six men went before the judge saying, "We, oh judge, have and practice the same faith for which our holy brothers, Isaac and Sancho, have been sacrificed; you can execute us; Do not stop the cruelty and come with all the rage against us for your offended prophet. For so we testify that Christ is the only God, and we solemnly proclaim that your prophet is the forerunner of the Antichrist and the author of a false doctrine"<sup>15</sup> After hearing their confessions, all were condemned to death by cutting their heads. Only old Jeremiah was whipped before his head was cut off. Their bodies, like those of the previous martyrs, were exposed in the market, and then burned.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 159.

The above-mentioned martyrs have made a strong impression on both Christians in Córdoba and Muslims. Many Christians, following their example, volunteered before the judges cursing Mohammed and proclaiming God. The concern of the authorities has begun to grow. Emir al-Rahman II and his ministers, realizing that the oddity of the extermination of such a large crowd would worsen the issue rather than solving it, tried to find other ways to stop the number of martyrs. They pleaded to the Metropolitan Bishop of Seville, Reccafredus, to exceptor Gomez and to other Christians who could have stopped martyrs from volunteering before Muslim courts. Reccafredus complied to this request and began to advise Christians not to volunteer for martyrdom. Many Christians did not like his policy and considered it a betrayal and a mistake. The one who opposed the most the policy of the Metropolitan of Seville was St. Eulogius. Disturbed, however, by Eulogius's enthusiastic response, Reccafredus ordered his imprisonment, and thus Muslim prisons were full of witnesses of Christ<sup>16</sup>.

Reccafredus' policy, which satisfied the emir's demands, was followed by Gomez, the exceptor. The campaign of the two succeeded in bringing doubt on some Christians who preferred a quiet life. All of them, united in their desire to discredit the voluntary martyrs, gave another dimension to the campaign, both in their high number and in the arguments, they supported their view. These arguments were numerous. Firstly, the martyrs who had suffered so far neither caused changes among the unfaithful, nor reinforced the faith among the Christians because they did not work any miracles; secondly, the martyrs presented themselves before the judges by their own will, without being violently constrained to abandon their faith; thirdly, Christians could practice their faith, and fourthly, emir Abd al-Rahman II himself ordered more than once that Christianity should be respected. All being considered, the martyrs did not deserve to be among the saints.

### ***Memorialis Sanctorum***

To reject these arguments and to reinforce the honour of the martyrs who died for Christ, St. Eulogius wrote his most important work, *Memorialis Sanctorum*. Though many works in the composition do not have the power of the Martiric Acts, as they reproduced what Eulogius had heard, the work remains a true literary masterpiece full of Christian piety of Mozarabic Christians from the mid-ninth century in Muslim Spain. Consisting of three books and a prologue, the writing was begun before his arrest. The first two books were finished during the

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<sup>16</sup> Alvaro Paulo, *Vita del Passio Beatissimi Martyrus Eulogii* in Augustin S. Ruiz, O. B., *op. cit.*, p. 21.

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four months of Eulogius' imprisonment in Córdoba from the end of June to the end of November 851.

The prologue of the work begins with the greeting of the author to all the churches in the world, greetings that he had first kept for the brethren in the monasteries around Córdoba, from where most of the voluntary martyrs came from, then changed them by realizing the universality of the message. The book provides the reader with a complete analysis of the behaviour of voluntary martyrs and responds promptly to the four arguments brought by martyrs' slanderers. Martyrs died because they confessed their faith in Jesus Christ, and for this reason, they are true witnesses to Him, namely, martyrs<sup>17</sup>.

He further added, "In the past, the Lord gave His ministers the gift of working miracles, because, acknowledging His deity, they were of benefit to those who demanded them, and the wonders of wisdom advanced in virtue in order to yield to the novelty of miracles the ones who refused the holy teachings of the Gospel. It was also useful in those times for the martyrs to shine by doing miracles in order to bring Christianity in the hearts of the pagans. A little appealing religion, it was orally preached, quoting the Holy Scriptures or ultimately the great victories they got in the midst of the storms. Before that I had acknowledged, it is not useful to do wonders in all times; because you do not always have people who want to see them; this is easily proved by the passage we read in the Acts of the Apostles when the Holy Apostle Paul and Saint Timothy wishing to pass to Asia Minor were stopped by the Holy Spirit; since He, who had previously commanded them to proclaim the Gospel to all the world, to all people, knowing that in Asia there was no one worthy to receive the evangelical truth, He prevented the disciples not to interfere in the trade of their salvation. For those who would have arrogantly received the word of life or would have despised it, much less they would have deserved to hear it"<sup>18</sup>.

Concerning the accusation that the martyrs sought death voluntarily, without being constrained in their faith, Eulogius pointed out that these acts proved the fervour of the witnesses of Christ who, despising earthly life went before the Muslim authorities trying to keep them away from their mistakes and shedding blood for the truth of Christian faith<sup>19</sup>. In order to support this, he brings some

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<sup>17</sup> Zacarias Garcia Villada, *Historia Eclesiastica de España III*, Editorial Razon y Fe, S.A., Madrid, 1936, p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> St. Eulogius, *op.cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> In the end, these saints who were inspired by God faced death because they confessed the faith, and did not diverge in any way from the commands mentioned (taking as argument the words of Scripture - Mt 5, 44-45, Lk 3:14; Peter 2: 23, I Cor. 6: 10 - the martyrs' detractors accused them of not respecting them). For by loving their enemies according to God's law, wishing their salvation, they spoke with zeal openly so that they

biblical testimonies, including St. Paul's enthusiasm to go to Jerusalem despite the prophecy of Agave who had revealed what the Jews would do to him (Fp. 21, 10-14) and several other examples of martyrs who sought martyrdom voluntarily. Eulogius is quoting the author of the Martirical Acts of Saints Emeter and Celedoni: "It is worth to be among the first honoured in heavens those who have been to martyrdom without being sought; and it is worthy of all the praise of presenting you to the storm whereas hiding from persecutors is not sin"<sup>20</sup>.

Another controversy brought to question by the detractors was the lack of the relics of those who suffered, the martyrs' bodies were not immune to decay. To this remark, Eulogius replied: "The adversaries object to the corruption of the martyrs' bodies. But, I pray, let them answer what difference this makes to those bestowed with the heavenly reward".

The book has reinforced the faith of many believers and, as an inevitable consequence Emir Abd al-Rahman has changed his policy toward Christians again, bringing violence. Thus, in November, before being released from prison, St. Eulogius received from Bishop Venerius of Complutum the news of the sufferings of the virgin sisters Nunilona and Alodia. Born in Huesca from a Muslim father, they had to follow Islam by law, but they chose Christ, for which they were sentenced to death on October 21, 851.

### **Sts. Flora and Mary**

One month later, on 24 November, St. Flora and St. Mary sacrificed their lives. Flora was born in Córdoba and came from a family of Muslim father and Christian mother. After her father's death, she was brought up by her mother in Christian faith, despite the Muslim law that determined those born of a Muslim father to inherit the father's religion. Flora also had a sister and a brother who was educated in the Mohammedan faith. To avoid any trouble with him, both sisters fled from their parent's home and sought shelter in Christians' households. Full of anger, her brother blamed the Christians and some priests were imprisoned. Finding out what happened because of them Flora returned home confessing her Christian faith to his brother. He took her to the judge who decided to beat her over the head and then left her in her brother's custody. After the convalescence, Flora took advantage of her brother's distraction and escaped again leaving the capital. She would not be hiding any longer, for she wished to confess, she

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would no longer live in the labyrinth of iniquity, and doing good to those who hate Christ, believed they would remove them from their madness rather with the shedding of blood than with the teachings of their words, for putting away their mistakes to embrace faith in Jesus Christ and to fight to death for Him."According to. St. Eulogius, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115-117.

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returned to Córdoba where she met in the church of Saint Acisclo with Mary, the sister of martyr Uvalabonso, who also wanted to confess. Having the same belief both faced the judges declaring themselves Christians. The judge sent them to jail where they met Eulogius, who, touched by what he heard, kissed the scars on Flora's head with honor, and encouraged them to remain steadfast in faith. Enhanced by their story, Eulogius will begin writing *Documentum Martiriale* in prison which is a warm invitation to the crown of martyrdom addressed to the two virgins<sup>21</sup>. On November 24, Flora and Mary were decapitated and their bodies, after being exposed in the city square, were thrown into the waters of Guadalquivir. Only Mary's body was found, which was laid-down in the Cuteclara monastery, where she had lived before her suffering<sup>22</sup>. Five days after their martyrdom, Eulogius is released promising obedience to Reccafredus. He will later be ashamed of his decision, punishing himself by not attending the Mass, which was prevented by Bishop Saul of Córdoba. The following year, on January 13, priest Gumesindo and Servus-Dei the monk were martyred.

#### **Sts. Aureliu, Sabigotho, Felix, Liliosa, and monk George**

A few months later, on July 27, five other voluntary martyrs accepted death penalty for their confession. Eulogius dedicated them several pages that narrate their lives and passion, as well as he did for Sts. Flora and Mary. Aurelius was born in a Mohammedan family but since he became an orphan at an early age he was raised by a Christian aunt. She grew in him her faith in Jesus Christ and despite the fact that some boy's relatives forced him to attend the Arab school, the flame of faith did not cease in the teenage child. When he had come at age, he began to be urged by the Muslim relatives to marry what they thought to be a suitable spouse, but Aurelius wanted a wife to help him progress in the knowledge of the God of Christians whom he prayed to. God listened to his prayers and gave Sabigotho to him. She was born in a Muslim family, too. After her father's death, her mother remarried with a Muslim who was a clandestine Christian and who converted her and Sabigotho. They pretended to be Muslims in society, but they carried Christ in their hearts. Aurelius had a relative named Felix, also a secret Christian. He denied that he was a Christian, and though he was regretful, he did not have the courage to confess his faith openly. He was married to Liliosa, daughter of Christians, who was pretending to be Muslim in public. A close

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<sup>21</sup> St. Eulogius, *Documentum Martiriale*, in Agustin S. Ruiz O.B., *op.cit.*, p. 285-329.

<sup>22</sup> Quintin Aldea Vaquero (coord.), Tomas Marin Martinez și Jose Vives Gatell, *Diccionario de Historia Eclesiastica de España II*, Instituto Enrique Florez, Madrid, 1972, p. 940.

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friendship grew between the two families, which would unite them in the confession.

A few years later, when Aurelius was on business in the city square, he witnessed the suffering of the Christian merchant John, who was mentioned above. Seeing the cruel scene in which the martyr of Christ was flogged and humiliated, the joy of confessing grew in him and decided to make public his faith. He got stronger seeing John who was telling him that the scene had been meant for him so that he would have the courage to confess and not to fear those who kill the body, as the soul cannot be harmed. He also came back home and told his wife all the moving scenes he saw, and they both decided from then on to live a life of penitence hoping that they would be worthy of the wonderful crown of the martyrdom. He started visiting Christians in prison. Here Aurelius visited those men imprisoned for faith, and Sabigotho spent much time in the company of St. Flora and St. Mary. Asking Eulogius what he should do with his fortune and the two little girls he had with Sabigotho, whether he would have the strength to confess, he advised Aurelius to sell his fortune. Aurelius and Sabigotho complied with the advice and shared their wealth with the poor, keeping only a part for their daughters that they sent to the Tábanos monastery. Once released from their earthly things, they committed even more to the spiritual life. After the execution of Flora and Maria, the two virgins appeared in Sabigotho's dream in all their newly won martyrs' glory, and promised that she and her husband would ultimately join them. They also gave her a sign telling her that they would send a foreign monk to share their fate.

This promise was soon fulfilled as she met a monk named George from St. Sava Monastery near Jerusalem, while she was visiting her daughters at Tábanos monastery. George, from Bethlehem, was sent on a mission to collect donations from monasteries in North Africa, and from there he had gone to Spain. Aware of what he discovered, the monk joined the family seeking martyrdom. Soon, Felix and his wife, Liliosa, will join this aspiration as well. All five sought a way to go in front of the judge to confess. They eventually found it in the following way: Sabigotho and Liliosa entered the church with unveiled faces. Muslims who believed they were of the same faith with them came to their husbands and asked for explanations. Hearing the confession that they are all Christians, the witnesses notify the judge. They were arrested as apostate Muslims and monk George was imprisoned as well, being accused of influence on them. Nevertheless, having no testimony from George admitting to have cursed their prophet, they decided to let him go. As he saw that he was about to lose the crown, the monk said, "Gentlemen? Do you still have doubts about the confession of Christian faith that I have not yet proclaimed before you? Why do you think I have kept my thoughts for the foolish devil, your false prophet? To be sure, I will tell you openly what I

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think about that angel who, transforming himself into an angel of light, appeared to your lawmaker: I think he is a devil, and your prophet, I consider, is the most wretched man, for he was the minister of the Antichrist and the labyrinth of all vice; who has not only cast himself into the eternal damnation, but also you who follow his vain teachings are intended for the eternal flames<sup>23</sup>. Irritated by this clear confession, they condemned him to death and all five were beheaded on July 27 of 852. Christians stole their bodies and buried them separately in the City of Córdoba churches<sup>24</sup>.

### **New martyrs. The decree of persecution and the death of Abd al-Rahman II**

On August 20, 852, two other voluntary martyrs died for Christ: Christopher, a monk from St. Martin of Rojana Monastery and Leovigildo, a Christian from Granada. On September 15 and 16, four more Christians followed. On the first day deacon Emila and Jeremiah accepted the sufferings. Knowing Arabic, they have launched such a forceful denunciation of Islam that the Muslims have forgotten the previous one. The next day, monks Rogelio and Servideo were martyred. They mingled among the Muslims in the mosque and began to preach the truth of the Gospel. Saved by the authorities from death at the hands of the raging crowd, the two were sentenced to a horrible punishment: their hands and feet were cut off before they were beheaded for the courage of committing, by entering the mosque, the greatest sacrilege according to the Muslim law, giving in this way their lives for Christ<sup>25</sup>.

The perseverance of the fervent Christians in the voluntary confession and the disrespect of the decision of the council enraged the Emir<sup>26</sup>. He summoned the

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<sup>23</sup> St. Eulogius, *Memoralis Sanctorum*, cap. X, num. 33, p. 207.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 173-209.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209-217.

<sup>26</sup> The proceedings of the council were held in the summer of 852, not knowing precisely the date as the documents were lost. From the emir behalf was Gomez, the exceptor. He opened the council session by sending the leader's message. It condemned the zeal of the Christians who, being unable to bear the state religion, went out to demonstrate it publicly irritating the Muslims and causing a real persecution of the Church. He also argued that those voluntary sacrifices are detrimental to Christianity and should not be considered martyrdom; furthermore, those who died this way shouldn't be honoured as saints and martyrs. He then advised the bishops to sign a treaty to anathematize the martyrs and of all those who would like to follow their example. Finally, he specifically attacked Eulogius as the most ardent supporter of the martyrs in Córdoba.

After Gomez's intervention, deliberations began between the participating bishops. In a climate of oppression and fear of the emir's messengers, the free opinion was impossible

council of ministers to decide that all Christians be trapped and imprisoned. From that moment on, Muslims were allowed to kill Christians who would confess Mohammed's insults without being brought to the authorities. We can imagine what effect these decisions have had among the Christians in Córdoba. Here is what Eulogius tells us: "Once this command was known, we, miserable, fleeing, escaping, hiding, changing our clothes, and being very careful in our conversations, we were sneaking wandering in the silence of the night. A falling leaf was enough to frighten us, we changed our shelter constantly, we were looking for the safest places; terrified, wandering without target, disoriented, fearing killing by sword. I was shunning death knowing well that someday we would die of natural death. Nevertheless, I think that if we fled the martyrdom it was not because of the fear of death that must come once, but because we felt unworthy of a gift given to some and not to everybody"<sup>27</sup>.

Due to this horror, many denied Christ in order to save their lives: "In such an atmosphere, many Christians, unworthy of the Lord's grain, who deserve - like the straw - the eternal fire, refusing to flee and suffer with us, they reject religion and denounce Jesus Christ instead. A terrible agony! They convert to Muslim law; they embrace the demons, blasphemy, insult, and anger upon Christians. Many of those who beforehand, with a healthy mind, praised the sufferings of the martyrs, preached their determination in battle, both priests and laymen, now are changing their minds, forming separate groups, because they do not want to suffer as their good fellows or brothers did. Being inferior to them, for they praised more their

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to express for many participants. There were, however, those who openly defended the cause of the martyrs. Bishop Saul of Córdoba spoke in their defence along with Eulogius, but the other bishops did not dare to show their support for the martyrs. What they really wanted was the condemnation of the Christian doctrine regarding the heretics and the deceived ones, of course with direct reference to Mohammed and the Christian practice of confession the truth, which in the first few centuries led many to confess voluntarily Christ in front of the torturers, even when they were not persecuted. Given this background full of doubts and pressure, the bishops made an ambiguous law prohibiting Christians from voluntarily presenting themselves to martyrdom, but without condemning or anathematizing the behaviour of the first voluntary martyrs.

The council sentence did not appeal to the fervent Christians. Here's what Eulogius said: "However, that document did not condemn in any way those who died for this cause; Moreover, it praised those who successively fought for the faith. I do not believe that law is to blame, because containing one thing and acknowledging the contrary, seemed dictated to keep away believers from martyrdom. Moreover, I believe that it should not be known if its content is not explained". According to Saint Eulogius, *Memorialis Sanctorum*, p. 221. That is why the decree of this council did not change the zeal of the courageous Christians. This is also evident from the fact that voluntary martyrs continued to go before the judges.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 217.

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wealth and peace than the Church, hesitant among the obstacles of the wicked; therefore, with some quotations from the Scripture, they argue their different ways of acting and their ambiguous language"<sup>28</sup>.

In the midst of so many storms, the enthusiasm of the Christians has not fallen. Saul, the bishop of Córdoba, is imprisoned, but Christians cry out to God for justice. Their demand is obeyed, for when "we were consumed by so much torment," says Eulogius, hidden and wandering, and for the second time our bishop lay in the horrible prison, and none dared to approach the houses of the faithful believers for fear of going to prison"<sup>29</sup>. The emir went up one day on the terrace of his palace, and saw the bodies of the martyrs Emila and Jeremiah hanging. Immediately he ordered to be burned, but, hardly had he finished his words when he was hit by paralysis and died the very next night. The punishment of God came upon him who, like Pharaoh once, had oppressed the people of God.

### **The Persecution during Mohammed I reign (852-886)**

After the death of Abd al-Rahman II, his son, Mohammed I (852-886) ascended to the throne of Córdoba and followed in his father footsteps precisely. Since the first day of his reign, he ordered the banishment of all Christians from the palace. With the exception of Gomez, he banned Christian commercial contacts supporting the army and orders the destruction of all newly built churches and monasteries. The famous Tábanos monastery, from which many martyrs had come, was destroyed. In order not to lose their jobs, many Christian officials converted to Islam headed by Gomez, whom Eulogius says that he had begun to go to the mosque more often than he entered the church when he was a Christian<sup>30</sup>.

Mohammed I charged Christians with taxes, and Islamic law teachers question the sacrifice of previous martyrs scornfully, admitting that martyrdom was meaningless in their opinion and their sentence to death was right, because they have brought injuries to the Muslim prophet. However, we discovered a lot of courage among Christians, and the first martyr during the reign of Mahomed I appears as the young elder Fandila. Shaken by the Christian's courage, the emir orders Bishop Saul's capture, suspecting him as an instigator. He managed to hide, but the emir, as Eulogius recorded, imposed a law of exterminating all Christians and dispersing their women by selling them into slavery, except those who rejected their religion and converted to the cult. By the intervention of ministers who assured him that no Christian, other than those who volunteered before the judges, had brought injuries to Mohammed, the law was abolished. Otherwise, it

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 219.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 223.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 241.

would have been the end of the Christians in Córdoba. The emir sent Fandila to death on June 13, 853. In the following days, other Christians went before the Muslim authorities to confess the faith. On June 14, Anastasio and Felix are martyred, and their bodies, as was the custom, were hung. At the sight of the terrible scene, a Christian virgin named Digna criticised the soldiers' cruelty and started confessing the Christian faith. For this reason, she was beheaded, and her body was hung with the previous ones. For the same reason, old Benilde is sentenced to death the next day<sup>31</sup>.

Three months later, on September 17, 853 young virgin Columba suffers voluntarily the martyrdom. Presenting himself in front of the judge's house, she preached Christ to him, showing him the Muslim error and inviting him to follow the true faith. Amazed by her fearlessness, she was taken to the council of judges where Columba spoke the same way. As they could not persuade to turn her religion, she was beheaded in front of the palace where they had gathered.

Eulogius said that, before being beheaded, Columba spoke to her public executioner in a gentle manner. With her body, the Muslims did not do the same thing as the other martyrs, but they threw it directly to Guadalquivir, from where eight monks picked it up and deposited it in the church of Saint Eulalia in Córdoba<sup>32</sup>. Columba's example in turn encouraged the nun Pomposa to seek martyrdom. She appeared before the cadet confessing the faith and denouncing Mohammed I, for which she was sent to death on September 19, 853.

After Pomposa's sacrifice, ten months would pass before the next martyrdom. This period of calmness and lack of voluntary martyrs is partly because those who ardently supported the cause of the martyrs, such as Eulogius, his friend Alvaro Paulo and Bishop Saul, ceased for a while to encourage martyrdom. In spite of the abandonment of martyrdom, the situation of Christians has not improved, but has even worsened. Following Mohammed I's victory in 854 against the rebellious Toledans the Emir returned to Córdoba longing to punish Christians here for the bravery of their northern brothers. The Toledans received help in this battle from the Christian king Ordoño I of Asturias (850-866) and Christians lost 8,000 people.

**Paul Alvarus' work: *IndicusLuminosus***

Under these circumstances, many Christians have again begun to feel the burden of Muslim pressures. The party of those condemning voluntary martyrs and blaming them of the cruelty of the Muslim persecution grew dramatically, until Eulogius and his followers started openly to support confession and voluntary

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 249-253.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 265-267.

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martyrdom as a way of reinforcing Christianity under Muslim rule. This year, in 854, Paul Alvarus writes the *Indiculus luminum opera: in defensione servorum tuorum, Domine*. It began this work with an ardent prayer to Christ to help him to carry out the planned work. Alvarus stated that he was merely following the example of those Christians who armoured themselves with their faith against the Lord's enemies. He did not want to triumph over anyone, but to persuade the others. He addressed especially beginner Christians or frightened ones who claimed that the martyrs of their time were inspired by the devil. "Are not the apostles ordered to defend the Gospel with their lives? That is what we do. There were many among the martyrs of the early centuries of the Church who spontaneously offered themselves to the executioners, weren't they? That is what our martyrs did. Moreover, Jesus Christ chose to die on the cross, didn't he? After all, some say that we are not in times of persecution. How come? Aren't we enslaved, charged with unbearable taxes, offended with dirty words and mocked with curses? Don't they destroy our churches, isn't there a law allowing whipping and even killing those who enter the mosques or curse Mohammed? Aren't we going to respond to the errors of their doctrines and to the immorality of their principles?"<sup>33</sup> In doing so, they responded to martyrs' detractors. Finally Christians accused them of being coward in order to preserve their positions in the Muslim government. "Let's compare – they said - our false confessions to the martyrs' true ones. They have confirmed what the whole Church preaches; we preach what all Christians have condemned. They cursed the false prophet; we cursed those who worship Christ. They stood up against the unbelievers; yet us, against Christians. They withstood courageously and efficiently against the devil; we, against the Lord. They opposed the earthly king; we, the heavenly one. They orally confessed what they felt with their hearts; we had one thing in mind and another on our lips. They were true confessors and witnesses; we, poor us, false and deceived"<sup>34</sup>.

### **New martyrs**

What Paul Alvarus expected from this work has been fulfilled. On July 11, 854, father Abundius confessed Christ and was beheaded. On April 30, 855 father Amator together with the monks Peter and Luis were killed by sword. Later, Witesindo from Cabra suffered martyrdom. After denying his faith in an earlier persecution, he then confessed it bravely, for which he was sentenced to death. On April 17, 856 fathers Elijah and Paul and Isidor were martyred. On June 28<sup>th</sup> of

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<sup>33</sup>Alvaro Paulo, *Indiculus Luminosus*, in Enrique Florez, *España Sagrada XI*, Oficina de Antonio Marin, Madrid, 1753, p. 219-275.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibidem*.

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the same year, the monk Argimir suffered martyrdom. He had served as Mohammed I's censor and then retired to the monastery. Falsely accused by some Muslims of having denigrated the prophet, he was brought to the court where he confessed the faith. A month later died Aurea, the daughter of Artemia, who witnessed the martyrdom of Walabonsus and Mary, sister of John and Adulf, who also sacrificed their lives for Christ. She came from a Muslim family from Seville. Despite her origins, Aurea was educated in the Christian faith and entered the Cuteclara Monastery where she lived for more than thirty years until some Muslim relatives denounced her to the authorities. Her relatives brought her to the Muslim judge. Aurea, after a moment of hesitation, promised the judge to observe the Muslim law. Returning to Cuteclara monastery, bothered by her lack of fortitude, she continued to practice her faith. Then, she has the second encounter with the authorities. This time she confesses and pays with her life. Her body was displayed in the market where she was beheaded and then thrown into Guadalquivir<sup>35</sup>.

This is the last martyrdom reported by Saint Eulogius in the third book of his work *Memoriale Sanctorum*. By the middle of the year 857 he wrote another work entitled *Apologeticus Martyrum*, in which, once again, he defends the cause of the martyrs, and he depicts the glorious death of Elder Rodrigo and Christian Salomon. Rodrigo was born in Cabra, Andalucia, where he became a priest. There were two brothers, one Christian and the other Muslim, who often had arguments over religion. They were fighting so hard that one evening Rodrigo had to interfere, but he was hit, that left him unconscious. Then a devilish idea came to the Muslim brother. He put Rodrigo in a coffin and dragged him through the streets claiming that father Rodrigo had decided to embrace Islam from God inspiration and did not want to leave this world without publicly declaring his conversion. Upon regaining his senses and realizing what had happened, he left town. He went to accomplish his mission as a priest in a village in the mountains around Córdoba where no one would know him. This flight took place in 852. Five years later, in 857, Rodrigo descended to Córdoba on business and was recognized by his brother. Seeing him wearing a Christian garment, he brought him to the judge, denouncing that he had left Islam. Rodrigo defended himself by pointing out that he had never been a Muslim in the first place, he had never abandoned his Christianity, had never believed in the unethical doctrine of Mohammed, and that he was not only a Christian, but also a priest of Christ. Hearing the confession, the judge imprisoned him with those sentenced to death, hoping he would eventually give up. There, however, Rodrigo met Salomon condemned for the same crime of having converted to Islam and then reconverted to Christianity. Together they reinforced their faith praying. The judge orders to

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<sup>35</sup> St. Eulogius, *Memorialis Sanctorum*, p. 277-283.

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split them out then sentenced them both to death. Rodrigo was beheaded first, which was thought that it would terrify Salomon. However, St. Salomon remained steadfast in faith, and thus he received the crown of martyrdom.

To prevent the bodies from being honoured, the Muslims attached some weights to their feet and threw them into Guadalquivir. Twenty days later, however, a priest in Tercios, a neighbourhood of Córdoba, discovered the body of Saint Rodrigo carried by the waters near Saint Gines Monastery. Finding the body odoriferous and unspoilt after death, the priest took it and displayed him in the church where he was serving. Here came Bishop Saul and honoured the martyr's relics who continued to spread a wonderful fragrance. The Christians wished to find the relics of Saint Salomon. After many prayers, Saint Salomon appears to the same priest in the dream, pointing to where his body was. Following the instructions from the dream, the priest found the martyr's body and buried him in the church of Saints Cosma and Damian of Córdoba. These two were martyred on March 13, 857<sup>36</sup>.

### **The martyrdom of Sts. Eulogius and Leocritia**

After the Spanish martyrs from Córdoba rose up to heaven, many of them being advised and encouraged in their struggles by Saint Eulogius, eventually it came Eulogius' turn to receive the crown of martyrdom in 859. A year before, the episcopal seat of Toledo became vacant after the death of Bishop Wistremiro. Therefore, the Bishops of the Cartaginense Province elected Eulogius. This choice took place in early 859. It is unclear why Eulogius did not reach Toledo to take over the seat of Toledo. Researchers put the blame on the emir Mohammed I, who knew Eulogius' role linked to voluntary martyrs in Córdoba. Despite the emir's opposition, the bishops did not change their decision and waited for Eulogius to come to Toledo. It did not take much longer, because in the same year Saint Eulogius gave his life for Christ. Here's how it was.

There was a virgin of a noble family from Córdoba, daughter of Muslim parents, called Leocritia. This young girl had an aunt named Litioasa who was a Christian and a virgin dedicated to God. Leocritia used to visit her aunt quite often; she took advantage to talk about Christ. At the age of maturity, Leocritia was baptized and began to live a secret Christian life, doing good deeds. Her parents discovered the truth and asked her for explanations, but she testified she was a Christian. Immediately they asked her to deny her faith by reinforcing their demand with harsh blows. She could not bear the blows anymore, so Leocritia sought Eulogius' help and his sister, Anulo, to find a place to hide. Listening to Eulogius' advice, Leocritia is encouraged to leave home. To be able to leave

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<sup>36</sup> *Idem, Liber Apologeticus Martyrum* in Augustin S. Ruiz, O.B., *op.cit.*, p. 387-403.

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without any suspicion, Leocritia made it appear as if she was attending a wedding. She eventually took shelter in Eulogiu's house. From here, the virgin was constantly wandering, not staying too long in a Cristian home to avoid suspicion. Her parents alert the authorities to the disappearance of their daughter in an attempt to determine her whereabouts. However, the search was unsuccessful because Leocritia was helped by courageous and loyal Christians. Once, wishing to meet Eulogius and his sister very much, she went to his house at night. Getting here safe and sound, Leocritia reveals that when praying she felt a liquid like honey in her mouth, and that she swallowed it with his sweetness and density. Eulogius replied that the sweetness was just a taste of the gifts from the Heavenly Kingdom she was about to share soon.

At night time, everything was prepared so that Leocritia could return to the house where she was supposed to hide. However, her appointed escort failed to appear to lead her to her latest hiding place. A betrayal led the authorities to the house, where they arrested Leocritia and Eulogius. When the judge questioned why he hid Leocritia in his house, Eulogius replied that it was his duty as a shepherd to take care of the sheep of Christ. Moreover, he began to show the judge the falsity of his religion and the truth of Christ. Enraged, the cadet sent him to the emir's palace before the council of ministers. Being a respected person in the Muslim world for his wisdom, Eulogius awakened compassion to one of the ministers who urged him to spare his life, to say a certain word at these moments and then he may be able to practice his faith. Nevertheless, the saint answered, "Ah, if thou knew what we are, the worshipers of Christ! And if I could move into your chest what I have in mine! Then you would not talk to me like that, trying to get away from my goal; Then, with joy, you will give up the honours you now have in this world!"<sup>37</sup>. He then spoke to them of Jesus Christ and His kingdom of heaven. Irritated by what they heard, the ministers ordered that Eulogius to be beheaded.

As he was taken out of the room, a eunuch struck Eulogius, but he turned his other cheek. The eunuch struck him again, but the impatient soldiers pushed St. Eulogius to the place of martyrdom. In this way he ascended to Heaven being decapitated on March 11, 859, he, the one that before entering the Kingdom of God, had sent many martyrs. The following day the Christians picked up his body from the river, where the Muslims had thrown him before and buried him in the church of Saint Zoilo in Córdoba. His friend and biographer, Paul Alvarus, reported that before the Christians found him, a local soldier from Ecija who was on guard on the city walls during the night headed for the river wanting to drink

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<sup>37</sup> Alvaro Paulo, *Vita del Passio Beatissimi Martyrus Eulogii*, p. 31.

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water. Here he saw close to the place where the saint's body had been brought by water many bright priests singing psalms<sup>38</sup>.

Four days later, the virgin Leocritia, being loyal to her faith, despite the master's death, was beheaded, sharing the same fate.

These are the sufferings of the voluntary martyrs from the ninth-century Muslim Córdoba, most of them constrained by the atmosphere of living under Arab Muslim rule in Spain. It is well known that in Christian-Orthodox spirituality it is not advisable to accept martyrdom voluntarily. Why then did many of those Christians do it? Have they been deceived, also causing the fall of weak brethren in faith and confession? These questions are inevitable and it is hard to give an answer by those who do not have the experience of living in that period under a Muslim authority in the Middle Ages. If in many Muslim countries, practicing Christianity is paid with many threats, even with one's own life, wasn't there more to be done to keep the Christian faith in the 9<sup>th</sup> century Spain conquered by Muslim Arabs? Many of these martyrs headed by Eulogius of Córdoba are found in the Roman Catholic calendar. Understanding as much as possible the experience of Christians under the Muslim rule in those times in Spain, the confession of the voluntary martyrs and not only, helps us to shape the picture of what it meant, and why not, at any time, to be a Christian under the absolute rule of the Islamic law.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.