

Founders & Foundresses

BY ANNE TSCHANZ



Ven. Maria Luisa Josefa of the Most Blessed Sacrament —*Obedient Servant of the Most Sacred Heart*

The Mexican Revolution of the 1920's wreaked havoc upon the Church in Mexico, resulting in persecution, martyrdom and exile for many religious and priests. One of the outcomes, however, from this terrible time was the dispersion of religious men and women to the United States where they were able to take up religious life once again.

Mother Maria Luisa Josefa of the Most Blessed Sacrament, affectionately known as Mother Luisita, was one of the women who recognized the dangers and sought to preserve the precious vocations entrusted to her by God by coming to America. Combining the active apostolate with a profound prayer life, these daughters of St. Teresa of Avila bless our country today by promoting a deeper spiritual life among God's people through their educational, healthcare, and spiritual retreat apostolates.

From Haughtiness to Humility

Maria Luisa de la Peña was born in 1866 in Atotonilco el Alto in Jalisco, Mexico. She was a stubborn, reserved child, inclined to be haughty. One day, Maria Luisa accompanied her father on his rounds around his many ranches. When she refused to acknowledge even the existence of his laborers, her father said to her: "My little daughter, will your tongue wear out if you simply

greet these people?" Devoted to her father, Maria Luisa never forgot this reprimand. Under her mother's care, and the companionship of a devout relative, Maria Luisa learned humility and to meditate on the beauty of God's creation. Gradually, she came to believe that God was calling her to religious life.

However, when she was fifteen years old, her parents arranged for her to marry a popular doctor named Don Pascual Rojas who was twice her age. Seeing this as God's will, Maria Luisa consented. When they arrived in Mexico City for their honeymoon, Pascual asked her what sights she would like to see. Much to his surprise, she said the Visitation Convent. When they arrived there, she said, "You may go now Pascual. I am going to stay here. I have asked for admission, and Reverend Mother has accepted me."

When the superior learned that the two had just been married, she told Maria Luisa to return home with her husband. A sympathetic Pascual said: "If you return with me now, Maria Luisa, I promise I shall let you come back to the convent someday." They were not blessed with children but decided after much prayer that the poor would be their family.

Maria Luisa had a heart for the suffering poor, a woman who by her goodness and charity drew many

people back to the Faith. "There was no human or spiritual misery that would not find a compassionate echo in her Christian heart," a priest said of her. In 1892, she and Pascual established a charitable hospital, called the Little Hospital of the Sacred Heart, in Atotonilco. Adept at administration and organization, Maria Luisa soon had things running smoothly. "The money that God has given us to bring about this work, is like the Blood of Christ" said Pascual. "It must serve to redeem the world."

When Pascual became mortally ill in 1896, he reminded her of his honeymoon promise. "Very soon now," he said, "I am going to keep that promise." Pascual died on Good Friday when Maria Luisa was twenty-nine years old. After straightening out her affairs, she applied but was refused entrance into the Visitation Convent because of her chronic ill health.

A Prayerful and Penitential Life

Over the years, however, her heart had grown increasingly devoted to the prayerful and penitential life of the Carmelites. In 1904, to her great joy, she began her novitiate with the Discalced Carmelites of Guadalajara. However, the happiness was short-lived. After she left Atotonilco, the quality of care at the hospital declined

dramatically. After prayerful consultation with the prioress, her pastor, and the archbishop, they all discerned that the cloister was not her vocation. She had the impression that children were calling her back and heard these words in her soul: “Your soul is saved, what about our’s?”

God was always demanding a great sacrifice from her but at the same time, she recognized His will in obedience. When she saw the ruinous state of the hospital, her heart ached. With the assistance of friends, she was able to turn things around and even start a school for young girls who had no access to education.

Maria Luisa received approval to live in community with other like-minded women, a number that quickly increased to twenty members. Following the Vatican’s guidelines, they did not form a new community but affiliated with the Sister Servants of the Blessed Sacrament in 1913, where upon her profession, she was appointed a local superior. Now, as a true religious, she felt her work could truly begin.

But, it was *déjà vu* all over again. Back in Atotonilco, the girl’s school closed and the hospital was in shambles. She expressed her sympathy to the new archbishop who gave his permission for her to return if that



was what she wanted to do. After making a retreat and earnest prayer to know God’s will, she made the decision to return to Atotonilco. “All the works of God have the stamp of contradiction, difficulty, and great sorrow and humiliation,” she later said. “If there are none of these things, do not be so sure of the work and be afraid of its execution.”

Only five elderly and illiterate women elected to rejoin her. Her money was gone so she was utterly dependent on God. “Leave to our good Lord His part,” she said, “and He will dispose of everything to our greatest advantage.” She saw in all things God’s desire for her sanctification.

Again, many women came to assist. The archbishop suggested once more an affiliation with a religious community, such as the Carmelites. Thinking of the cloistered life, Maria Luisa wondered how this could be. The archbishop said that they

could follow the Carmelite Rule, wear the habit but combine a life of prayer with active charity. “To unite the spirit of Carmel with the active apostolate,” she said, “is my greatest ideal.”

Persistent Prayers Answered

Opening a school, an orphanage and conducting religious education classes, Maria Luisa’s persistent prayers were answered when in 1921, her group became affiliated with the Discalced Carmelite Order. She received the Carmelite habit at age fifty-five and became Mother Maria Luisa Josefa of the Most Blessed Sacrament, Superior General. “Prayer can do all things,” Mother said. “It is our most powerful weapon against the devil and nothing can withstand it or resist it. With courage, trust, and prayer *Adelante* (onward), even if you have to walk among thorns.” When a benefactor told her, “You are a saint,” she said in reply: “All religious are expected to be saints, and you have brought this to my attention. Thank you.”

Over the next few years, Mother established foundations in several cities amid continuous persecution of the Church in Mexico. In 1927, a particularly violent period of oppression broke out, resulting in the martyrdom of many. The teaching of religion and the wearing of habits was forbidden with violators subject to torture, imprisonment and death. Mother for safety reasons sent her sisters to various safe houses. She ultimately went to the United States to establish a place of temporary refuge. “How good You are, my God! You granted me such consolation at the time of adoration,” she once wrote. “This again proves to me that all consolation comes from You



Mother Maria Luisa Josefa, O.C.D.

Born: June 21, 1866 in Atotonilco el Alto, Jalisco, Mexico

Married: 1882 to Don Pascual Roja

Widowed: April 3, 1896

Entered Religious Life: 1904 in Guadalajara, Mexico

Founded the Carmelite Sisters of the Most

Sacred Heart: February 2, 1921

Died: February 11, 1937

Declared Venerable: July 1, 2000 by Pope John Paul II

Spirituality: Witnessing to God’s love through a profound life of prayer, joyful witness and loving service

Charism: To unite the spirit of Carmel to the active apostolate



alone and that it is useless to look for it anywhere outside of You.”

Traveling in civilian clothes to the U.S., Mother told the sisters accompanying her to repeat to themselves: “I am a religious.” Without preaching, they would “discharge their sacred duty of working in the apostolic life the way our Lord is permitting and asking us to do.” Leaving family and friends, perhaps forever, they proclaimed: “Yes, all for Thee, O Jesus.”

After they boarded an American train in Texas, the sisters knelt in the aisle and recited the “*Te Deum*,” grateful to be in a free country. Arriving in Los Angeles on the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, they were happy to don their habits once again, publicly witnessing to their espousal to Christ. “The soul of each Carmelite raises herself to Christ, who is her Heaven,” she said, “while her shadow falls in charity upon earth doing good to all people.”

Their first apostolate began in a parish in Long Beach where in a Mexican community they taught catechism classes and prepared adults to receive the sacraments. They had no steady income for Mother said: “We never charge to teach the Word of God.” The arrival of more sisters from Mexico necessitated the move to larger quarters. Though they received small donations the sisters

often had nothing substantial to eat. Mother was very careful about paying debts “because it is our duty, and out of dignity towards those who loaned us the money.”

When the sisters sang Mexican songs that reminded them of home, Mother directed their eyes to Heaven, their true home. “It is very necessary to have recollection and detachment above all, detachment from your own will,” she said. “Really and truly you cannot have any other will but that of the Beloved.” Another time she said: “Always keep (your soul) detached from creatures, places, honors, in a word...everything!”

She consistently urged her sisters to remain humble. If sisters started asking for their “rights,” pride and insubordination would follow, foreshadowing the great evils that afflict our society today. “Ah, how cunning the devil is, and how much territory he has gained.... Superiors refrain from giving orders because they fear they will not be obeyed.”

Apostolates Restarted in Mexico

When the situation eased somewhat, Mother Luisita returned to Mexico to restart their teaching and nursing apostolates. Over the next eight years, she made trips back to the United States while moving from house to house in Mexico, trying to stay one step ahead of

the authorities. All this took a toll on her health.

In late 1936, Mother wrote that her time was short, saying: “Let us praise the Lord in life and in death.” After she died in early 1937, a priest told the grieving sisters that their Mother was not dead, she “is in the midst of you. And here she shall remain as long as you preserve the Godly spirit, the special stamp which distinguishes you,” given by the woman “with the celestial aspect, of smile tranquil and serene, whom God Our Lord in His loving Providence gave you for a Mother.”

In her last testament, she wrote: “From my heart I earnestly ask you that, for the love of God Our Lord, you be very united and treat one another as if everything depended on you individually for this unity. Help one another and tolerate one another’s faults with patience. Fervently resolve to obey your superiors... Work diligently for children and for the sick. May all your conversations engender love of the Most Blessed Sacrament and Our Most Blessed Mother.”✠

Mother Luisita is the foundress of the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles, an autonomous institute since 1983. The sisters promote a deeper spiritual life among God’s people through healthcare, education and retreats. For more information, visit CarmeliteSistersOCD.com.