

Hope
Against
Hope

Biography of
Maria Antonia
Paris

Throughout history, God has made Himself present in various ways and has spoken to many women and men (Hb 1:1). Each one of these words has configured in them a concrete answer: another way of looking at reality, another way of understanding God... in conclusion, a different way of living, but always in response to the only Word: Jesus Christ

Maria Antonia Paris is one of those people. Tracing the events of her life allows us discover that her vision does not come from herself, but from God and from a great freedom of spirit that enabled her to be faithful regardless of the consequences. In this respect she states: "the more I do contemplate the works of the Lord with clarity, the more I discover the blindness of men" (PR 53).

Historians say that a person's history speaks of who the person is. Many of the situations that Antonia faced continue to challenge us today as Claretians and as Christians. For that reason, it helps us to remember her words:

*"And I say this, so that those that will come after
learn how to hope against all hope"*

(Aut. 218)

TAKEN FROM:

- . Writings of Maria Antonia Paris
- . History of the Religious of Mary Immaculate Claretian
Missionary Sisters
- . Positio on the Declaration of the virtues of Maria Antonia
Paris y Riera

Aut.: Autobiography of Maria Antonia Paris

Autobiography: Autobiography of Claret

Const.: Constitutions

AM: Apostolic Missionary

PR: Plan for the Renewal of the Church

RC: Relation or Account to Caixal

Diary: Diary of Maria Antonia Paris

PRESENTATION

This brief biography of Maria Antonia Paris is finally complete. This introduction wants to show the purpose of this book, its composition process and the sources which it draws from. The desire which moves it is expressed at the end.

***Purpose:** It seeks to make reading easier for all those who are interested in knowing our Foundress, serve as a guide for the young women who begin a vocational process in the Congregation, and help the sisters who sometimes want to have serious and exact information at hand, yet narrated more briefly than in the *History of the Congregation* or the *Positio*. Its format, photos, color, etc. facilitate its reading. An index of people and terms as well as Maria Antonia's Writings is included at the end.

***Process:** Although it is brief, this biography has its history. Its first redaction was completed in 1998 in the House of Formation in Pozuelo. It was used in a simple format for some young women in vocational discernment, various sisters read it, and it was sent to other Organisms of the Congregation that requested a copy. Some years later, in 2002, in the same house in Pozuelo which by then was already the Inter-provincial Novitiate of Spain, two sisters, Rosa Ruiz rmi and novice Lidia Alcantara, revised it to give it an easier and more accessible language. A number of Claretian Missionary Sisters of different nationalities and ages have taken part in the translations. A beautiful collaboration!

***Sources:** It is based on books that we have published. We all know that many years ago M. Carmen Diez rmi looked for

documents of the Foundress in many Archives of the Congregation and outside of the Congregation (various Dioceses, City Halls, Libraries, the Company of Mary...) for *The Historical Process of Maria Antonia Paris*. All of these, properly authenticated, are in the General Archive in Rome. These documents were very helpful in the development of the *History of the Congregation*, written by our beloved Fr. Jesus Álvarez cmf, with historical rigor as well as charismatic meaning. Then Maria Antonia Paris' *Writings* and *Epistolary*, with critiques by Juan Manuel Lozano, were published. We relied beforehand on the two *mystical studies* on her done by the competent and also beloved Fr. Francisco Juberías cmf, *For your Body which is the Church*, and by the same Juan Manuel Lozano, *With my Church I thee Wed*. Upon these bases the *Positio* was written by Carmen Ruiz rmi and Encarnación Velasco rmi. Due to the methodology required by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the *Positio* extensively transcribes many of the *Writings* and documents drawn from the different Archives; that is its peculiarity.

***Desire:** We hope that this work, accomplished and revised with love by many Claretian Sisters working as a team across space and time, will be a motive for coming to know more deeply that "Woman of God" that our Foundress was. She knew and taught us with her life to "hope against all hope," trusting that God always supports his cause. This is an experience which is valid in all times and deeply comforts us today. That the Church has ratified her "heroic virtues" making her Venerable in 1993 means that today she can be a real testimony for all of God's people.

For the Claretian Sisters who with a communal sense have collaborated with it in different ways, the work itself has been a motive to go deeper into the life of our Foundress. Its

development has had certain similarity with the formation of the Books of the Bible; all of God's people somehow collaborated with them: living and experimenting, erring and getting back up again, preaching, praying, writing, correcting, listening... We hope that as the "Holy Spirit's inspiration" was present in the sources used for this book, it has also accompanied the formation of this work which has something of "God's action" for us Claretian Missionary Sisters. And may He also be present in its reading and transmission.

Rome, February 22nd, 2003

Encarnación Velasco, rmi

Superior General

Let's Begin with Some History

Maria Antonia Paris was born in Spain at the beginning of the 19th century. For that reason, it is important to understand the historical moment in which she lived.

The 19th century was a time of abrupt changes in Spain, changes that had already begun in Europe the previous century: the French Revolution, the Illustration... While an entire system of values was crumbling, new ideas were rising in the midst of difficulties and violence. The basis of the established absolutist monarchical government, known as the Old Regime, was falling apart in every aspect: political, social, economic, cultural, and religious. It was a time in which God no longer seemed necessary to make sense of the world nor appeared to respond to the deepest yearnings of men and women. Apparently there was no need for principles to guide people's thinking, actions, and to determine what was good and what was bad. The bases for Modernity were being established.

Amid this process of European dechristianization, the Church needed to reposition itself. Anchored in the Old Regime, it did not always know how to maintain its identity and mission, while letting go of its already outdated structures, privileges, and possessions. Also, what was originally inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution: *Freedom, Equality, and Fraternity*, ended up becoming an indiscriminate religious persecution, which made an appropriate response difficult.

We must bear in mind that the number of clergymen and religious people at the beginning of the 19th century was very high in Spain. For a population of ten million inhabitants, there were eighty-three thousand secular priests, seventy thousand religious men and thirty thousand nuns. This was an excessive number. Even worse if we consider the reasons why

many of them chose the religious or clerical state... But, it is also true that not all of them were this way. A remarkable number of clergymen and religious served the people with dignity while living in extreme poverty. On the other hand, the institutional Church was powerful and rich, and this made politicians look at its possessions as a good solution to the economic problems of the State.

There were several attempts to reform the Church from the outside. At the time of the French invasion, in order to confiscate ecclesiastical goods, convents and institutions were suppressed. Later on, Liberalism claimed popular sovereignty against the absolute monarchy of the Old Regime (system defended by the institutional Church at the time). The *Cortes de Cadiz* - Spanish Parliament - imposed liberal innovations to the ecclesiastic institutions: confiscation of goods, suppression of privileges... When King Ferdinand VII regained power, he tried to protect the Church with his absolutist politics, but his real aim was to get the Church to support his way of governing, thus mutilating its freedom and its prophetic voice in the mission.

But it was during the regency of Maria Cristina - who had promised to support the Church - when the worst abuses took place (mandatory exclaustations, prohibition of admitting new novices and numerous violent killings).

In this historical context Maria Antonia Paris was born. She did not live unaware of what was happening at social and ecclesiastic levels. In fact, God called her to respond with the foundation of a new Institute, not new in its doctrine, but in its practice (Aut.7), in which to live and work for the renewal of the Church. It would be characterized by a special love for evangelical poverty, basis of new apostles (cf. Aut.11) and the mission to announce the Holy Law of the Lord to every creature. She would not be alone in this task. God pointed her to Claret as the apostolic man called to the same evangelizing

mission(Aut.19).

Birth and Childhood

Maria Antonia Paris y Riera was born in Vallmoll, a small Catalanian town near Tarragona, a city on the North Eastern Mediterranean coast of Spain, on June 28, 1813.

Her mother, Teresa, had arrived there the previous day; like many other citizens of Tarragona, she was trying to escape the French invasion. Teresa, who was pregnant with Maria Antonia, and her three year-old daughter were welcomed in Vallmoll by the family of a farm worker employed by the Paris family. There she gave birth.

Maria Antonia's father, Francesc, had died in April. He was the oldest son of an important farmer from Tarragona. Teresa came from a family of fishermen of the same city.

The circumstances of this birth were unpleasant. She narrates that she was born so thin and bruised that her body looked like it was roasted on a grill. Her mother would always say that Maria Antonia had come to this world with an important mission, because without a particular providence from the Lord, she would not have been born alive¹. It seems that from its very start, Maria Antonia's life was marked by difficulties and, at the same time, signs of hope. This is the way God usually makes Himself present. Early in her life, Maria Antonia learned that in weakness and poverty, God's Word is most effective. Having experienced this, she wanted to pass it on to the Institute.

¹ All the quotations of this chapter are taken from the Notes of Maria Antonia Paris, edited after her death by M. Maria Gertrudis Barril, *Positio*, p. 9.

As soon as Teresa could, she returned with her daughters to Tarragona, where they spent their childhood and adolescence. Maria Antonia described herself as a person of few words since childhood. Indeed she was serious, responsible and had great common sense; she was extremely helpful and hardworking, dedicated to domestic chores since her early years.

Maria Antonia's education was quite thorough compared to women of her time. It included reading, basic arithmetic, drawing, painting, embroidery, and sewing. Although her spelling was not perfect and she used several expressions from her maternal Catalan language, the firm strokes of her calligraphy are signs of self-confidence. There is no record of what school she attended. She may have gone to the school of the sisters of the Company of Mary in Tarragona, where she would later enter as a postulant.

Her Christian formation seems even more wholesome. Fearing that she might die, Maria Antonia was baptized the day after her birth, Saint Peter's day. She received the sacrament of Confirmation when she was two years old, as was the tradition in Spain at that time. Due to her solid doctrinal preparation and her spiritual maturity, she received First Communion when she was only nine years old (although it was usually received at the age of 12). She would always remember this experience as a key moment in her life. Referring to it, she would later say, she could not remember acquiring knowledge about anything of this world, as the understanding of the Lord that she received on that day.

Jesus, “The Center of My Affections”

Although a continuous and well founded spiritual development is evident since her childhood, Maria Antonia speaks about her “conversion” at the age of 14 as an experience of deeper encounter with Jesus Christ. It happened in a mission the Franciscans were directing in Escornalbou, Tarragona. During the mission, they apparently insisted on living a life of faith and of personal encounter with the Lord. They promoted love for the sacraments, cultivated a great affection to the Blessed Mother, asked people to practice charity, read books on Christian formation, abstain from degrading shows, and have a good spiritual director. Even when she reaches the highest stages of mysticism, she will continue to observe these simple and solid Christian practices. In fact, it is possible that in this experience lies the beginning of her religious vocation, her christocentric spirituality, her love for Christ's Humanity, and for the mystery of His redemptive sufferings. She lived all of this with a profound ecclesial perspective.

She enrolled in Minerva, a Christian life group with these same characteristics. It was a time of great enthusiasm, maybe of excessive efforts and sacrifices that even affected her health.

At that time she met Fr. Caixal, a wise priest who served as Canon of the Cathedral of Tarragona, with whom she began to go to confession. With his help she learned to moderate her penances and this led her to improve her health. When he was banished to exile with Bishop Echanove for political reasons, she began to be accompanied spiritually by Fr. Gatell, a Dominican who would continue guiding her, even after Caixal returned from exile.

Her mother remarried, and went to live at her new husband's house. Maria Antonia continued living in the family home with her sister, who also got married. She remained there until she entered the Company of Mary as a postulant.

Although Maria Antonia affirms that she had a religious vocation for as long as she could remember, she did not enter the Company of Mary until October 23, 1841, at the age of 28. This is understandable knowing the anti-religious laws of Spain at the time: the persecutions and the prohibition against the admittance of novices. Maria Antonia lived a gradual interior clarification. At the beginning, she leaned more towards the contemplative life, maybe because of her introverted temperament and her desires for solitude and prayer. However, she also had a missionary orientation. In a way, Caixal's apostolic spirit influenced her. This process of integrating the contemplative dimension and the missionary zeal became increasingly evident to the point that her deepest mystical experiences were characterized by a concern for evangelization and the renewal of the Church.

Initial Experience: Founding Experience

Due to the existing legislation, Maria Antonia remained nine years as a postulant, which is the first stage of religious life and usually lasted no more than six months. Yet in practice, she lived the life of a professed nun all those years.

One year after entering the Company of Mary, she lived a decisive experience that left a definitive mark in her life: God asked her to renew the Church and found a New Order, not new in doctrine but in praxis:

- centred in the Word of God, in poverty and simplicity, living radically the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience
- committed to announce the Gospel to all creatures, ready to go to any part of the world without making any divisions among the sisters
- in a profound life of communion, sharing goods and personnel among the communities.
- and uniting action and contemplation, which she considered the most necessary point for the Institute.

Although Maria Antonia wrote about this experience fourteen years after it happened, she narrates it in such detail that one can sense the deep and durable print that it left on her. It took place in the context of prayer and supplication:

One night, while I was at prayer pleading to Christ Crucified to remedy the necessities of the Holy Church, which in that time were many; I offered Him

my life in sacrifice as I had done many times... but as I had no virtues to offer Him, I begged him to deign to teach me what I should do in order to please Him and give Him glory accomplishing His most holy will.

God answered her prayers setting before her eyes the observance of His most Holy Law (the Gospel) and Evangelical Counsels. He led her to understand that the ills the Church suffered were not only owed to the existent anti-religious sentiments, but to the lack of fidelity to the Gospel within the Christian community.

... and He told me to observe them with much perfection; He told me with intense sorrow that He had nobody in his House to observe them... Cry, my daughter cry for the ills in the Church that so much pierce my heart.

Progressively, she arrived to the core of this experience:

I was very attentive, overwhelmed by what was happening, and it seemed to me that I was reading the Holy Law of the Lord, but without seeing any book or letters, and I was understanding it so well that it seemed to me like if it was impressed on my soul, but in a more particular way the book of the Holy Gospels, which I had never read before, as well as the Sacred Scripture. Afterwards, by God's grace, I have read something, and I have seen it written word by word, as our Lord taught it to me from the Holy Tree of the Cross. It seems to me that the words were coming out from His most Holy mouth.

Her first reaction was confusion and fear, so she begged again:

My Lord and my God, if you do not tell me in what religious order you want me to enter so as to

comply with your demand, I do not know how this will be done... My God, perhaps you want something new? (here I did not know what I was asking).

... Thus, our Lord told me with much pleasure: Yes, my daughter, I want a New Order, but not new in doctrine, but rather new in practice. And He gave me the design of the whole Order.

This mystic experience marked Maria Antonia indelibly.

Soon after that, she heard about a young priest named **Anthony Mary Claret**, who preached with evangelical zeal and great poverty around the towns of Catalonia.

Claret had been born of a Christian family in Sallent (Barcelona), on December 23, 1807. He worked with so much success in his father's textile factory that he soon moved to Barcelona to study the latest techniques in textile manufacturing. This city was already very populated and famous for its textile industry. As he later recounts: *In the midst of this whirling of ideas, while at Mass one day, I remembered reading as a small boy those words of the Gospel: "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and suffers the loss of his soul?" This phrase impressed me deeply (Aut. 68).*

He left everything behind to become a priest. He was ordained in 1835. His missionary restlessness took him to preach in different places, from Catalonia to the Canary Islands, receiving from the Pope the title of "Apostolic Missionary." In 1849 he founded the Claretian Missionary Order, and in that same year, he was named Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba: a task that he always carried out with deep missionary spirit and great concern for the formation of the clergy.

Around the year 1844, God made Maria Antonia understand that Claret was in fact the man that could help her

clear the way in the Church for the foundation, which was something she could not do on her own.

... pleading for the necessities of the Church... our Lord told me pointing at Mosen (title given to clergymen in Catalonia) Claret... "This, my daughter, is the apostolic man whom you have asked me for so many years..." showing me the graces He poured on that holy soul for the preaching of the Gospel... I did not know that man. Only a few days before I heard that a certain chaplain called Mosen Claret began preaching with much zeal about the honour due to God and the salvation of souls (Aut.19).

Maria Antonia met him for the first time in 1847 during the mission that he preached in Tarragona. Yet, it seems that they did not even have an opportunity to speak to each other. It would not happen until January 1850, when Claret returned to Tarragona. Caixal insisted that Claret visit her to discern the authenticity of her experience.

Claret listened to her, but at that moment, he had his own plans and concerns. Apart from the recent foundation of his Congregation of the Missionary Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, he had also just received the assignment of Archbishop of Cuba, although no one knew about it yet. Nevertheless, he gave her hope: *Now I already know that you are here..., the fruit is already ripe but not yet in season... (Aut.61).*

Maria Antonia was in the midst of great confusion when she heard about Claret leaving for the New World. She was convinced that he was the person the Lord had chosen to help her in founding the first houses of the Order (Aut.36). Therefore, she wanted him to be the one to decide whether or not she should leave the Company of Mary. What should she do now? Should she profess in the Company of Mary, something she had been waiting for so many years, or remain

free until she received a concrete answer from Claret in order to make possible the mission she had received?

Florentina Saingler, a young sister who was also directed by Father Gatell, felt moved by the same spirit. Until the last moment, neither Caixal nor Gatell dared to make a decision. Due to the great affection Maria Antonia felt towards the community, she was more worried about the suffering they could cause the nuns, while both confessors were concerned with the scandal that could rise up in the city if they left the convent. In fact, the confessors suggested that they should live outside Tarragona, but she did not want to leave. With great freedom of spirit, she said:

... I was not committing any crime in leaving the convent and in not wanting to go home, and so I did not want to move out of Tarragona (Aut.113)... the whole city was commenting my going out of the convent... everybody was expecting to see the end of the story; ... Certainly, it was amusing to see very serious persons so eagerly occupied with two little ants; because, from the Archbishop to the least important one, everyone would talk about the same topic (Aut.119).

They went to live in a remote little corner of Canon Bofarull's house (very well known by both of them because his niece had been a student at the Company of Mary and loved Maria Antonia very much). There they began the new life that the Lord had asked them to live: everything shared in common, a shared life of prayer and apostolic longings, while waiting for Claret's call. Three other young ladies joined them. They gave much thought as to whether they should accept them or not, because many came out of curiosity, even sent by some priests in order to find out what kind of life they were leading.

Once they were prepared for the work that the Lord commended them, they took a step in the formation of the new Institute.

On August 15, 1851 they vowed to cross the seas and go to any part of the world without allowing anything to divide them ... offering themselves to suffer any kind of trial for love of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Aut.121). With this vow, Maria Antonia intended to strengthen the vocation of her young companions through unity and holy obedience, assuring them at the same time that she would never abandon them. This can be considered the charismatic foundation of the Apostolic Institute of the Immaculate Conception (that New Order that the Lord had requested from her in her Initial Experience).

They did not have to wait long for Claret's call. On August 18, 1851, they received a letter from him, which had been written on March 25th. He asked them to go to Cuba, because he had already realized how many needs there were on the Island, especially in all aspects of women's formation. In this same letter he told them that he could not offer them much, but that they could live from their work. He also suggested which ship was safe to make their voyage, and even indicated the best time of the year to travel, so that the heat would not frighten those Catalonian young ladies.

I received this letter as direct call from God, because He had assured me that this holy man would give me a hand to found the first house of the Order, I did not harbour the least doubt that this new world was the place where God our Lord had determined to start His Work. In spite of the many difficulties of travel so frightening for a woman, nothing intimidated me... (Aut.127).

Row Out to Sea

They could not embark, as Claret had proposed, on the ship called *Teresa Cubana*. Fr. Pedro Naudo, Claret's representative in Barcelona, got them tickets on the *Nueva Rosalia* which belonged to the same ship-owner and was also reliable.

On February 12th, at three in the morning, they left Tarragona on a stagecoach that took them to Barcelona, where they were to embark. Naudo was waiting for them in Barcelona. He had already made lodging arrangements and paid for their tickets as Claret had requested.

Three days before embarking, they visited the *Nueva Rosalia* to prepare the cabin according to their taste. They met the captain of the ship, but one day before departing, a setback forced a change of Captain and crew. Rumors that the Captain was planning to hide a young man in the cabin impressed Maria Antonia, who did not hesitate to go to the port that night to find out what was happening. She calmed down after talking to the ship owner, who confirmed the change of Captain and crew, but denied such story.

The young women's goodbye to their families was moving because of the serenity that they demonstrated at the farewell and towards the difficulties that such a long trip implied for five women on their own in those times.

Maria Antonia tells us of the great trust that the Lord infused in her spirit:

*And so, armed with confidence in my God,
and certain that only He could protect me and those
whom He had entrusted to me from so many and*

such imminent dangers that such a frightening trip for women presented (and which perhaps has never been seen in similar circumstances), I told myself: "The Lord is the defender of my life, will the most serious dangers be able to discourage you?"... God put this trust in the center of my heart since I began to serve him, and I have always had my eyes set on God, fully convinced that He is always at my side to uphold me (Aut.135).

The ship left the port of Barcelona on February 22, 1852, a little over a year since Claret had set out to Santiago de Cuba. Once their motion sickness had settled, they organized their daily life following the same rhythm they had had in their small community of Tarragona.

They gained the captain and crew's trust very soon; the latter even prayed with the community at times. It was an itinerant monastery (cf. Aut.142).

But after ten days of sailing, water entering the ship instilled in them a fear of sinking. At that moment, the sisters' courage and firmness was very helpful for the crew. The captain even found support in Maria Antonia:

... The captain, suffering very much and unable to contain his tears, came down to inform us of the danger, I tried to console him and told him to have much confidence in God and Mary Most Holy and not to be afraid (Aut.149).

Amid these dangers, the sisters felt Mary's presence. In fact, the sense of being protected by Mary is present throughout the entire history of the Institute; it belongs to the very being of the Congregation (cf. Const.9).

They tried to cast anchor in Tenerife, but were not able to do so because of bad weather, which forced them to wait until they reached Lanzarote. During the month they stayed

there, they celebrated Holy Week, which the people of the island were not accustomed to celebrating with much depth. However, the sisters' presence moved their hearts in such a way that, when they departed, everyone was sad and asked them to stay.

Meanwhile, Claret waited impatiently in Cuba. From the Canary Islands, Maria Antonia wrote to the Archbishop so that he would not worry about their unexpected delay. From Claret's letters we know that he was already beginning to fear that the difficulties of the trip had made them back out. But this was not the case. There were no setbacks during the rest of the trip.

All of these events speak to us of a courageous woman who discerned daily and lived her fidelity with maturity, even in the smallest details. Risks did not stop her. She set out to sea, and felt protected by God:

The memory of the dangers from which God had freed me, increased more and more my hope in God. This hope which God has placed in my heart since my early years has preserved me from many dangers, and my hope in God filled me with so much joy, that when I lost sight of the Canary Islands, my heart rejoiced because with the land no longer in sight, all I had left was my hope in God (Aut.158).

First Steps in Cuba

Cuba, with its plains and mountains (especially its highest, the *Sierra Maestra*, in the region of Santiago), tropical climate and exuberant vegetation, awaited the sisters. Everything was new for them, and they soon learned to love this land as dearly as they were loved by its people.

The Diocese of Santiago de Cuba was one of the oldest in America. Established by Leo X in 1518, it not only included Cuba, but also the Spanish possessions Louisiana and Florida.

Its population was heterogeneous: Creole people (of Spanish ancestry), black people, Chinese or coolies, white people of diverse origins... This generated great pastoral difficulties. The women's situation was especially painful. This is what made Claret think of the young novice from Tarragona to carry out this mission.

It was an unknown world for those five young women who had never left their native Catalonia. They expected the Archbishop to be there to welcome them, but, due to their delay, when they arrived on May 26, 1852, Claret had gone on his pastoral visit around the large diocese and was not in Santiago. Maria Antonia lived this with great sorrow:

We were welcomed with much applause by the entire city, but God our Lord who in all things makes me taste the sweet and the bitter, or better said, the bitter and the sweet, took away the pleasure of finding there the Archbishop, who was the only person that I knew in this new world. This affliction was a token of the solitude in which his Divine

Majesty would leave me for a long time... (Aut.161-162).

Claret also regretted not being there, and he expressed this in a letter to Caixal:

It was not possible for me to have the pleasure of seeing the sisters arrive in Cuba, because due to the delay they were held back too long and I could not delay, the pastoral visit any more; but I had already prepared everything they could need, in respect to people, as well as money and anything else...

And so it was. The city's clergy, presided by Juan Nepomuceno Lobo, the Archdiocese's Administrator, and a women's committee, went out to meet them at the pier where the ship docked. They were accompanied by a large number of the people of Santiago who showed interest and curiosity.

They had prepared provisional lodging for them in the *Callejon del Carmen* (as the street was known) with the simplicity and austerity that Maria Antonia had always wanted for this New Order from the beginning:

We stayed very happy ... in a room they had prepared for us with five cots, one for each, the only furniture in the bedroom, which did not even have a nail on the wall. In the room where we were welcomed there were ten chairs, and a table in the dining room. In the kitchen there was a pot to make hot chocolate and a frying pan. I was so happy seeing the house so empty, that jumping for joy I said: Long live Holy Poverty, my sisters! (Aut.163-164).

The women sent two of their maids to help them. They were two black women. This surprised the sisters a lot, not only because they had never seen people of another race, but also because they were not expecting maids. In the end, they

kept one of them to help them in matters which required going out of the house, since in those times there were no possibilities of being a religious without living a cloistered life.

The first Mass was celebrated in the oratory on June 13th, feast of Saint Anthony, who was the patron saint of both Founders. They were filled with joy because the maid, who had not gone to confession or received communion for the last thirty years, did so with great fervor.

Shortly after, due to the earthquakes that razed Santiago from August to December, the oratory became a public chapel since the Cathedral, the Episcopal Palace and most of the churches were in ruins. People felt safe there. *It seemed to them that our house was free of the tremors.* Moreover, they were curious to see the nuns. *For these people who had never seen them it was something so new that they did not cease to marvel.* (Aut.169).

The commotion caused by the earthquakes was such that Claret was forced to interrupt his Pastoral Visit to be near the people of Santiago.

The youngest sisters had not met him yet, and were surprised and pleased that he visited them the very same day he arrived in Santiago.

In this first visit, the subject of the organization of the New Institute was brought up, which made Maria Antonia and Florentina very happy (cf.Aut.173). However, they soon realized that Claret's intention was not to found a new Institute (in part, because the established laws did not allow it); rather, he planned on doing everything as if it were another convent of the Company of Mary.

In this unexpected change, I became so astonished that I hardly knew what to say; because to reproach the Archbishop in front of the Administrator of the conversation we had had in Tarragona,... did

*not seem proper, and so I turned to silence...
leaving the matter in God's hands. (Aut.174).*

Misunderstandings increased because the Archbishop left the process in hands of the Administrator. As a good canon lawyer, Fr. Juan Nepomuceno did not see any legal possibility for beginning other than asking for a sister from the Company of Mary of Tarragona to go to Cuba.

The Administrator's way of seeing things was by no means what God had inspired Maria Antonia. In addition, he described the island's reality in such a negative way that she began to think that perhaps he wanted to scare them and discourage them from the task that they had already begun. With her usual sincerity and clarity, she wanted to know whether or not the foundation was really wanted:

I told him that these things made no impression on me, that I was not afraid of death and that for whom could I die better than my Lord Jesus Christ, but that not even this did I seek. That my only motive in coming to this land had been fulfilling the Divine Will and that I would come to know it through my Archbishop. And so to tell the Archbishop to say if he believed proceeding would be in accordance with God's will, or if due to the current situation he thought that it was God's will for us to return to Spain, to say it frankly, that the same spirit who had brought me here would return me to my country. (Aut.177).

But a few days later, Fr. Nepomuceno took them the draft of the request to Rome to begin the process for the new Institute. The truth is that no nun from Tarragona wanted to move to Cuba. On the other hand, even if they had done so, there were so many changes that it would not have been a continuation of the Company of Mary. It was clearly a new foundation, which was difficult in those times. Nevertheless,

Maria Antonia's firmness and the long conversations she had with Claret led him to finally ask the Pope for the necessary authorization:

Thank God, I have never put my trust in men, but in Divine Providence... always certain what is done is only what God wants and not what men think. And so it has occurred in this foundation; that the Archbishop without wanting to be concerned with this or with that, has been concerned with everything by divine impulse... I say this so that the ones who will come after will learn to hope in God against all hope. (Aut.217-218).

In those same days, Florentina Saingler unexpectedly died of yellow fever. This caused Maria Antonia much grief and loneliness, which increased the pain she was experiencing with the foundation of the Institute. She expresses it as follows:

Only the one who knows the mutual sympathy of two hearts united by God for himself in the same spirit, can understand the sorrow that filled my soul in this most sad occasion. My suffering was equal to the love I had for her, because it was no less than a love modeled by God, and I loved her as part of my soul. And so I felt such grief in this sad separation as if my soul was separated from my body. How many things afflicted me at the same time! Her irremediable loss! The unknown country! My complete solitude!...(Aut.180).

Claret made arrangements so that the funeral would be held in the Cathedral and she would be buried in the part of the Cemetery reserved for the Clergy. It was an act of love which did not fail to move the sisters.

Florentina's death was not only a significant moment in Maria Antonia's life; rather, somehow, it was also an important

moment in the history of the Institute. Maria Antonia herself was able to see it as part of God's plan for this New Order.

God did not leave me abandoned to my suffering for much time. A few days after her death, bitterly complaining ... why had he taken my sister... Our Lord made it clear to me that so it was best for the purposes of His glory ... In this way it has been fulfilled, that being burdened many times without knowing how to accomplish so many things which overwhelm me, I have invoked her favor for me and for my sisters and she has always helped me, especially in the beginning when our whole community consisted of only these four little ants (Aut.181-182).

The Beginning of a New Order, Not in Doctrine but in Practice

On June 7, 1853, they began their novitiate with a very simple ceremony, already living what would later be canonically and civilly established once the required permits were received.

The apostolic dimension of the Institute was expressed in different ways from the beginning. It appeared in the original name of the Order: Apostolic Institute of the Immaculate Conception of Mary Most Holy. On the other hand, as it occurs in the biblical vocation stories, each sister changed her name taking on one of the apostle's names: Maria Antonia Paris became Maria Antonia de San Pedro, Maria Josefa Caixal became Maria Josefa de San Pablo, Maria Gual became Maria Rosa de San Juan and Antonia Gual became Maria Encarnacion de los Santos Simon y Judas.

Moreover, they had already arranged the little space they had to give classes, which began a week later, on June 15th. The essential points of the Institute were already established: to unite contemplation and apostolic life with a strong community dimension, because "the principal aim of the religious of this New Order is to work with all diligence in the Lord, in keeping the Divine Law, and fulfill the evangelical counsels, and in imitation of the Holy Apostles, work until death teaching every creature the Lord's Holy Law" (Aim and Goal).

Shortly, the number of school girls had increased. They were also awaiting some candidates from Spain who were known to Caixal. The house in the *Callejon del Carmen* was getting small. Currius, Secretary of the Archbishop, and Juan Nepomuceno Lobo were the ones who found a larger

accommodation on the corner of San German Street and San Felix Street (which can still be seen in Santiago nowadays, although a bit changed). The sisters contributed their savings, but it was Claret who committed himself to pay for it. Furthermore, anticipating the future of the Convent and the Institute, Claret also bought the adjacent land.

They moved on December 13, 1853, and on January 15, 1854, the nine candidates arrived from Spain. Only the legal formalities, which would give both Founders many problems, were missing. The ecclesiastic and civil approval files were being processed very slowly. Finally, on July 16, 1855, the papal bull allowing the foundation of the new Institute arrived in Santiago de Cuba. The Archbishop signed the Foundation Document August 25th and, at that moment, he set the date for Maria Antonia's profession, the 27th of the same month. The others would profess on September 3rd in hands of both Founders.

Two original copies of the profession documents have been preserved. The first one, signed by Claret and Maria Antonia, remains in the Book of Professions of the Institute, and, in it, both of them are noted as Founders of this *new Order*.

Sister Maria Antonia de San Pedro Paris,... 39 years of age, born in the town of Vallmoll..., now a resident of the present city of Cuba... with the consent and approval of the Most Rev. Anthony Mary Claret y Clara, began again her cloistered life and novitiate according to the rules of the Apostolic Institute of the Daughters of the Immaculate Conception of Mary Most Holy, of which she is Foundress... and all the formalities already observed... his Holiness gives permission... to admit her to the religious profession on August 27th of the current year, at age 41... And being the truth and for

the record, the new and first professed sister of said Institute signs with the Most Rev. Archbishop (Positio, p.60).

The second one, signed by Currius, belongs to the ecclesiastical file of foundation, and it describes the religious ceremony (cf. *Positio*, p.69).

In her profession, Maria Antonia felt the joy of something so awaited, sought for a long time and for which she had struggled much. It was a very special experience which confirmed her charism and ecclesial vocation. It was in continuity with that "Initial Experience" and, at the same time, it deepened her vocation in service of the Church:

When the Archbishop put the crown on me, I felt such an extraordinary weight on my head that it made it tilt, and naturally the crown weighed very little, since it was made of very fine flowers. As I marveled at that great weight, Our Lord told me: "This is, my daughter, the burden of the renewal of my Church which lies upon you "; And three times He called me "my spouse" with much affection, making me understand that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit loved me very much. And Our Lord told me: "My daughter: from now on I want to be in the center of your heart"... And He wanted to celebrate it for eight days conserving the sacramental species from one communion to another" (RC.9).

The joy lived in the convent in those days due to Maria Antonia's profession was the best preparation for the other sisters' profession on September 3rd. After this, all that was left was the election of the prioress. Maria Antonia was chosen unanimously that same day. She was also in charge of formation, of both the recently professed and those who were entering. This is how the foundation process ended.

A few days after the profession, Claret asked Maria Antonia to write the most essential points of the new Order to send them to Rome. It meant writing in a more extensive form what she had already written in Tarragona (cf. Aut.228). In addition, Currius, Maria Antonia's confessor at that moment, knew that the Lord had made Maria Antonia see the Church's need for renewal and the concrete way in which it should be carried out: greater poverty, preaching the Word, formation of the clergy and collaborative ministry. For that reason, as her confessor, he ordered her to write these essential Points for the General Renewal of the whole Church.

It was a hard task for her, because she could not bear the thought that someone like her (a woman and a religious in the 19th century) had to say those things to priests, religious people, bishops and to the Pope himself. However, Currius kept insisting that she write these points because he believed it necessary for Claret to know them, convinced that this was God's inspiration. Both Maria Antonia and Currius not only saw him as a man in a position to carry out this plan of renewal of the Church but, above all, as somebody who was already living according to it.

The community's daily life went on normally. Not everything was perfect, but they lived in simplicity and with desires to follow Christ. This is seen in the good impression people had of them, and also because more families continued trusting them with their daughters' education. In fact, very soon they had to organize two shifts of classes, one in the morning and another one in the afternoon. From the beginning, much importance was given to uniting the apostolic work with one's prayer life. Both Founders were convinced that true mission could only spring up from a deep spiritual life.

Maria Antonia guided the life of the community spiritually and materially. Both she and Claret made sure that the norms and rules of the Institute were practiced in everyday

life before they were written. They used to discern all matters together. Although after giving his opinion, Claret would usually let her make the decisions, because he believed “*that when God chooses a person for a task, He gives him the necessary knowledge...*” (Letter from Claret to Currius, February 15, 1853).

Soon, new foundations were proposed in different places: Camaguey, Santo Domingo... However, they could not be carried out in that moment; it was still soon to divide the new community. The Founders preferred to first strengthen the basis.

This is also perceived in the care they took when receiving new candidates. They wanted women prepared for the apostolate of the Institute, with good health and, especially, with serious motivations:

... If it is to live and die crucified with Christ... detached from all that is created to live only for the Creator, and this in any part of the world, entirely confident and sure that God is everywhere... If this is the spirit that moves you before God, it's all right... (Letter from Currius to a young candidate in which he expresses Maria Antonia's criteria for discernment, November 16, 1857).

Young Cuban women began to request admission. Maria Antonia, who asked Claret his opinion on all the important matters of the Institute, did not fail to consult him about this point of great importance for the Institute's future. At that moment, the Archbishop's answer was negative. He feared that the entrance of young women who were not as strong as the Catalans would water down the spirit of the Institute. Soon reality proved him wrong. A few years later, several Cubans entered, and because of their apostolic spirit and how they lived their consecration, they dissipated the fears of both Founders.

Claret frequently visited the sisters when he was in Santiago. They took part in his missions through their prayers and concern about what he did. He used to tell them about his apostolic adventures and helped them understand the reality of the Island and the idiosyncrasy of its inhabitants. A letter from Maria Antonia after the attack in Holguin allows us to understand how united they felt in their missionary ministry and spirituality:

Great is the satisfaction which my heart feels seeing how great God's goodness has been preserving your life ... He wanted to give you the great reward of shedding part of your blood... we can imagine how happy you are to have been wounded for teaching the Holy Law of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and I and all of your daughters want to participate in the great reward that the Lord will give you... for you may remember that in a sermon you told us that we would divide the spoils. I wish we had the fortunate luck of sealing our life shedding our blood in confirmation of the Lord's Holy Law... (Letter from Maria Antonia to Claret, February 28, 1856).

Claret Returns to Spain

While Claret was preaching in Santiago on March 18, 1857, he received an urgent letter from Madrid: Queen Elizabeth II wanted him to be her confessor and called him back to Spain urgently.

It is true that Claret had been thinking about the possibility of giving up his position, but certainly not to become a royal confessor. However, after a time of discernment and several consultations, he accepted due to obedience and went back to Spain. The Spirit of the Lord was behind all of that although it seemed otherwise. If his missionary zeal had transformed the Archdiocese of Cuba into a mission, now he had the opportunity of converting this new position (that did not seem to be missionary at all) into an authentic mission. The Queen's trips, in which she always requested her confessor's presence, gave him the opportunity to preach countless sermons in the most diverse places. While the Queen dealt with matters related to the Spanish Court, Claret preached in churches, jails, hospitals, monasteries, to the St. Vincent de Paul Society...

He embarked on the merchant ship *Cuba* to Havana on March 22, 1857, and on April 12th departed to Cadiz on the *Pizarro*. He arrived on May 18th. Soon after that, on the 25th of the same month, he was already in Madrid with the Queen. On that trip, he read the two notebooks that contained the Plan for the Renewal of the Church that Maria Antonia had written years before and which Currius had given him.

Claret's sudden transfer to Spain would not weaken his relationship with the sisters. In fact, this new responsibility

turned out to be the pretext for the Institute's new foundation in Spain.

Tremp: A Novitiate in Spain

It had already been some time that both Founders had been thinking about founding a novitiate in Spain. In fact, Currius wrote to Claret while he was still out at sea to inform him about new developments in the Archdiocese. He also took the opportunity to ask him to talk to the Queen about the foundation of a formation house for the sisters. Maria Antonia wrote to him with the same purpose. However, the Archbishop's response made it clear that the matter was not as simple as they thought.

First, Claret spoke with Fr. Esteban Salas, Superior General of the Claretians, who planned to establish them in a part of the convent of the Augustinian Nuns of Perelada (Gerona), but this was not possible. Claret also negotiated with the government and the Nunciature; he insisted the bishops of Gerona, Vich and Urgel, but was not successful. He wrote to Currius so that he would inform Maria Antonia about the discouraging situation. The letters, in which she thanked him for his efforts and discloses her trust that the foundation would take place because it was part of God's plan, are still preserved.

Furthermore, Maria Antonia suggested to him a foundation in the Diocese of Urgel, taking into consideration that Caixal was bishop of that diocese. The Founder answered saying it was better that she and Currius communicated directly with Caixal. Considering how much Caixal cared for Maria Antonia, this proved to be a better approach. His response came without hesitation:

My heart is completely open for my daughters from Cuba... I will try to place them in

*Urgel, Tremp, Pons, Agramunt, or if not, in Guisona
(Letter from Caixal to Currius, 1857).*

Finally, the chosen city was Tremp (Lerida).

The preparations for the trip began. They decided that Maria Josefa Caixal de San Pablo and Maria Gertrudis Barril de San Felipe would accompany Maria Antonia. Claret wanted Currius to go with them.

The sisters who stayed in Cuba suffered deeply the separation from the Foundress. She also suffered it, but trusted in the wisdom and spiritual depth of those whom she had formed. She also knew they would do everything according to the spirit of the new Institute in that Cuban reality that would soon go through plenty of political and ecclesiastic difficulties. Rosa Gual was elected Prioress of the convent.

They left April 6, 1859 in the Spanish vessel *Venus*. Since the day prior to their departure Maria Antonia had a strong headache which prevented her from saying words of farewell to the community, Currius spoke to them with much fervor about the Gospel of John, Chapter 16: *You need me to leave...*

They arrived at the bay of Cadiz on May 12th. The bishop of that city, who had received a letter from Claret and Caixal, was waiting for them, and when they disembarked the following morning, he took them to the Episcopal Palace.

After having lunch, he showed them the cathedral that was about to be completed and, finally, drove them to the Convent of the Discalced Nuns of the Immaculate Conception, where lodging was prepared for them. They felt welcomed as in their own house, and when they left, they were given some gifts for the new foundation. Years later, Maria Antonia would remember a very fine silk that they used to make a canopy for the monstrance of the chapel of Tremp.

They embarked again on May 17th and arrived at Barcelona the 23rd, although they could not disembark until the 24th. There was a pleasant surprise waiting for them there: Maria Gertrudis Barril's brother, who had come from Urgel to wait for his sister, told them that Claret had come from Madrid. Claret shared this with Caixal:

Dear brother: I have just received a letter from Father Currius, who tells me that he has disembarked in Cadiz with the three nuns and leaves today to Barcelona. I have asked His Majesty for permission to give them a blessing... (Letter to Caixal May 18, 1859).

Due to the Archbishop's mediation, the four travelers were spared the time of quarantine required for overseas travelers. They immediately went to the Palace of the Archbishop of Barcelona, where they ate with him and with the Very Reverend Fr. Palau. Given Maria Antonia's delicate health, aggravated by the difficulties of the trip, Claret decided that they should stay in Barcelona for as long as necessary.

On June 8th, they departed to Tremp, accompanied by Currius. They traveled by train (recently inaugurated) to Martorell, and from there by stagecoach until Igalada. They stayed overnight in Agramunt, and completed their journey to Tremp by donkey. They arrived June 11, 1859, at about seven o'clock in the morning.

While the church bells rang, Bishop Caixal, the town representatives and a great multitude gathered to receive them. Some girls dressed like angels sang an amusing refrain: *Praised be the nuns*. The sisters made them change it for a more appropriate one: *Praised be Mary Most Holy who sends us the nuns*. Once in the parish, they sang a solemn "Te Deum" of thanksgiving. Then they visited the little house that had been prepared for them in Capuchins' Street, but that first night they stayed nearby at Mrs. Manuela Doria de Gallart's house.

On Pentecost Sunday, Bishop Caixal celebrated Mass, and in the afternoon, they moved to their temporary residence which had an adjacent lot where they were planning to build the convent. At once they began to clean and fix the house. The furniture was scarce: a table, four seats, a pan and a pot, in addition to three folding beds, two of which broke the first night. This was not novelty for Maria Antonia because in Santiago's foundation she had already experienced poverty in those first steps, and this filled her with happiness.

On June 13th, coinciding with the date of inauguration of the house of Cuba, they celebrated Mass in the small chapel of the new house. The Blessed Sacrament was placed in the tabernacle, and thus, began the life of the second community of the Institute.

Tremp is a small city in the County of Lerida, rich in cereals, wine and oil. At that time there were 2,500 inhabitants. The political atmosphere was quite calm, without confrontations between the *Carlistas*, supporters of Carlos (the king's brother) and the *Isabelinos*, Isabella's supporters. That was one of the reasons why Caixal had offered them that location for the foundation.

The only nuns in town were the Daughters of Charity, who were in charge of the Hospital, but there was no religious presence in the field of the education of girls and young women. That is why the arrival of the sisters was so beneficial. Almost at the same time, the Congregation of the Sacred Family, a community for men, was founded by Fr. Jose Mañanet y Vives, who would become friends with Maria Antonia and be one of her helpers.

Besides education, the new community had the mission of providing formation for the young women who were admitted to the novitiate, thus being able to help the sisters in Cuba with new vocations.

In July 1859, the construction of the new convent began. They started with the most urgent part: the Church and the areas for classes and the novitiate. They received much help: the city council donated the house, and the adjacent threshing field and orchard; a board formed by people of the town also made donations, although it was not a lot. Caixal, Claret, the community of Cuba, and Queen Isabella II herself sent financial help. The rest was paid through the work of the sisters of Tremp.

It was the first convent of the Institute that was built according to the Constitutions, keeping in mind three requirements: sufficient space for the classrooms, an area reserved for the community's internal life, and being a public testimony of poverty for anyone who saw it.

They wanted to lay the cornerstone of the church on August 15, 1859, but because the Bishop was ill, it had to be delayed until November 18th. That same day, the first two novices began their novitiate.

The construction of the church lasted exactly one year. Caixal consecrated it in honor of Mary Immaculate. Also present were the priests Balague, Mañanet and Palau. Maria Antonia described the ceremony in detail in a letter to the Founder dated November 28, 1960.

The convent's church, as the Constitutions prescribed, had to be built with a single nave and a small chapel at each side, a high choir and a low one. St. Peter and St. Anthony of Padua had to be at the sides of Mary Immaculate. In the lateral chapels, a Crucified Christ and a painting of Saint Joseph beside the Gospel, an image of the Sacred Heart and a canvas of Saint Anne.

Currius was the chaplain of Tremp until he had to go help Claret in Madrid. It was difficult to find an appropriate chaplain and confessor, because too often these would intrude

in the internal life of the community. Nevertheless, while Maria Antonia was in the community many problems of this type were avoided. The parish priest of Salas (a small town nearby) was one of those who helped them most.

In spite of the difficulties, the sisters' fervor did not diminish. In many occasions they had to rely on themselves for their Spiritual Exercises and retreats. Their eucharistic spirituality was notable; they even obtained permission from Caixal to have adoration of the Blessed Sacrament open to the public. They also stood out for their love towards the Blessed Mother. The sister's church in Tremp was the first church dedicated to Mary Immaculate.

As they had agreed, Maria Antonia kept the Bishop informed of all that happened in the convent. He made the necessary visits to confirm their fidelity to the Constitutions.

In addition, she informed Claret of the steps they took, because although he was not their current bishop, he was the Founder and his opinions and advice were essential to her.

Claret also received reports on the community from Caixal. In one of his letters, he wrote:

In two years I have visited them twice. Sir, that [community] is admirable. It is an assembly of angels and proof that it can work perfectly (April 16, 1867).

New Claretians for the Mission

New candidates entered two months after the community was established in Tremp. Almost all of them were acquaintances of Caixal or of other friends of Claret. Maria Antonia continued being very careful with the selection of candidates.

As in Santiago de Cuba, she was the Mistress of Novices. Her work of formation was always marked by a sacred respect for each person. She never wanted to coerce anyone, so she allowed each one to decide before God which was her own path. She accompanied them, but without forcing anybody. It is interesting to see the way she acted with Rosa, Caixal's niece, before she started her novitiate:

I find that, although her parents do not demand that she go home, it is convenient that she goes out for a few days, because... no matter what we say, they will always think that we have persuaded her to become a nun... (March 1, 1863).

Also, she was realistic and honest when giving reports, not hiding faults when they existed, both hers and those of the other sisters.

Claret sent some young women to the community whom he considered had a religious vocation and suitable qualities for the Institute. He even geared to the Institute some young women whom he had known by means of Saint Micaela

of the Blessed Sacrament when sensed a Claretian vocation in them. Many times he expressed in his letters the happiness that he felt when seeing the community grow on firm bases:

I am very happy to know about the increasing number of members in that community; try to form all of them in a true spirit of humility, poverty, charity and zeal of the greater glory of God and wellbeing of souls (February 23, 1863).

By the end of their first year in Tresp there were already seven novices, and two years later they started considering the idea of sending some sisters to help in the mission of Cuba, but all this required certain permits from the Church and civil authorities.

Meanwhile, the community of Tresp was in charge of the education of a numerous group of young ladies and girls. The school was free; they only charged each student for the materials they used, and the boarding fee was determined by the townspeople, taking into account the increase in cost of living.

The pedagogic methods intended to be quite up-to-date and more complete than those the State required for women's education. This evidenced their commitment to the promotion of women in the 19th century.

They were given appropriate formation in reading, writing, embroidery, sewing and everything that was expected for women in that society. They also took care of religious and moral education, trying to make them meditate personally on their acts. Also, Maria Antonia was aware of how necessary it was to take care not only of academic instruction, but especially to form the youth for what society expected of them once they finished school. For that reason, they also tried to work with the parents, making them realize that they were the ones authentically responsible for the education of their

children, and that the school could only complement their educational task.

It was then that Maria Antonia asked Claret to write a booklet similar to *The Well Educated Schoolboy* for her students. He wrote *The Well Educated Schoolgirl*, taking into account the answers to the questionnaire (about the daily life and religious practices of students) that he had previously sent Maria Antonia. It was not difficult at all for her to answer this questionnaire because most of this was prescribed in the guidelines for the school contained in the Constitutions of the Institute. Once the booklet was published, Claret sent it to the sisters in Tremp and asked them to send him annotations for successive updated issues, since they had more experience than he did in this field. The Constitutions set high standards for those who teach:

All the teachers...must try with all care to win the heart of their pupils, that is, that their good behavior, charity, meekness, sweetness, affability, wisdom, modesty...are the first lessons that their pupils should learn from their teachers; and these characteristics, learned well, make the girls know the respect and submission with which they have to treat and to obey them. (Const.IV,3.1, Writings p. 549).

The teachers' zeal, care, longing and desire ought to be to try to plant and engrave in the heart of their pupils a tender love of God and neighbor, This is how the law of the Lord is fulfilled and without its fulfillment all is lost and everything else is in vain. (Const. IV.3,1.17, Writings pp.549.552).

Living the Church's Burden

When Claret returned to Spain to become the Queen's confessor, he took two notebooks that contained the *Plan for the Renewal of the Church* that Currius had ordered Maria Antonia to write years earlier. Through some letters and the great similarities that it has with his later writing, *Notes of a Plan to Restore the beauty of the Church* (1857), it appears that he not only read these notebooks on the ship, but that both Founders had already begun working on this plan of renewal before his departure to Spain.

The two little notebooks on the General Renewal are in my possession. Moreover, during the crossing I have written a plan of Renewal which, with God's grace, should produce the good results we need... (Letter from Claret to Currius, June 5, 1857).

I wonder if God has arranged my return to Spain to carry out the great project of renewal for clergymen... we already began the project in Cuba with Mother Maria Antonia... (Letter from Claret to Caixal, May 31, 1857).

For some time, Currius had been insistently asking Claret to write to the Pope a letter presenting the *Plan for the Renewal of the Church* written by Maria Antonia. He resisted because he did not think it was an easy task. At this time, in which the Church was predominantly understood hierarchically and unchanging, to speak of a renewal was a risk and both Founders knew this.

According to Maria Antonia's writing, the Pope should take the initiative, together with the bishops, priests, and

religious men and women. From the beginning, she saw in Claret the apostolic man, who with the torch of the Gospel in hand, had to preach to the wise and the ignorant. The lifestyle that she proposed to the bishops was modeled after Claret's lifestyle as Archbishop:

Bishops should live in community... there should not be a distinction of what is yours and mine between them... All their money from interest belong to the poor and, therefore, they should be given to them ... After renewing themselves, they should... be fully in charge of distributing the Bread of the Word... Gather all the clergy and preach the Divine Word to them... (PR 16ss.).

The Lord has wanted to place him (Claret) in the Episcopal seat in order to give the law to the people... His brother bishops, priests, clergy and religious ought to look to him as a model, which was not possible when he was simply a priest... (PR 63).

Before professing, in continuity with the spiritual experiences lived in Tarragona, Maria Antonia had an experience in prayer relating to Claret:

Blessed Mary told me that she would take care of making him understand how the Church's burden weighed upon him. So it happened a few days after having professed that he was told how he was to be the Angel of the Apocalypse. He told me this himself (full of wonder and astonishment) the day he came to say goodbye before leaving for his Pastoral Visit (Aut.79-80).

Indeed, Claret also had a revelation in which he saw himself in the role of the Angel of the Apocalypse (he saw himself as a herald of the Gospel called to help renew the Church). This occurred six days after Maria Antonia's

profession. Without a doubt, it was a joyful moment for both of them to be able to share this experience.

Maria Antonia must have experienced much happiness with this man's interior change. That is, from a certain initial distance when they had arrived to the island, to such a profound union enabling them to share with each other the spiritual gifts granted by God.

This experience served to confirm Claret as an instrument chosen by God, as *that apostolic man who must reinstate the Lord's Holy Law (PR 61)*. Claret's new position as the Queen's confessor not only failed to contradict this mission, but also opened new possibilities to renew the Church: influencing in the appointment of bishops, fomenting the formation of the priests and their dedication to the proclamation of the Gospel, encouraging community life in religious congregations...

Despite his doubts and after many requests from Currius, Claret consented to writing the letter presenting Maria Antonia's *Plan for the Renewal*.

Currius took this to Rome together with a first draft of the Constitutions of the Institute that Maria Antonia had also written in Cuba as Claret had ordered her. Before leaving to Rome, Currius went by Tremp and Seo de Urgel so that Caixal would also give him a presentation letter and to see Maria Antonia before his departure.

On February 17, 1860, the Pope met with Currius, who earnestly asked him to read the *Plan for the Renewal*. At the end, Pius IX consented to read them. The Pope did not consider the proposal feasible and told Currius: *Tell your Prelate that it cannot produce the fruit he hopes for.*

The Constitutions had to go through the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Religious, who took longer than the Pope to get the job done. Archbishop Claret opened the

envelope containing the response on September 21st in Barcelona.

The Constitutions were not approved because solemn vows were incompatible with the type of poverty and form of government they proposed. According to the Sacred Congregation, Canon Law did not allow convents of solemn vows to practice the kind of poverty prescribed by the Constitutions (which prohibited living off income from properties and interest from dowries), nor to engage in missionary apostolate, nor to unite all houses under a Superior General ... How difficult it would be to approve this!

Currius returned to Spain disappointed. Maria Antonia accepted the negative response with great humility and obedience. Claret also accepted with peace the fact that his name was bound to something denied by the Pope.

It was a dark time for Maria Antonia. She only asked the Lord to have mercy on her. She feared that her mystic experiences were not from God and that her confessors were making a mistake by asking her to write:

I find it funny to see a poor ignorant creature involved in such a delicate and important task; but today God has reprehended me... He told me, what have you in what I do? Understand that the less capable the instrument is... more so does it reveal the wisdom of the Teacher who guides it (PR 43).

Nevertheless, in her Diary one reads her hope that the Pope would start the renewal of the Church in spite of everything.

Since the Constitutions were not approved, Maria Antonia saw it necessary that each sisters receive her own copy of the most essential and proper points of the new Institute, giving the existing convents in Cuba and Spain a uniform lifestyle. For this reason, she planned to create a summary of

the Constitutions that were waiting to be approved, including that which concerned daily life and avoiding the canonical difficulties.

She consulted Claret with the idea and he not only approved it, but also offered to pay the printing and binding expenses. Maria Antonia sent it to him on December 18, 1861, and on the 30th of the same month, he responded approving the text. He also suggested that she give them a copy of the book he had written on the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius.

The sisters used these abbreviated Constitutions, published in 1862 by Riera Press, until the Constitutions were approved after the Foundress' death.

From here on, the reader will find several difficulties in the long journey of the writing and approval of the Constitutions of the nascent Congregation.

The tension in between the Founders' vision of the Apostolic Institute and the existing juridical structures were part of the birth and evolution of the first houses of the New Order.

To transmit the life and inspiration of this New Order to the Constitutions, according to the juridical categories of the effective Canon Law, was a difficult and painful process, impossible at that moment.

The delay in the final approval of the Constitutions contributed to the separations that occurred in some communities like Tremp and Reus, as well as with some clergymen who did not thoroughly accept the newness of the New Order when it interfered with their own interests. Certainly, trying to "put the new wine in old wineskins" at some moment caused the wineskins to break and the wine to spill.

Besides other socio-political factors and difficult people, the main reason for the delay in the approval of the Constitutions was the problem of legally inserting the new elements of the Founders' vision of the Institute, especially aspects such as:

- The prophetic inspiration of a way of religious life with **solemn vows lived in poverty, earning a living with the work of one's hands and without relying on money earned through interest, or properties ... and distribution of goods between all the communities.** It did not fit in the canon law of the time.
- That **all the houses of the Order form "a single soul and a single heart"** did not enter then in the cloistered concept of the existent autonomous and independent convents of nuns.
- The sisters' **missionary disposition and freedom to move** from one convent to another as needed, as well as a Mother General visiting the communities was unconceivable.

The difficulties to include these new dimensions, essential to the inspiration of the foundation, in the Constitutions lasted for a long time, until other forms of apostolic religious life were born in the Church and made the change of the Canon Law inevitable. The moment arrived for the Congregation in 1920, in the "Union Chapter", some time after the death of both Founders.

"... It is impossible to remain silent and to speak is imprudent. Assuming, then, my God, that You order it, I will speak..."

Therefore, may the first point be how God Our Lord wants the general renewal of His entire Church... May no one excuse himself for impossibility or for corruption of customs or of

the times, because God Our Lord has all times present and has only given us one Holy Gospel...

Our Lord does not request anything new in His Church; He only asks us what we have promised Him. The observance of His Holy Law...

And what was the reason why the Church of God flourished so much in the beginning, when there were not many evangelizers? Because they preached the Gospel through their deeds more than through their words...

All Bishops be certain that greed has spoiled religion; the devil has opened a gap through here for all the evils that the Church is suffering...

(cf. PR 1. 2. 8. 12. 41. 49)

Reus: A New Foundation

Maria Antonia wanted to open new houses in other parts of Spain. Claret encouraged her to write to well-known people who could facilitate a new foundation, including the Archbishop of Tarragona.

Maria Antonia preferred to write to Fr. Pablo Bofarull since they had known each other for some time. He was the one who had provided lodging for her and Florentina when they left the Company of Mary. In addition, Maria Antonia asked Claret to write to the Archbishop of Tarragona to support the proposals made by Bofarull so that things would proceed. The only condition was that they would not found a new community in Tarragona because there were already some other nuns there. The most appropriate place they found was the city of Reus. Both the clergy and the people welcomed that foundation. As always, the difficulty was the government's approval.

Reus is located 14 Km. from Tarragona. It had a strong economy, and its people were restless and venturesome industrially and politically. It was the first city which supported the Constitution of Cadiz of 1812, and was also one of Isabella II's strongest opponents. Faith and religiosity was not predominant among its inhabitants; rather, a strong sense of anticlericalism prevailed.

It was the priests of the *Iglesia Prioral de San Pedro* who began the canonical proceedings for the foundation in March 1865. As these things take time, the sisters were not able to move until two years later. During this time, Claret met several times in Madrid with the Secretary of Grace and Justice and with the officials in charge of attending the proceedings. Seeing

that it was so slow, he told Maria Antonia to hasten it with a Reus Deputy, and this way, the permission was obtained more quickly.

Among the different possibilities for the location of the convent, they chose a small farmhouse with its vegetable garden located in the Tarragona Highway. Claret paid for the purchase of the house, as it is stated in the book of Chronicles of the Reus community.

Permission for the sisters to leave took a long time. It was granted June 26, 1867 and the 29th of the same month, Fr. Agustin Codina, Ecclesiastical Governor of Urgel, transmitted it to Maria Antonia. He also gave her the appropriate means to carry out the trip: *By the shortest route and in a closed carriage, accompanied by a priest.* This was very different from the first trip to Cuba, in which five women had accomplished such a long trip on their own, solely relying on their own zeal and the confidence of being guided by God's Spirit. Now they were professed and Canon Law demanded it this way.

The six sisters left on the morning of July 12th, and after traveling for two days, they arrived in Reus at 8 p.m. The house, which had been prepared by several townswomen, had only six cots with straw mattresses, a table, six chairs, and hardly anything else.

Since the Archbishop was in Rome, the Vicar went there the following day to establish the community. Bofarull, who was close to them, blessed the provisional chapel and celebrated the Eucharist, leaving the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle.

Two days later, Maria Antonia wrote to Claret about the foundation of the third community of the Institute. Full of joy, he answered immediately:

Evil has worked hard to prevent the foundation, but Mary has triumphed...moreover, on

Saturday... Fulfill your mission, which is the gratitude that Mary expects from that foundation... imitate the ox of the Nativity through patience, perseverance and love of work. You will laugh at my simplicity. It does not matter. It is that I am happy... (July 21, 1867).

Although there was not much space in the house, they began having classes in their dining room, which fit approximately thirty girls.

The construction of the convent soon began. It caused the sisters much suffering because the architect wanted to show off his artistic talent at the expense of the community. Maria Antonia insisted that he remove some columns and baseboards that surrounded the walls. This way, they followed the poverty and simplicity noted in the Constitutions. Although they received some help from the sisters in Cuba, Claret, Caixal, and the inhabitants, they covered most of the expenses on their own.

Soon, young women from Tarragona, Maspujols, Vallmoll and Reus entered. Once again, Currius was the chaplain and confessor, as well as a great support for Maria Antonia, not only in the organization of the community but also in the young women's formation. This was even more important after the Founding Father's death, which happened a short time after the Reus foundation.

Maria Antonia remained in Reus until 1875 as Prioress and Mistress of Novices. During this time, important events happened in her personal life and in the nascent Institute: the Spanish revolution of 1868, the schism of Cuba, the foundation in Baracoa, the *Decretum Laudis* of the Constitutions and Archbishop Claret's death.

The Spanish Revolution of 1868

The Spanish revolution of 1868 was the result of many political mistakes. Claret, who saw the situation from a key position, had been predicting it for some time.

The rebellion began in Cadiz (in southern Spain). Twenty-one canon shots on September 18, 1868, announced the dethronement of Isabella II. At once the rebellion spread throughout Spain.

In Reus, the revolution found support at once. The Revolutionary Board was formed, and the consequences were greater than in other Catalan cities. On October 2nd, the city's congregations and religious communities were suppressed, without bearing in mind the agreement with the Holy See that protected them.

Naturally, the situation was difficult for the sisters. Maria Antonia, foreseeing these events, asked the bricklayers to finish the wall around the convent to protect it. Although at first, the master bricklayer took it as a blunder, he later admitted that it had been a good idea. During the time of the revolution, armed groups met in the surrounding area, and these would have undoubtedly occupied the outbuildings of the convent if the wall had not been raised. As soon as the first street manifestations began, Maria Antonia decided to send the novices to their families and asked the candidates to wait for better times.

On October 1st, at 7 p.m., a closed carriage sent by the mayor arrived to take them to the Hospital run by the Daughters of Charity. This was to protect them from possible attacks. They took only that which they were wearing. Maria Antonia hid the Blessed Sacrament under her veil, leaving the tabernacle empty, in case it was desecrated. They were asked

who they were several times on their way to the Hospital, but nobody did any harm to them. People had grown fond of the sisters of the Tarragona Highway.

The Sisters of the Hospital kindly received them, as well as the Discalced Carmelites. All of them collaborated in the internal tasks of the hospital and helped in its economic maintenance, not only with their work but also contributing some vegetables that they could occasionally pick from the convent's vegetable garden. Fortunately, there were no problems either in the Hospital or in the Claretian Sisters' convent.

The Schism in the Church in Cuba and the Foundation in Baracoa

The situation in Spain had repercussions in Cuba, where uprisings for independence began taking place. Also around that time, Primo Calvo, Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, died, leaving the diocese vacant for eight years. Calvo had taken Fr. Jose Orbera (a priest from Valencia, Spain, who would become a great benefactor of the Institute) to Cuba as Administrator and Vicar General, and it was believed that he would become the next bishop.

However, the Government in Madrid appointed another bishop for Cuba that Rome did not accept and this brought about the schism. Most of the Cuban Church remained faithful to Rome, and therefore, to Msgr. Orbera. The sisters in Cuba were among them, but it was a difficult situation for everyone.

The sisters in Reus followed the events closely through the letters from the sisters in Cuba and Orbera. Maria Antonia wanted to intervene in his favor when he was imprisoned, but she could not do anything because most of her Cuban friends were in favor of the schism, and therefore, against the appointment made by Rome.

When the Government in Madrid finally gave in, Orbera left jail, but he was exiled for some time. He took advantage of his stay in Spain to visit his family and the sisters in Reus. Later, when returning to Cuba, he would take three new candidates with him.

It was also Orbera who made the foundation of a new community of Claretian Missionary Sisters in Baracoa possible.

This city is located on the island's northeastern coast, in a very mountainous region known as the famous *Cuchillas de Baracoa*. The vegetation is abundant, rich in pineapples, bananas and coconuts. Its dense population made Orbera choose that location for the new foundation, which the people accepted with much enthusiasm. The rate at which the money needed to begin the construction of the convent was collected was proof of this.

The cornerstone was laid on December 2, 1872 in a solemn ceremony in which all the social classes of the city participated. Only a month and half later, the schism in the Cuban Church began. Therefore, even though civil authorities were very interested in finishing the construction of the convent, they did not want to support the project since it was related to the sisters, whom everyone knew were close to Orbera. Nevertheless, the project continued, but with many political and religious difficulties. On August 31, 1875, the sisters who would form the new community arrived, and it was established on September 5th. Ten days later, classes began.

***Decretum Laudis* of the Constitutions**

In 1865, Claret had to travel to Rome to meet with the Pope because Queen Isabella II had acknowledged the Italian kingdom, against the Vatican's interests. Taking advantage of this trip, Maria Antonia asked Claret to once again present the Constitutions for their approval, but the copy that Currius sent arrived in Rome after Claret had already left. Nevertheless, the Constitutions were presented by a member of the Trinitarian community who was a friend of Currius.

When in 1869 Claret returned to Rome to participate in the preparation of the First Vatican Council, Maria Antonia wrote to him through Fr. Pedro Naudo so that he would follow up on the approval of the Constitutions. Shortly after, the *Decretum Laudis* (Decree of praise or approval), a canonical document in which the nature of the Institute was detailed, came out. This Decree was sent to Caixal, because he was bishop of Urgel and Tremp was in his diocese. For this reason, Claret could not read it at that moment. Maria Antonia saw it before him and noticed the important mistakes that the document contained: the Institute appeared to have been founded in 1854 in Urgel, instead of in Cuba in 1855; it referred to a pious institute of simple vows instead of a religious institute with solemn vows; it also failed to mention Pius IX's Decree approving the foundation in 1855 in Cuba. Furthermore, all that the Holy See considered not in compliance with Canon Law only referred to the Institute founded in Cuba.

The confusion was cleared up when it was verified that the Institute's files had been mixed up with another institute's files in the Office of the Secretary of the Diocese of Urgel.

Claret advised Maria Antonia to correct the Constitutions as the Holy See had suggested, but preserving the nature of the Institute. She did so with Currius' help. The new version was titled *Constitutions and Rules of the Religious of the Institute of Mary Immaculate, founded in Santiago de Cuba by the Most Rev. Anthony Mary Claret y Clara in the month August of 1855 by virtue of the apostolic brief of the preceding April 27th.*

Claret presented this version, but it does not appear to have been sent to a consultant. Perhaps it was impossible due to the Celebration of the First Vatican Council and the revolution and looting of Rome that caused such a precipitated end to the Council.

It would not be until 1876 when, from Carcagente, Maria Antonia would once again attempt to obtain the approval of the Constitutions of the Institute, supported by Orbera.

Claret Dies: How Will the Foundation Be Accomplished?

Those times had been specially painful for Claret, even undermining his health: the escape from Spain accompanying the Queen, the stay in Paris, but, above all, the tremendous calumnies raised against him. However, he accepted all of this with great integrity and evangelical dignity.

In addition, his health was already very deteriorated and was worsened by the Roman climate that he had to bear during the First Vatican Council. In his letters to Maria Antonia and to Currius there are many spiritual reflections, as if he wanted to leave a beautiful evangelical legacy to the Institute:

... what matters is that you and the young women who enter be good religious and the approval will come when God thinks it best...be patient, pray a lot to God and the Blessed Virgin, observe well the Rules you have and make yourselves holy (Letter from Claret to Maria Antonia, January 1, 1870).

As he had done throughout his life, at the end, he also wanted to give testimony of his fidelity to the Lord and to the Church:

The hardships and difficulties of the Council keep us very busy in sustaining and defending the rights of the Church and the Holy Father. In the middle of the Council, I said from the pulpit that I was willing and ready to shed my blood and give my life. (Letter from Claret to Maria Antonia, June 17, 1870).

On October 24, 1870, at 8:45 in the morning, Claret died surrounded by the Claretian Missionaries of Prades and the Cistercian monks of the Monastery of Fontfroide. He died forgiving his persecutors and slanderers, with the crucifix in his hands as a final sign.

News of his death took a few days to reach his spiritual daughters in Reus. But something significant occurred there: at the same moment in which Claret died, the bell which the sisters used to call the chaplain, Fr. Currius, rang, calling him. He went, but nobody had rung it. It could have been a coincidence, but when they found out that it had occurred at the same time the Founder had surrendered to the Lord, all of them thought it was significant.

Claret's death was very painful for Maria Antonia. She not only saw him as the Founder of the Institute, but also as the apostolic man God had chosen to carry out the renovation of the Church. For Maria Antonia, his death seemed to contradict all the hopes that the Lord had made her put in him. She wrote in her Diary few yet very expressive words about what this holy man had come to mean in her life and in the ecclesial task the Lord had entrusted her:

Feeling distressed because of Claret's death, I prayed intensely to God for the restoration of the Holy Church. Since he had taken him, how would His work be completed? At this point the Lord told me: Perhaps, is my Word not enough? Have faith, my daughter, wait a bit and you will see what I do. (Diary 109).

She saw that the Project (the foundation of the Institute as well as the renewal of the Church) was already reality in Claret's life as a bishop of the Church. He was a small sign, a guarantee, that the Project was being carried out, similar to the stretch of promised land which Abraham bought from the Hittites to bury his wife Sarah (cf. Gn 23). This explains Maria

Antonia's anguish. If Claret disappeared, would the Project remain unfinished? But the Lord assured her that it was His Project, not Claret's. Somehow that way of being a shepherd of the Church should remain as a model for all shepherds "according to the heart of God". This is what she had already experienced in prayer in 1858: "*This is how to perpetually remember my Servant Claret, whom I want to live in each one of my Bishops (Diary 16).*"

Claret remained in Maria Antonia's life as a sign for the Church. But, her hope had the firmest support beyond Claret: it is God's Project and He will take care of it.

From this moment, without understanding how it would be, Maria Antonia knew that the Lord would continue carrying out His Project.

First Internal Divisions

Since she left Tremp, Maria Antonia had a simple and fraternal relationship with the sisters of Tremp and Cuba. Naturally, and without legal concern, she was recognized in all the convents as Superior General of the Institute. Nevertheless, this did not exist in the Canon Law of the time for religious orders. This is why the Constitutions were still not approved which would cause problems.

Maria Antonia freely sent sisters from one convent to another, and if a house had excess material goods, they would be sent to another house that was in need. This is how it was written in the Constitutions: *All the houses will form a single family and a single heart.*

But, shortly after arriving in Reus, difficulties arose in Maria Antonia's relationship with the sisters in Tremp, ultimately leading this community to separate from the rest of the Institute after her death.

When Maria Antonia left Tremp on July 12, 1867, she left Maria Josefa Caixal, Caixal's niece and co-foundress, as Prioress. This was a provisional arrangement until the bishop arrived from Rome and the official election for Prioress could take place. Disagreements between some sisters and the superior soon began. Through letters, we can see how Maria Antonia always tried to encourage unity between the sisters and with Maria Josefa Caixal. In October 1870, she wrote to Father Mañanet, the sisters' spiritual director, so that he would help her restore peace in the convent:

... You can see the trouble caused by touching the main points of religion, charity and union, which form the peace of the monasteries ... For heaven's

sake I beg you, and hope in your good zeal for the benefit of that house, that you will try to repress those exaggerated bad tempers that make a big deal out of little matters... As everyone else, the Mother Superior has the temper that God has given her; but true obedience does not depend on tempers or on the characters of the superiors... (Letter from Maria Antonia to Father Mañanet, October 5, 1870).

The situation became worse when Caixal did his Pastoral Visit to the convent in 1871 and supported some sisters against the Prioress, his niece, blaming the Foundress for so many problems. Why Caixal blamed Maria Antonia for the unfavorable condition in which he found the community is incomprehensible. It had already been four years since she had left Tresp.

It was a painful situation for all. But with the information and objectivity that time allows, it is now better understood. The misrepresentation of what happened and even some psychological problems made things go so far. The more difficult sisters ended up leaving the Institute later on, but it was already too late to re-establish union with the Foundress.

Caixal was left with resentment toward Maria Antonia and it lasted until the end of his life. This separation caused her much suffering because he had been the person who had initiated her in her religious life and had supported her in many moments with his strength and vision.

By that time, Caixal was submerged in the *Carlista* fight, which won him many enemies. His exiles and imprisonments made it difficult for him to have a realistic view of things. This probably contributed to seeing Maria Antonia as another enemy, and ultimately accusing her of influencing the Pope to find someone else to substitute him as bishop of Urgel. Obviously, Maria Antonia did not have the authority to do something like this; it was clearly a political decision.

The community of Tresp, not only separated itself from the Foundress, but through Currius, also influenced the sisters of Reus to separate. Maria Antonia's pain was double: on one hand, she was living difficulties, caused largely by those who had accompanied her through so many years; and, on the other hand, the union of the houses and between the sisters was seriously threatened. And this was one of the fundamental pillars on which the Institute was founded.

During this whole period, Maria Antonia experienced profound solitude. Her suffering for the Institute combined with her experience of weakness and poverty. In some moments she felt that she found herself without any virtue to offer the Lord and that hurt her. But this experience allowed her to deeply discover love that was detached, even from herself:

... I was like a stone, unable to move... and I asked the Lord to cover me with His graces... I heard a voice that told me: What is all virtue before the Lord of virtues? (Diary 88).

The Lord purified her spirit in her selfless giving, which united itself with a profound sense of love and suffering for the Church, which also suffered much in those times.

A New Community Is Born: Carcagente

Fr. Jose Orbera played a fundamental role in this foundation, as would later occur in the Velez-Rubio foundation. When he was exiled from Cuba during the schism caused by the Revolution of 1868, he went to Valencia and visited Mrs. Isabel Soriano, an old friend of his who was very interested in founding an institution for the education of girls and young women in Carcagente, her native town. When Orbera found out about this, he thought of the Claretian Sisters. He found support in Fr. Jose Maria Navarro Daras, a great educator of Carcagente,. They encouraged the people there and formed an Administrative Board to motivate the other citizens to raise funds.

Orbera met with Maria Antonia in Reus to propose the foundation. She gave him permission to begin taking all the necessary steps. Since Claret had died, Fr. Dionisio Gonzalez de Mendoza, Claret's second Administrator who was now in Madrid, assumed the responsibility.

The sisters in Reus began thinking about who would be able to leave to start this new community. Four sisters left. To avoid problems, Maria Antonia wanted the canonical election of Prioress and Subprioress of the convent of Reus to be done before her departure, and so it was done August 23, 1875.

They traveled on train from Reus to Carcagente. It was, without a doubt, the most comfortable trip the sisters had done. Although they had already used the train for the foundation in Tremp, it was still not a common means of transportation in Spain, especially for nuns. But Maria Antonia

and Currius considered it was the most suitable means to travel at that moment.

They arrived in Carcagente on September 2, 1875. This was one of the most picturesque villages of the fertile Valencian region in the 19th century. The people went to meet them with the cordiality characteristic of this place. Fr. Jose Navarro had prepared provisional lodging for them in the old St. Francis convent, headquarters of the San Luis School since the Spanish government had taken over Church properties.²

In that same month, they laid the cornerstone of the new house. Cardinal Barrio, Archbishop of Valencia, was present.

At first, there was much enthusiasm towards the foundation and the citizens collaborated. The Cardinal granted indulgences to those who worked gratuitously on the convent's construction, and they even had permission to work on Sundays. After some time, the enthusiasm died down and even though those who were committed went from house to house asking for donations, there were fewer contributions.

Naturally, the house's economy was also limited. A miraculous intervention by Saint Joseph, to whom Maria Antonia had great devotion, is reported in the Chronicles of the community:

... It was already fifteen days that the bricklayers had not been paid their wages, and Mr. Agustin Garcia came to say that construction would have to stop... As this gentleman was speaking with our Mother Maria Antonia and Mother Maria Gertrudis... someone rang the bell and Mother Pilar went, and after greeting and asking who it was, they simply courteously answered with a deep gentleman's

² From 1766-1924, the Spanish government took over Church properties and transformed them into national property.

voice: Be kind enough to give this little bag to Mother Maria Antonia... And upon seeing Mother Pilar enter, our Mother Maria Antonia said: Saint Joseph brings it to us... and they saw with astonishment that it was full of gold coins... In spite of all the attempts made, no one could explain who that man was, and only Mother Maria Antonia said he was Saint Joseph. And the construction continued with much admiration from all... (Memories of Sister Joaquina de San Bernabe, 1885).

The sisters in Reus and those in Cuba also helped with their savings. However, those in Tremp, who continued distancing themselves, did not want to collaborate.

Although the construction was not finished, the house was inaugurated December 14, 1876. As it happened in other foundations, Maria Antonia did not wait for everything to be finished. Three months later she wrote to the prioress of Reus saying:

... We do not have more than the section for the Novitiate ... the parlors are not finished and only one of them can be used, but it is very poor... there are no cells; rather, a long room, and since we are nineteen there is hardly place for a chair in between each bed... in the lower level all the walls must be plastered ... and nothing was paved with bricks; and there are no doors, so that kitchen, refectory and pantry are visible to all... You see, daughter, how happy you can be with what you have and pray a lot for me - I need it so much. May your Holy Week celebrations go well since we cannot do anything because we do not have a church (March 20, 1877).

The community was formed by the first four sisters, others who arrived from Reus later and some novices. There were also a few young women who hoped to enter. Some of

them came from families that were well off and collaborated with the economy, but many others could not contribute with anything and were received with the same affection. This was not normal in the convents of the time since all the nuns were to enter with a dowry. From the beginning, the Founders did not want one's socio-economic position to be an obstacle in becoming a Claretian sister.

Fr. Enrique Gomis, a diocesan priest, was named the community's confessor by the Cardinal. From that moment, he would be Maria Antonia's right hand in this foundation, in the steps for the approval of the Constitutions and in other difficult matters that she would have to live. Fr. Enrique Gomis became what Currius had been up to then. Nevertheless, when in some cases their opinions differed on matters relating to the Institute, Maria Antonia felt free to let him know, and acted according to God's will. This priest also helped the sisters financially, and never wanted them to return the money that he had spent in their favor.

From the beginning they felt very welcomed by people, making very good friendships that Maria Antonia would later recall in her letters to Gomis. They even gave a *Letter of Fraternity* to several lay people who were very close to the Institute's spirit. The obligations and rights of these lay people are not known, but it is significant that such an initiative was taken, giving lay people a place within the Institute's charism.

At this stage they offered them the possibility of founding in other places around the area: Alcoy, Albox, even the capital of Valencia, where they thought of founding a Novitiate for the whole Institute. But none of them could be carried out.

Many girls and young women went to the classes in Carcagente. The classes were also free there. Only the interns paid for their board and lodging, and the day students for some extra classes.

A situation occurred which expresses the attitude which Maria Antonia wanted for the Institute: open and capable of enculturation, as would be said today. People did not like that the girls were behind a grille. They were also frightened because the sisters covered their faces with their veils during visits. For that reason, Maria Antonia had them get rid of those cloister customs in Carcagente, and asked the sisters in Reus to do the same when anyone from that area visited them:

In a few days, Fr. Enrique Gomis will return with his mother and niece... go to the parlor without covering your faces with the veil, and continue doing this whenever you see someone from here until I tell you otherwise (Letter to M. Maria Luisa de San Pablo, prioress of Reus, September 18, 1876).

Nevertheless, the people's affection toward the sisters was greater than their fear. The number of students as well as vocations continued to increase.

Maria Antonia Returns to Reus

During her stay in Carcagente, Maria Antonia maintained frequent communication with the Superior in Reus, Maria Luisa de San Pablo, and with Currius, confessor of the community. She also wanted to foster a close relationship between the two convents, allowing for the exchange of goods, creating a fraternal climate among the sisters by sending sweets, correspondence, etc.

However, certain tensions soon began. The first ones appeared when Maria Luisa and Currius decided on their own to finish the construction of the house in Reus, although Maria Antonia had already explained the convenience of not finishing them because of the existent political tensions. In the end, Maria Antonia conceded to continue the work, after all the insistence from the confessor and the Superior, but the animosity towards her was already evident:

As for the construction, I was far from thinking that you would be so obstinate in proceeding with it against my will, and that you would call on higher powers to go ahead with your plans. If I had thought that you did not have the virtue to obey my dispositions, I would have told you to finish the construction in order not to let the devil destroy charity, which is what bonds our Institute, and not give such bad example, my daughter... (Letter to Maria Luisa of San Pablo, June 6, 1877).

Also, the correspondence maintained between the sisters from Reus and Tremp led the Reus community to be influenced by the schismatic ideas brewing in Tremp.

Furthermore, Maria Antonia had asked Currius to visit the convent in Tremp to avoid the division, and instead of fixing the problem, he was convinced that he had to take those ideas to Reus and support the split there too.

On the other hand, there were certain problems in Reus among the sisters, especially because Maria Luisa imposed fasts and excessive disciplines that were not in the Constitutions. The unconformity got to such a point that Concepcion Llevat and Maria Antonia Minguella (both of them born in Reus) escaped from the convent. This caused such uproar in the city that the nuns feared people could set the convent on fire; since, also, the families of these two sisters spread some rumours, mixing lies and truths, which exasperated the townspeople a lot.

Finally, the Vicar of the Archdiocese had to call the Foundress to help with the situation of the community. Maria Antonia, with the information that Bofarull gave her in his letter, considered it convenient that Currius left Reus for the moment. The Vicar supported her decision, and he requested Currius to move from the city while the turmoil calmed down.

The night of June 19, 1879, Maria Antonia, with Maria Gertrudis Barril, her secretary, and another sister, arrived at the convent of Reus accompanied by Fr. Enrique Gomis.

Maria Antonia planned this trip carefully. After having been called twice by the Vicar of Tarragona, she discerned it with Gomis and requested all the necessary permits from the Nuncio for her transfer and that of the other sisters. Despite the care she took at each step in this matter, her arrival in the community was really painful. The Archbishop's Secretary presided over the ceremony by which the responsibility of the community was transferred to Maria Antonia. The previous day, Maria Luisa de San Pablo was told that when the Foundress arrived, she would have to give her the keys and the responsibility of the community. She complied, but it seems that her reaction was quite unpleasant once the Secretary left.

Despite everything, Maria Antonia's serenity gradually won the sister's acceptance. Maria Luisa ended up publicly asking for forgiveness and giving Maria Antonia a sum of money that, with other things, she had taken out of the house and hidden with some friends. Also, she gave her certain documents written by Currius, the sisters from Tresp and Caixal, in which it was clear that they all wanted to make Reus independent from the Foundress.

Currius appealed to the Archbishop of Tarragona to expel Maria Antonia from Reus, accusing her of usurping the leadership of the convent and of transgressing the cloister by moving to another convent. However, this was not true, because she had been called to go to Reus by the Archbishop and she obtained all the appropriate permits before the transfer. In fact, it was the Archbishop of Tarragona himself who confirmed her as Prioress of the convent. Currius went to see Fr. Dionisio Gonzalez, who was in Madrid, and both appealed directly to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Religious. They were not able to expel her from Reus, but it is easy to suppose that these negative reports to the Sacred Congregation thwarted the approval of the Constitutions.

When the sisters of Tresp found out that Maria Antonia had returned to Reus, they feared she would also go to Tresp. They wrote to Caixal (exiled by the Spanish Government because of his political ideas) and to the Apostolic Administrator of Urgel, Fr. Salvador Casañas:

... We want to alert you about Maria Antonia de San Pedro, who considers herself Mother Superior of the Order, inappropriately using that title which is incompatible with the solemn vows we have taken... because she wants to visit this house to devour it... because I am certain she has visited the house of Reus with fatal results. She is astute and deceiving... Please protect and defend us, by not allowing this nun to

come to upset us and bring us problems with sad consequences. As this lady attempts everything and considers herself authorized for anything, we hope you will indicate to us the behaviour that we must observe the day in which this woman comes to disturb us (July 2, 1879).

Casañas wrote to Maria Antonia a firm, but respectful letter, asking her not to go to Tremp without communicating it to him previously, because the situation could be difficult. He did not doubt of the valid rights that Maria Antonia had to take this step, but Canon Law required that he approve it. In those days convents depended on the authority of the Bishops. The Church had not yet approved legislation permitting the union of the convents under a Superior General. Monasteries of solemn vows were independent from one another and each had its prioress or superior.

This letter telling her not to go to Reus, never reached the Foundress, because they sent it to her through Currius, who considered it inopportune to give it to her. Nevertheless, she had not planned to go to Tremp, since she knew, with sorrow, that she was not welcome there, and no ecclesiastical authority had requested her presence. Maria Antonia had to bear harsh and very unfair accusations from the sisters in Tremp and from Caixal:

... This lady, the Prioress of Carcagente, called M. Maria Antonia de San Pedro, not only sought to govern as if she was the local prioress of Tremp while she was in Reus, and thus creating disorder in the convent, but asked that funds from Tremp be remitted to Reus. I went there, put things in order and prohibited them from communicating with her if she continued like that and also from giving her any money... The title of Foundress does not authorize her to destroy with her ambition what she created

with her hands, ... (Caixal to Msgr. Casañas, July 8, 1879).

In these hard moments, Maria Antonia's spirit was full of great darkness. It reflected her suffering for the Institute and for the Church. Yet, she enjoyed again a deep union with God as she had experienced on the day of her profession. They were experiences closely connected to the Eucharist. She deeply felt the greatness of God in whom she felt submerged, while at the same time experiencing her own weakness. She felt as if she had a little jewel in her heart that accompanied her in daily life and continued impelling her to hope against all hope (cf. Diary 100-112).

Foundation in Velez Rubio

When Fr. Jose Orbera was named bishop of Almeria, seeing the needs of his diocese, at once he thought of a new convent of Claretian Sisters. He chose the city of Velez Rubio, Northeast of Almeria and near the county of Murcia. There was an old convent of Franciscans which he prepared for the sisters. People from Velez Rubio were known for their politeness and friendliness. They were frugal, but at the same time joyful and hard-working.

It was not easy for Maria Antonia to decide which sisters would go to the foundation, because Orbera had already thought of two nuns whom he greatly esteemed: the Gual sisters, who were the Prioress and Sub-prioress in Cuba. Neither Maria Antonia nor the bishop of Santiago found it convenient that they left. This created difficulties, but was finally resolved, thanks to her freedom of spirit and wisdom. Orbera did not insist on the topic. The archbishop of Tarragona did not want anybody from the convent of Reus leaving either, especially Maria Antonia. For this reason, all the sisters had to come from Carcagente, even though it was not a large community. Since Maria Antonia knew this, she prepared three young candidates from Reus to be sent there and even a novice if it was necessary, as she writes ... *“a novice that we have here that is very valuable”* (Letter from Maria Antonia to Fr. Enrique Gomis, July 13, 1880). Once again, this shows the missionary and itinerant spirit that the Founders wanted for the Institute, even in its first formative stages.

On September 20, 1880, Maria Antonia, as Foundress and First Mother of the Institute, named Maria del Carmen de San Andres Superior to the newly found community. Two days

later, five sisters left for Velez Rubio accompanied by Fr. Enrique Gomis and other priests.

The Andalusian village of Velez Rubio received the five sisters with joy. Near the entrance of the village a post was set up to fire rockets announcing the arrival of the sisters. In addition, bells were rung and a lady placed a garland of flowers around each sister's neck as they entered.

Immediately, a music band started playing, accompanying the procession toward the convent, where they were first met by the beautiful statue of St. Francis of Assisi, to whom the convent was dedicated. During the festive dinner the *Paseo de San Francisco* was lit and there were also fireworks. Obviously, the sisters did not expect such a celebrated welcome, which was an anticipation of the affection of the loving people from Andalucia.

Difficulties in the Community of Cuba

At this time, the community of Cuba was going through serious difficulties. The archbishop of Santiago, Msgr. Martin Herrera, did not find it right that the sisters Maria Rosa and Encarnacion Gual (the same ones that Msgr. Orbera had wanted to go to the foundation of Velez Rubio) were always the Prioress and Sub-prioress of that community. It coincided that, of all the nuns, only the two of them and another nun were over forty years old. Canon Law required that the Prioress be 40 years old or older. During the last years, the Gual sisters created a tense environment inside the community. As a result, the Archbishop requested a special permission from Rome that would allow any other sister to be elected Prioress, even if she did not meet the age requirement. Once the dispensation arrived, the community chose Florentina de San Jaime as Prioress.

Florentina maintained a cordial relationship with the Foundress; she informed her of all the important steps and lived and worked to preserve the congregational spirit. She also won at once the affection of the sisters and of the Archbishop, who even helped them to face their economic difficulties.

The two Gual sisters did not know how to take this new situation. Soon after, they abandoned the Institute. During that time, three other native sisters also left. It is easy to imagine Maria Antonia's suffering when she found out about the situation, but more so, considering that the two sisters were part of that first group that had gone with her to the foundation of Cuba.

However, there were also some happy events. While Florentina was the superior, Canuta Palacios, a black young woman, was interested in being a Claretian Sister. Since the existent racist laws did not allow it, the Foundress authorized her to live with the sisters as a postulant. She was a sister of exemplary life and recognized holiness. This shows that it was not all difficulties and displeasures in the first steps of the Institute. Without any doubt, it was a cause of great joy for Maria Antonia. She had known Cuban people and had been willing to learn from their simplicity and cordiality.

I Want Nothing Else but Our Lord Jesus Christ

In almost all of Maria Antonia's writings, there are references to her precarious health. However, this never prevented her from living an active and intense life, not only apostolically, but also spiritually.

As we have seen, the year 1882 was especially hard for her. The community of Tremp continued to be distanced from her. Difficult internal events occurred in Cuba and Reus. Caixal and Currius had also separated from her, speaking badly about her and interpreting her actions in a negative way:

The state of my health continues delicate, and it cannot be otherwise due to the continuous afflictions of spirit that increase every day. It seems that all of hell has unchained against the fragile little boat of our Institute... (Letter from Maria Antonia to Fr. Enrique Gomis, May 9, 1882).

In the beginning of 1884, her health worsened. The sisters that lived by her testify to this. Maria Gertrudis Barril, her secretary, tells in detail how they lived these eleven months of illness:

She became gravely sick on February 3, 1884, having suffered extraordinary pains in the eleven and a half months that her illness has lasted, which she has sustained with admirable conformity, with exemplary patience, and with a holy happiness of soul which has continuously edified the whole community... because instead of having to encourage her in her painful sufferings, on the contrary, she

consoled and encouraged us... I am also certain that during the illness she has suffered inwardly a lot of abandonment and interior hardships in imitation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, whose life she always tried to imitate... (Testimony of M. Maria Gertrudis Barril, February 13, 1885).

Concepcion de San Jaime, her nurse, lived with intensity the experience of accompanying her in moments of so much pain and infirmity:

During the course of this whole time, I did not hear her, not even once, give a minimal sign of displeasure or of her suffering; on the contrary, she always manifested an external happiness that indicated the peace that her soul enjoyed... I never saw her upset, even when she was given reason to be; her words were simple and wholesome, by which the fire of the love that burned within her toward God and us became evident... I noticed she had a lot of patience in bearing the scorns that she was suffering from benefactors of the institute, who returned evil for goodness... But I never heard from her a word of complaint or of hatred (Testimony of Concepcion de San Jaime, Reus 1885).

There were days in which it was necessary to watch her constantly, because of her serious condition, and she took advantage of this opportunity to converse with the sisters. They spoke of how she was continually taking care of everything, so that they did not suffer a lack of anything, either materially or spiritually. There are also beloved memories of her relationship with the students. When she could no longer get out of the infirmary, the girls sent her messages and she responded sending sweets.

In October and November 1884 she felt a bit better. She was able to write letters, but in December her health

deteriorated irreversibly. In Christmas she had a vision of the Child Jesus, which the whole community interpreted as a pre-announcement of her imminent death. But it was by the middle of January when the doctor advised that she be given the last rites. The sisters said that she received them *with the devotion, fervor and fondness characteristic of privileged souls*.

On January 17, 1885, day of Saint Anthony Abbot, at nine o'clock in the morning, when the confessor asked her whether she wanted anything, she said: "Nothing, but Our Lord Jesus Christ," and having said this, she passed away.

... Fifteen minutes before expiring, with the whole community present, she instructed us in the way we had to behave with God and to persevere in the way of life we had embraced. She told us with such affection, and pure and disinterested love that it was obvious that God was the source of that fire... (Concepcion de San Jaime, 1885).

When she passed away, she was left with an expression of suffering in her face, but immediately her semblance started changing drastically. She looked peaceful and young for someone seventy-one years old. Her body preserved all flexibility for several days, and did not become corrupt. There is evidence that it remained incorrupt until the Spanish Civil War (1936), when tombs were opened, profaned, and bodies dumped together. Her body was identified, because the sisters buried her with a habit that they had embroidered, as a simple token of the affection they had for her:

... Both when she reprimanded or praised, it could be seen that it was God's hand guiding her. I cannot say I ever saw any sign of superiority in any of her acts or any scorn for the defects that she might notice in all her daughters, or even in what she had to suffer because of those who were benefactors at a time and adversaries later... That God tests the ones

He chooses, was seen in our Mother Foundress. Blessed be God... Our Mother, pray for all your daughters, help us be not only good, but holy (Concepcion de San Jaime, 1885).

Before dying, she wrote her Testament, explaining how the Constitutions had been rewritten by order of Claret and how their approval was in process. She also wanted at this time to look after the unity of the Institute, just as she had done throughout her life:

... it should be the obligation of the First Mother of the Order to visit the houses of the Order every three years, by herself or through another nun, to maintain the mutual union and life of observance vigorous in all of them, because we have seen in the past this necessity in some cases that we sadly recall in which some Prioresses abandoned obedience and attempted to become independent, something so contrary to the spirit of our Sacred Institute and the desires of Our Lord, Who wants us to be a single soul and a single heart... (Testament. In Writings, p. 718).

Today, her remains are venerated in the crypt of the chapel of Reus. She has left us a great love for the Church. This does not only require that we denounce the ills afflicting her, but rather, to really renew her, and impels us to live the Gospel radically and faithfully. Maria Antonia wanted us to live united *as a single family and a single heart*, and she wanted us to be *living copies of the first apostles, willing to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples in any place of the world, following the footsteps of Christ, our highest good.*

For this, she points out to us a unique way:

“May the missionary pray with Christ, praying;
travel with Christ, travelling
eat with Christ, eating;

drink with Christ, drinking;
sleep with Christ, sleeping;
suffer with Christ, suffering;
preach with Christ, preaching;
rest with Christ, tired;
and live with Christ dying,
if he wants to enter into life
with Christ reigning".

(AM 31)

But the story continues...

After the death of the Foundress, the Congregation lived hard times with the convents functioning independently up to 1920, when the desired union was achieved thanks to the firmness of the sisters in Velez Rubio and Cuba and to the fraternal help of a Claretian Missionary, Fr. Felipe Maroto, who did not an institution founded by Archbishop Claret to perish.

With the union, the Congregation changed its structure and finally picked up the most genuine aspects of its spirit. The foundational desire was in fact strengthened by the approval of the Constitutions. The new canonical structure united the communities, which were finally able to fully share their goods with each other. Solemn vows, with their monastic implications, became simple vows, which correspond to apostolic religious, always with a special emphasis on *evangelical poverty, basis of the new Apostles*.

Little by little the Congregation has been expanding its presence throughout the world to proclaim the Gospel to every creature. This way the Aim and Goal written by Maria Antonia Paris becomes reality; sisters of very diverse cultures pick it up with love, generosity and depth. It is through their lives that we can better know the charism handed over by Anthony Mary Claret and Maria Antonia Paris.

INDEX

Page

Let's Begin with Some History.....	
Birth and Childhood.....	
Jesus, "The Center of my Affections".....	
Initial Experience: Founding Experience.....	
Row Out to Sea.....	
First Steps in Cuba.....	
The Beginning of a New Order, Not in Doctrine but in Practice.....	
Claret Returns to Spain.....	
Trempe: A Novitiate in Spain.....	
New Claretians for the Mission.....	
Living the Church's Burden.....	
Reus: A New Foundation.....	
The Spanish Revolution of 1868.....	
The Schism in the Church of Cuba and the Foundation in Baracoa.....	
<i>Decretum Laudis</i> of the Constitutions.....	
Claret Dies: How Will the Foundation be Accomplished?.....	
First Divisions.....	Internal
A New Community Is Born: Carcagente.....	
Maria Antonia Returns to Reus.....	
Foundation in Velez Rubio.....	
Difficulties in the Community of Cuba.....	
I Want Nothing Else but Our Lord Jesus Christ.....	

*“I put
all my trust
in the Lord,
certain and confident
that I would always
walk under His shadow”*