

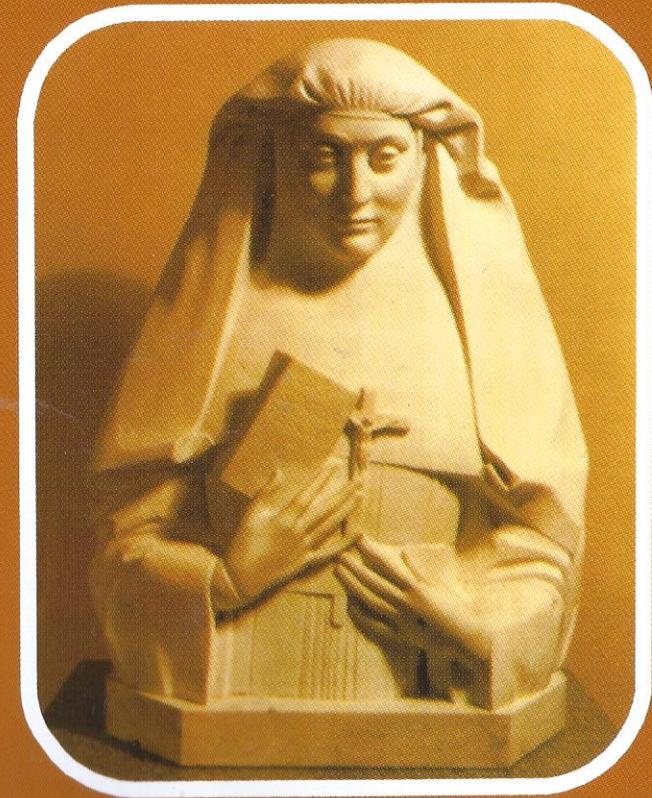
There are few personages more talked about – and yet unknown in their true reality in the history of the Spanish Church of the past few centuries as is Mother Rafols, Foundress of the Sisters of Charity of St. Anne, Heroine of the Sieges of Zaragoza, but heroine, above all of charity and of the obscurity of a life of faith.

Deformed in the '30s by fantasy, this new biography tries to give her back her true face, far more dramatic, profound and exemplary in reality than in any imagination.

J. L. Martin Descalzo who has tried successfully his hand at the novel, poetry, theatre and journalism – offers us in these pages – that are read with the passion and the ease of a novel – a rigorously historic portrait of her life and her deep spirituality, two centuries ahead of her time with regard to many ideas that we believe today. This publication coincides with the second centenary of the birth of Mother Rafols and with the happy re-opening of the Process of her Beatification, which was interrupted forty years ago because of the enumerated flood of fantasies.

This work will undoubtedly contribute to returning to the Foundress of the Annes her true and magnificent face.

# The True Face of **MARIA RAFOLS**



**JOSE L. MARTIN DESCALZO**

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## THE TRUE FACE OF MARIA RAFOLS

## **INDISPENSABLE INTRODUCTION**

*“At the petition of the Most Excellent and Most Reverend Señor Don Elias Yanes Alvarez, Archbishop of Zaragoza in Spain, and being the narrator, the undersigned Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, in the audience granted to him on the 4th of December 1980, the Holy Father John Paul II, attending to what was manifested in the petition brochure, as also in the petitions of many other Bishops in Spain, has benignly deigned to revoke the “Dilata” or suspension of the path of the Cause of the aforementioned Servant of God which was decreed on the 28th of January 1944 by Pope Pius XII, such that the cause can go ahead, without anything obstructing to the contrary”.*

With this letter – that was signed on the very 4th of December 1980 by Cardinal Palazzini – the second act got definitively closed – or was it the third act that was opening? – of one of the most beautiful, dramatic and passionate histories that the Church has known in the past few centuries: the history of Mother María Rafols, Foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Anne, of Zaragoza; a history that is getting ready to complete two centuries at the time of the publishing of this book.

This enormous adventure of the spirit begins with a first act that has Zaragoza as its stage and which prolongs all through forty nine years, and it is the most beautiful and important – even though the least known – part of the story. It corresponds to the time of winter, a long winter when God, who usually writes straight with the most crooked and at times the most painful lines, seems to want

to wrap the protagonists of the drama in dark obscurity. They are a small community of women who, under the direction of two gigantic personalities – a priest, Fr. Bonal, and a religious woman, María Rafols live in such a passionate surrender to Christ and to the sick, that they hardly have time to stop and discover the enormity of what they are living and starting. Even less is the time they have to build up their pedestal. Twelve initially, not many more in the years that follow, they surrender their lives to God and to the stern direction that would be imposed on them by the Directors of the Royal Hospital of Zarazoga, with all the oscillations and changes that it goes through. They will know hunger daily, the terror of the Sieges of Zaragoza, persecution, prison, and exile. Often they will see the very existence of the small foundation suspended in air. Small, above all because “the pot does not allow the plant to grow”. They will see brakes put a thousand times, on their desires for expansion. They will experience, on the other hand, the pain of anonymous deaths at the height of youth. Of heroism they will have everything except the shine. Of sanctity, all except the radiance. Of humility, of poverty, of silence..., everything, absolutely everything.

Contrary to what is normal in the majority of the Congregations – that live a first burst of growth with the ardent impulse of the first hours, to later experience crisis, divisions, maybe even the undoing of the essence, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Anne will not receive from God this candy that is never denied to those who start their path. One would say that God had “condemned” this daughter to the most total obscurity and had destined her to live a faith understood in the stark nakedness of the senses: to believe in what would never be seen in this world.

María Rafols would never, like Moses, have the joy of seeing – or have a premonition of – even in the distance, the Promised Land. She would die without knowing whether this cutting that she had planted would be destined to wilt in the heat of the first day of summer, to remain eternally tiny like those trees that Japanese gardening skill forces to live forever in a pot, or, on the contrary,

one day it would grow and multiply and give shelter to thousands and thousands of souls.

I believe it can be affirmed, without fear of exaggeration, that no other soul was obliged to live faith so radically as she had to, in this unending winter of six hundred months. It is a winter that begins in 1804 with a community of 12 Sisters and concludes in 1853, at the time of the death of the Foundress, with the 16 Sisters that form it.

But – even though we will never know why God denied her experiencing it – spring did come. It can almost be said that Providence was waiting for this “marathon of faith” of the Foundress to be concluded to initiate the take-off of the foundation. This spring – that would experience frightful storms when summer was arriving – forms like the second act of the great drama of this history.

An act that bursts with joy and activity in the whole of the first part and which would not have less activity – even though it would have its dark clouds – in the second. Now that small cutting can burst forth from the plant and the Congregation of the Annes (as they will be popularly known) will live an impressive “take-off”. So the mustard seed will soon grow and become even bigger than most of the bushes of the Church of the end of the XIXth and the XXth century. The first Superior General after the death of the Foundress (Mother Magdalena Hecho, 1851-78) will see 12 new foundations created; her successor (Mother Dolores Narín, 1878-89) will start another 20: in the years when Martina Balaguer was Superior (1889-1894) there will be 23 more. In the long years when the one who is considered as the second Foundress, Mother Pabla Bescós was Superior (1894-1929), another 47 foundations will be added, now with the character of universality in numerous countries. In 1926 there will be already more than 2,000 religious of St. Anne, spread over 118 foundations. It is the hour of glory and of light. In 1898 the Pontifical approval of the Institute will be received. In 1904 the definitive approval of the Constitutions will be received. The centenary of the Institute and the centenary

of the Sieges of Zaragoza will be like a rediscovery of the hidden pearl of Mother Rafols, converted now into one of the great religious and civic heroines of the city. The homage and the monuments are multiplied. Not only in the interior of the Congregation, but also in the Christian community of Zaragoza and of the whole of Spain, the hidden and almost unknown face begins to be “rediscovered”. Her remains – together with those of Fr. Bonal – are taken in triumph to their new sepulchre.

And now arises – how can it not? – the logical desire that this admiration, which the multitude already feels towards the virtues of Mother Rafols, be officially recognised by the Church. And in 1926 the Process for her Beatification begins. The graces conceded by God through the intercession of the Servant of God multiply. Her sepulchre becomes converted into a centre of pilgrimage. Everyone who visits Zaragoza knows that after the visit of the Pilar this other prayer before the sepulchre that seems to radiate the favours of God becomes obligatory.

Summer has come: all that was denied to Mother Rafols in her life seems to be counterposed now with superabundance. Her fame multiplies. The newspapers of the period talk about her and never stop.

At this moment bursts the great storm, a page that we can neither hide nor pass over if we do not want to falsify history. A bitter and dark page, but which is also part of the – at times unknown – paths of God.

The beginning of the Beatification Process presents two apparently opposed facts. On the one hand there is all the enormous background of the popular veneration and the admiration of those who had known the tree by its fruits of a magnificent religious congregation. The postulatory letters for the beatification are signed, headed by the King, Alfonso XIII, the four Spanish Cardinals of the period – Segura, Vidal y Barraquer, Ilundáin and Casanova –, all the Archbishops of the nation, 49 Bishops and an unending list of 265 civic and religious personalities.

But it shows, on the other hand, a serious and difficult problem. Seventy-three years have passed since the death of the Foundress. There do not exist practically any witnesses who lived intimately with her. All those who appeared in the earlier interrogatories prior to the process are persons who talk from hearsay, relating what they have heard being related. The reasons for which it took so long to initiate the process are clear – the enormous poverty in which the Congregation lived during many years, the same simplicity and occult style that Mother Rafols imposed in her life –, but it is evident that this distance makes it difficult to get the necessary evidence.

A second event aggravates the situation: there are also very few documents known then that could serve to clarify her personality. The fire and the destruction of the first hospital caused the disappearance of almost all the foundational documents. The fact of the lack of autonomy of the community – always at the orders of the Board of the Sitiada – did not permit the archives of the community to have wide documentation. The fact that during the life of the Foundress there was no house other than the one of Zaragoza (with the exception of the almost independent foundation of Huesca) makes it that there isn't – as happens with other foundresses – a correspondence between the communities or the habitual letters of direction or of spirituality that the Superior General sends to the other houses of the Order. This is how – in the year 1926 when the process is about to begin – we have no written texts other than small receipts, invoices, some letter or petitions not of much importance. Why would she write if all her daughters lived together in a tiny little world?

The difficulty is serious and some ask whether with such scant material and second-hand references could sufficient historical material that logically the Roman Congregation demands, be supplied. But – it was thought – the superabundance of favours attributed to the Mother could compensate for the historical data left in the shadows, in the same semi-darkness in which the whole life of the Foundress unfolded.

And it is in this moment when something is produced, “something” that *seems* will help the definitive setting in the right direction of this ship towards the desired beatification. A very fervent religious of St. Anne gave herself body and soul, as ordered by her Superior, to go through archives. And in 1926 – as if guided by a supernatural call – finds some first letters of the Foundress. Letters that seem authentic, with paper and ink that are esteemed to be of the period, with a calligraphy that responds to other evidently authentic writings of the Saint, in the receipts and invoices earlier alluded to. These first letters are not specially substantial, but much more than the earlier known ones. And they are received with the logical jubilation of a discovery. And they go on to be incorporated in to the Acts of the ongoing process.

Not many months have passed and the findings are repeated and multiply. Now they are not brief letters, but authentic notebooks of spirituality, notes, almost of an autobiography that confirm or complete many of the things that were more or less known, by the tradition of the community. There are in these “findings” strange aspects: all of them seem to arise from a mysterious call of God. And in places that are many times unlikely, in drawers, which have been looked into a thousand times already, writings that had remained there without anybody seeing them for a whole century now appear easily.

There are 15 of these “findings” that are produced between 1926 and 1931. Everything revolves around them. There are in them data, almost sufficient, to trace an autobiography of the Servant of God. We have texts that have been dictated to her directly by the Sacred Heart, spiritual advice, a kind of spiritual testament, a long and very detailed report of her death written and signed by the person who was her confessor, mosén Agustin Oliver.

The repercussion of these texts is impressive, above all when in the last ones (the “findings” of 1931 and 1932) there appear some surprising prophetic talents in the author of these writings which at the beginning of the XIXth century would have announced many

events that had occurred in the years immediately prior to the finding and publication: the institution of the Feast of Christ the King “by my beloved son Pius XI”, the dissolution of the Society of Jesus, the religious persecution initiated by the Republic, the official Consecration of Spain to the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Cerro de los Angeles...

These prophetic announcements, and a certain apocalyptic tone which had been growing progressively in the documents as they were being found, produce two counter effects: the enthusiasm of groups of supporters who – without even asking whether they were deforming the true face of Mother Rafols with it – convert her into an illumined prophetess who could serve as a banner to Spanish Catholics who were going through dark moments; and, on the other side, first the distrust and the bitter hatred of those who saw in those writings a blasphemous and sacrilegious fraud and asked a little less than the burning in the main square of those responsible. The political circumstances were to add much fuel to this fire. In some sectors of high rightist militancy, an arm against the Republic began to be seen in the “writings”, especially when in some lines they wanted to see the announcing of a Caudillo (Great Leader) who would arrive to “purify Spain of the filth”.

During the years of our Civil War and, above all, the post-world war it was almost inevitable that the Servant of God would be “utilized” politically. The editions of her “prophecies”, of her “promises” multiplied. And this image – politicised and warlike – is what the people of Spain between fifty and sixty years today, have of Mother Rafols. Does this image coincide in any way with the authentic face of the woman who lived largely in the dark shadows of the faith and who experienced above all, the heroism of everyday charity?

In 1944 came the great pain. The Holy See, that had received benevolently the “writings” of the Mother initially and which had even been approved in a first and not very serious examination, alarmed perhaps by its multiplication and by the aspect that had been taking progressively, carried out a long and detailed analysis

– as much material as interior – of the same, and in 1944 the results were published: they were all the fruit of a patient and meticulous falsification.

And to the harshness of this conclusion was added the toughness adopted, by the Holy See as a consequence: Pope Pius XII signed the “Dilata” with which put the brakes – for almost forty years – on the Process of Beatification and the Congregation of the Annes was told not to talk about the topic any more.

It is easy to imagine what these decisions meant for all those who loved Mother Rafols and her Congregation. That was an unimagined and tremendous catastrophe. And it was doubly so because it was not understood. If those writings were a falsification, from where did they come? Who prepared them?

Unfortunately today, it has to be said about those forty years of history, whatever be the roots of the falsification, its results could not have been more catastrophic: not only were forty years lost in the path of the beatification of Mother Rafols, but her image became falsified, rhetoricized, hysterized for almost a generation that knew much more of her supposed prophecies than of her authentic virtues. But there is something worse: the life of the Mother became converted into a labyrinth for historians.

It is stated that suddenly authentic documents were destroyed. Probably they were not more important than the authentic ones that remained. And what is most sure is that several of those that appeared would be copies of the original texts, inflated with interpolations that made them more “interesting”. But how can we distinguish today the authentic from the interpolated? And what value can be given to narrations of the autobiographical type? Most of them indicate total coincidence with the memories that, by tradition, existed in the Congregation and were thus reflected in the declarations made by some witnesses in the Process of Beatification. The author surely limited himself or herself to giving a literary form and putting in first person this oral tradition. But how can we distinguish today what is truly authentic in it and what is of pure fervent and literary creation?

Besides this, if all this accumulation of harm is important, greater was the pain produced in the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Anne. Some other religious congregations in the history of the Church have suffered moments of peril similar to these. But few so sharp and that have hurt the ‘core’ so loved.

It has to be proclaimed here – and the Holy See has recognised it – that the reaction of the Institute was absolutely exemplary, almost “too” exemplary. The topic was closed with seven locks. The religious let themselves be insulted and defamed. They entered into a silence that was, yes, a rigorous reflection of the true life of Mother Rafols. Never probably in all its history had the Institute seemed so like its Foundress.

But I have written that the obedience of the Congregation was “almost too exemplary” for two reasons: because this total silence, this blind fidelity to the orders of Rome, has left without clarification (at least as far as we know today) the background of the whole problem, which, even leaving aside errors and guilt, it was necessary to elucidate for this rediscovery of the true face of the Foundress.

And there remains a second reason: the obedience of the Annes was always so total that not only did they not talk about the problem of the writings, but they began to have some kind of a “complex” when talking about their origins. Mother Rafols was not to blame if someone or some people used her name one century later, which was evident. But we humans tend to distrust the quality of a wine that has been served to us from a deformed bottle.

I must confess that talking now to many religious Annes who entered the Congregation during those years and hear them relate how in their Novitiate, in their first years, they hardly heard about their Foundress has impressed me, and how it is only now when jubilantly, they are rediscovering their own roots and coming to know how proud they should be of them.

Because, to our greater astonishment and as one more game of this Providence who does not stop acting in this history, those

years, when a strong wind shook the foliage of the tree of the Congregation even threatening to uproot it, not only were they not years of vocational crisis but, on the contrary, they saw a new and more impetuous flowering. The darkness, the struggles, the calumnies, not only did not cut the curve of the vocations and the foundations, but they even came to strengthen and multiply them: as if God wanted to prove that it was men – and not He – who had been shaking that tree; as if He himself was in a hurry to reward that impressive gesture of obedience of the entire Congregation to the orders of Rome. Thus it is that we see during the years when Mother Felisa Guerri (1921-1953) was the Superior, which coincide with the tempest, the number of new foundations rise to 100, to which another 66 have to be added under the direction of Mother Eladia Magaña (1954-1965) and another 66 in the twelve years when Mother Encarnación Vilas (1965-1977) was superior.

But even history reserved some joys for the Congregation. And they came from the path of humility. The Annes have never refused any of the smallest and darkest jobs. And one of them is that of taking charge of the kitchen of various Spanish seminarians. They have assumed the vocation of servants, which are today refused by the feminine institutes who want to “liberate themselves” because they are considered oppressive and unworthy of women, and which they have taken on with joyful naturalness as always, which joyful naturalness comes to them straight from the hands of Mother Rafols.

Well, it was in the seminary of Vitoria where a seminarian, José Ignacio Tellechea, who would with the passing of time be one of the most important historians of the Church that Spain can count within recent years, met the Annes. And not all the seminarians who had passed through that cloister would have known to thank the obscure sacrifice of the women who took care of their food and cleanliness in the years they were students. José Ignacio has, fortunately, besides a tremendous capacity of analysis as investigator, the sensitive heart of a good person. And it was enough that someone in Rome – Fr. Antonelli – commented to him, worried, about the

unhappy events that had taken place with the Process of Beatification of Mother Rafols, for him to feel – in 1953 – the obligation of giving back, with his work, some of the love which, from the dark kitchen, had been showered on him and his companions of the seminary of Vitoria by some religious, more or less anonymous. And he began to work from the darkness, which is how saints and authentic historians work.

His raising of the issue was very simple: if there is in a topic material that seems with all probability spurious, time should not be wasted discussing whether it is or is not authentic, or about how the falsification was produced. This would only serve for polemics, not for the search for whether “other” sources, which are indisputable, exist, even when they are less abundant.

In any case, the faults and responsibilities of a later polemic should not be turned onto Mother Rafols. This type of falsification has existed, furthermore, around more authentic saints. They existed, even around the figure and life of Jesus. There are all the apocryphal gospels. Neither did the sentimental and emotive Christians of the first centuries feel satisfied with the short material offered by the canonical gospels; they found them empty, hollow, with a lack of information. And they thought they would help Christ filling these hollows with their imagination or with literary variants of tradition with greater or less basis. This was the root of the apocryphal gospels, that offered an evident – but also ingenuous and well-intentioned in most of the cases – falsification of the reality of Jesus.

Now well, would the Church work wisely despising the authentic gospels because falsifications had arisen around them? Clearly, no. The true face of Jesus does not get stained by the sweet imagination of some of His followers. The Church would have then, to carefully analyse which are the texts that spoke of the authentic Jesus and simply leave aside, without more polemic, the apocryphal, that would be passed into history as a simple curiosity or as a source

that could have some truth, but had been seen with the contagion of fantasy.

Five fundamental volumes of documentation, two of them referring to Fr. Bonal and three to the foundations of Zaragoza and of Huesca and to the origin of the first Constitutions of the Congregation have emerged till now from these studies of J.I.Tellechea. These are cold documents – in what refers to Mother Rafols –, their fundamental source being the 50 volumes of Acts of the Sitiada that are still preserved till today, Acts where someone writes “from right on top” and in which only incidentally reference is made to “the poor little things” who work there. They are official documents, emotionless and without learning and which will offer us, in any case, crumbs of the great banquet of charity that those religious lived during 50 long years. They have, on the other hand, the stupendous guarantee of objectivity: there is no witness filled with passion who tries to exalt the hero. On the contrary: most of the times they are texts signed by enemies or, when less, by hostile persons.

There is also the volume of the Acts of Beatification with the declarations of the witnesses. It would be ingenuous to give absolute value to all these declarations, guided undoubtedly by love and enthusiasm. But it would be equally unjust to spurn them en masse or place all the affirmations in the same shredder. Attentive and careful reading of the same will permit us to discover their large areas of truth, above all in those cases that coincide with the cold documents of the official acts of the period.

This book is constructed on these two sources. Two centuries of the birth of Mother Rafols will be celebrated within a few months. And this proximity has revived in the Congregation of St. Anne something that had been sown by Vatican II: the great eagerness to find their roots once again, to relive the original charism of which they were born. As many of today’s religious had lived those years of “silence after the storm”, their desire to know what was half hidden from them in their Novitiates by too rigorous an interpretation

of obedience, is even greater. And it is a joyful encounter. They have begun to discover that “without rhetoric it is much better”, that they knew some more folkloric aspects of the Foundress, but perhaps less profound; that their roots of sanctity are much more alive, more modern even, than they had imagined.

This book would like to be a part of this joyous re-encounter. Polemics will be left to the side, use that was wanted to be made of this figure will be forgotten, and it will try to describe with simplicity what we know of the true root. And it will be quiet there where there isn’t enough serious data. This book does not have any investigative or historical aspirations: in reality, it is a simple summary and a popularization of what was investigated by J.I.Tellechea, almost the authentic author of the pages that follow. If this book is written, it is only to help those who do not have the courage to confront documents that are always arid.

“When you drink water, remember the source”, says an old Chinese refrain. This is what this book wants to be: a return to the sources, a re-encounter with the spring from which this great river that is today the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Anne has emerged.

It is a happy descent. It has been so earlier for the one who has written these pages. I had heard spoken – like almost all Spanish of my generation – of Mother Rafols with a series of political or bellicose hues that could make her more or less attractive to one, according to whether or not, one shares this type of patriotic-political “ideal”, but which did not precisely drive one towards imitation of her along the paths of sanctity. I remember, even, having read not too long ago a drama, the name of which I prefer to forget, in which Mother Rafols presented a half-rhetorical, half-hysterical character, called to draw the applause of the rhetorical and of the hysterical but which to me seemed, suited much more to an Agustina of Aragón than to a religious. Heroism is admirable; sanctity is “something else”. And it is this “something else” that I did not see

in that theatre character which the author had dressed as a religious and bathed with sentimentalism.

Hence I have been the first to be surprised when I descended to this grotto of dark and true sanctity that one finds in the origins of the Institute of the Annes. The freshness of a fountain is always better than the warbles of artificial fireworks. Neither God nor His Saints need empty verbiage. Truth is sufficient for them.



## I. IN A WORLD THAT GOES ROUND

It was on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1781, at the Rovira Mill, 64 kilometres from Barcelona and 5 from Vilafranca, when a little girl was born who would be baptised two days later with the name of María Josefa Rosa. Her parents were named Cristóbal Rafols and Margarita Bruna. They were poor and simple peasants.

Here the history of an infancy that was as simple as this birth could be concluded. There were no divine splendours, celestial voices, and magical announcements. The newly born was a “darling” for her mother and for all the neighbours, and of course that little old woman was not missing at her Baptism – like she was never missing at any – who announced that the neophyte is called to make the world go round. And all those who heard it smiled – like they always do – benevolently and commented, “yes, grandmother, and may you live to see it”. With this sweet irony we comment on all that we do not believe.

However, this time this “prophecy” of all Baptisms was going to have a lot that was true: that little girl was going to be the captain of a great adventure that would make many things turn around, which would anticipate some of the most vivid movements of the Church in the century that was about to start. That girl – not because she was made of that special wood of which, so it seems, make saints are made, but rather because she would know to respond to these calls of God that we mediocre persons would waste – she was going to assume one of the most difficult tasks that could be entrusted to a believer: to burn and not shine; to walk and not go forward; to construct deep foundations very arduously and never see the building that would be built over it.

Fortunately, obscurity is not infertility: and that is the reason why two hundred years later that 5<sup>th</sup> of November becomes important once again, in spite of the human race having a very short

memory and that is accustomed to eat bread without asking ever about that obscure seed from which this wheat of which it is made was born, and the bitter winters and tremendously strong winds that the seed had to confront.

Tremendous winds, yes. Because history is not uniform: together with pacific, calm centuries in which the years seem to pass meekly and in no hurry, there are periods when history seems to go very fast and fall headlong even obliging those who live in those times to have their soul in the air, as if they were navigating among cliffs and precipices. These are what are called “times of transition”, in which man has more questions than answers and uses more the compass than the arm chair. Those of us who live today understand this. And perhaps that is why we are better able to understand that other century when Mother Rafols lived, hours of mutations like ours, days of search for new paths, times of anguish in which the best boats threaten to sink.

How different would the life of María Rafols have been if she had lived in the first eighty years of her century! But, born in 1781 and died in 1853, she was an eyewitness of one of the most intense turns ever taken by humanity in history. The world that accepted her at the end of the XVIIIth century had very little to do – with the ideas that ruled it, with the great social structures, with the same problematic of faith – such that seventy years later they would dismiss her. We have, hence, to detain ourselves to know the framework in which she moved, because, if Christians are born “in order to” bring the world near to God, we will not be able to understand her zeal if we do not know the problems and realities to which it responded.

### **The Collapse of a Christendom**

This tremendous turn around is summarised in very few words: the collapse of a style of life which had been defined as “Christendom” till then and many confused it with the Church itself. This is certainly the crisis suffered most severely by Christianity,

more than that of the persecutions. It is not – like in the times of Luther – that individuals or groups, more or less numerous, raise a war against the Church or against Rome; now it is society as a whole – even though, as is logical, with different levels and with a diverse rhythm – that fights to free itself of the faith. In these decades we assist at the breaking down of a system of beliefs and values that had till then laid the foundations of the life for the man in the West. In the political field it is the death of absolutism; in the social, the great collapse of the system of classes inherited from the Middle Ages; in the judicial, the birth of a new law that has very little to do with the earlier; in the moral, the birth of another moral different from the traditional; in the organization of daily life, subjects were changed to citizens; and a new religiosity seems to be born, natural, deistic, far from what was preached by Jesus, while the goddess Reason, who seems to be the frontal enemy of faith is canonized and goes up to heaven. “Man comes out from being a non-entity”, according to Kant. “Men, following reason, become gods”, as C.Gilbert would say. It is like a return to paradise or like a definitive departure from it. The whole, well-covered and rolled in blood.

This tremendous awakening (or this outburst of madness, according to how one sees it) can be painted using the style of a film of good guys and bad guys, as was frequent among the ecclesiastics of fifty or more years ago: the bad guys attack the good Church. But this painting does not lack ingenuity. Far more accurate – however painful it may be – is the diagnosis with which Rogier opens the volume corresponding to his *New History of the Church*:

“Well-known is the parable of the bad man who came at night to sow weeds amidst the wheat. Very edifying, but it has no application in the case of relations between the “Enlightenment” and Faith. The historic situation did not present a fervent community of faithful on the one hand, and on the other, audacious assailants attacking it from outside: Voltaire with his motto of crushing infamy, Diderot and the Encyclopaedia, D’Holbach, Helvetius, La Metrie

and Volney, who declared all religion as a chimera. Actually, all these men came from within its own bosom; they grew in its atmosphere, all of them as students of the Jesuits. They did not attack the Christian community of the XVIIIth century by surprise; their origin was in it, and they almost believed they were its interpreters. The books did not dechristianize France and the other countries of the West; the dechristianization took form in the books, but what they brought to full light had been propagated in the shadows for a long time. Even before the end of the XVIIIth century a progressive cooling down of the life of faith was already perceptible. For many in the XVIIIth century, religion consisted in a submission to the united powers of Church and State more than in convictions, in conformity with a whole lot of traditions, of norms and of conventionalisms which avoided a break-down of the social order...

During the XVIIIth century Christian life did not produce an impression of heroism, not even of fervour. It happened as if any impulse whatsoever in Catholicism had been suppressed in this century: for fear of Quietism all mysticism was suppressed: so as not to fall into rigorism, life slipped towards laxity. It is the devotion of the average just person and of small obligations. A devotion of this type could not offer anything to those, who as St. Theresa said, are made for something great, either in hatred or in love, to be great sinners or great saints. Among the Bishops and the other ecclesiastics of elevated position, religious practice had the aspect of an empty conventionalism. During the XVIIIth century the monastic orders offered a general impression of stagnation and despondency. Certain authors blame the "philosophers" for this religious lukewarmness. This seems like nothing more than playing with words. Actually: when the enthusiasm of religious practice is attenuated, when the fire that heats hearts becomes cold, favourable conditions for an empty deism are created, faith with neither height nor depth, as tolerant as it is widespread."

This is a tough diagnosis and probably exaggerated, above all with regard to all the generalization involved (as actually in the

Church of the XVIIIth century – as in all centuries – very diverse temperatures existed simultaneously), but its presentation as one of the saddest centuries, in which an anaemic church had to confront a turnaround which it is beginning to assimilate, with only one century of delay, may be accepted as substantially valid.

And hard reality for Christians who had to live it. It is precisely this reality that makes the Christian adventure of those who lived it more meritorious. How much more simple and more brilliant would it have turned out to be for María Rafols if she had lived in the blazing hour of the Spanish XVIth century of Theresa of Jesus, or, simply, in the Renaissance half a century later, when Antonio María Claret and the stupendous chain of holy foundresses who embellished the second half of the XIXth century lived: María Micaela del Santísimo Sacramento, María Molas, Soledad Torres Acosa, Vicenta López y Vicuña, Teresa Jornet, Rafaela del Sagrado Corazón and several others. It was María Rafols' lot to live literally "the worst part": to be born in a winter and to flower in a desert. Men cannot choose when and where they have to be born. And it is perhaps this that makes the work of pioneers and standard-bearers more important. Even though most often it is not they who enjoy the joy of victory.

### **Spain of the old regime**

The whole phenomenon of decomposition on the one hand, and the revolutionary ferments that burst in France a few years after the birth of María Rafols, reached Spain some decades later where an outburst like in France was not produced among us, rather, it was a longer one – and hence, more bloody – a revolution which, in reality lasted almost a century.

When our protagonist was born, Spain was typically what has come to be called "a country of the old regime": an eminently agrarian nation, dominated absolutely by a king and nobility that possessed everything and decided everything.

Politically the country reached the end of the century tired of the reigns of Carlos III and Carlos IV, and of this personage so disastrous for the nation, Godoy, who was valet more of the Queen than of the King himself. The high nobility of the great proprietors swarmed the Court: the Dukes of Alba, of Osuna, of the Infantado, of Medinacelli, of San Carlos... a total of 119 Greats of Spain and 535 titles of Castille. All the wealth and all the dereliction of the country were in their hands. Of the 37 million cultivable hectares, only eight and a half were actually cultivated. Twelve million were dedicated to pasture, but the majority did not know any cattle other than the herds that crossed the Mesta once a year. Of these 37 million hectares, seventeen were property of 1,323 great families, while another ten belonged to the 390,034 «hidalgos or noblemen». The rest corresponded – to put it in this way – to the ten million Spanish that the country then had. The active population is calculated to be 6,650,000 persons, of which 5,615,000 (80 per cent of the Spanish) dedicated themselves to agriculture, while there were few who dedicated themselves to the nascent industry.

To add to the tragedy, the rich were not only proprietors of the lands, but also of its men, like a medieval residue. The nobility «possessed» 15 cities, 2,286 small towns, 4,267 villages, and 671 hamlets. And many a time true relations of serfdom existed. In the lands and cities of their domain, the nobles had the right to designate magistrates, senior mayors, judges, municipal magistrates, aldermen and other municipal functionaries. There were villages, like Baza, in which the Lords were still called «Lords of the Manor». And they enjoyed the monopoly of the furnaces and the mills, they collected 10 per cent of the sale of immovable properties, a percentage of the harvest, special tributes of reaping time and vintage and taxes on transit of cattle. It is easy – as Tuñón de Lara points out – to deduce from all this data, what was the social structure of Spain at the end of the XVIIIth century and to understand the tumults of change that were to bubble up.

Besides – as misfortune never comes alone –, the country was going to embark on five wars during this period – the War of

Independence, of America, of Morocco and the two Carlista wars –, with the consequent tremendous blood bath both of men and of money. Today it is usually calculated that the War of Independence cost 12,000 million reales, that the very long Carlista Wars cost the country 60 million reales each month and that the loss of the American colonies meant the loss of 50 per cent of the income of the metropolis.

These facts suffice to understand such terrible incidents like the fact that one third of the Spanish people during this period are undernourished, living in conditions that could be today those of the countries of Africa; the life expectancy of the workers of that period is calculated to be around 24 (twenty-four!) years; that, even though food devoured 80 per cent of their income, it was reduced to bread, pulses and «bacalao or codfish», while meat appeared only in the diet of 12 per cent of the Spanish people – naturally, the rich – ; that the health situation was so disastrous that any epidemic caused the death of hundreds of thousands (the one of 1833 caused 300,000; the cholera of 1855 took 236,774 persons to their death); that illiteracy was the law and the norm in the country; well, at the beginning of the XIXth century a little more than 5 per cent of the Spanish people knew to read and write; that work conditions were despicable: an industrial worker at the beginning of the century had to work 12 hours to earn 11 reales; and an agricultural worker who worked «from sunrise to sunset» – 16 hours in summer – earned 12 reales in the harvest months, that went down to 2 reales in the winter months.

This is the real Spain in which María Rafols is going to move. This is the life that she lived in her infancy. These are the people who are going to come to the hospitals in which she would work. Maybe in the light of these figures we will begin to understand that the majority of the religious who accompanied her died young, that they and her patients lacked practically everything, that in one month of her work at the Foundling Home she saw 42 children admitted and 39 of them die! This Spain of underdevelopment, of hunger and of injustice was frightful. This was the Spain that made the awakening to charity more urgent and burning.

## A Church that is an accomplice, well intentioned and naive

In the face of this tremendous situation of injustice it is painful to add that the Church played the role of a naive accomplice, and that the followers of the Gospel of charity and fraternity were the exceptions.

Suddenly, we find ourselves with an exceptionally high number of «personnel of the Church». We have fairly weighty figures, referring to the beginnings of the XIXth century, which tell us that ecclesiastics, friars and nuns reached almost 200,000 in Spain, one of every fifty Spanish persons, proportionately double those that Italy then had, three times the number France counted with, seven times more proportionately than Spain has today. The secular clergy more than 85,000. The religious, numbered 70,000. The nuns, 30,000. The officials of the Inquisition, 8,000. All of them authentic vocations? Evidently, no. For many farmers, access to the priesthood was the only manner in which they could flee the plough. The regime of the right of succession vested in the first-born son of a family made many nobles assign the younger sons to clerical tonsure. And in many cases a chaplaincy was founded – free of taxes – to be able to achieve the «placing» a son for a little money.

Apart from the moral problematic that this excess supposed, the country lived in a clerical «inflation» that explained many anticlericalisms. Think of a town like Toledo in 1820: for 12,000 inhabitants it had 27 parishes, 15 monasteries for men, 23 for women and more than half the immovable property of the town was ecclesiastical property.

This is because together with their number went their Institutional wealth. Even then – and more than ever – this double phenomena was produced: together with the real poverty of the majority of village clerics and the near misery of many, with the impression – and also the reality – of an overwhelming wealth of the Institutional Church. The Bishops were nobles among nobles. The same Superiors of the great Orders offered the picture of true potentates: the general of the Franciscans (surprise!) had the rank

of Grandee of Spain and wherever he went, he received honours corresponding to a Commander-in-Chief.

And here was the money, ready money, and cash. Calculations that do not seem to be exaggerated indicate that the income of the Church rose, at the beginning of the century, to 1,042 million reales (600 million coming from income from rustic and urban properties, 324 from tithes and first fruits, 118 of surplice fees and foot of the altar fees). And even though this figure is not very high, if it is divided among the number of ecclesiastics (13 reales daily, a worker's salary), yes it is, seen as a whole. So also, is the fact that two per cent of the population possessed twelve per cent of the immovable goods of the nation.

But more serious than the material possessions themselves, were the consequences: while the majority of the clergy lived close to the people and shared their poverty, «the visible Church» was situated within the nobility, thought like them, shared their morals, their unjust distribution of human rights, their sense of class.

In politics, the Church-Throne marriage was total. Church and State supported each other mutually, helped each other, used each other, and dominated each other, without it being too easy to say who dominated whom.

The Spanish Bishops of the XVIIIth century were: – I do not know whether they were «men of faith» or «men of good faith – (bonafide)»; perhaps more the second, than the first. Men of simple customs, who personally lived like the poor, but took refuge in the distant solitude of authority. Scientifically their level was only average, being as they were from a period of the most utter theological poverty. The theological faculties were going through a long low watermark. The seminaries served no nourishment other than a cheap and remasticated Thomism. It is not surprising then that the eruption of new ideas surprised them and they could not counter the new wave of rationalism except with a sentimental apologetic and excommunication. It is also understandable that politically they would always ally with the rightists and when faced

with the attacks of liberalism almost all of them would show themselves as supporters of Carlism.

### **A poor, but profound popular religiosity**

We will now have to make a certain ideological turnaround because we are going to talk about the popular religiosity of the period. And if it is normal that in all historical moments several Churches co-existed. So also at the end of the XVIIIth century this Church asleep on the heights that we have already painted co-existed with the other Church, impoverished but authentic and deep in the rural world.

The XVIIIth century was the best century for popular Spanish religiosity and its embers prolonged till the beginning of the XIXth. The reforming efforts of the XVIth century permeated very deep in Spain. Its catechistic projection, the popular missions, the good average clergy of the period and the fervour of a very large group of saints, created a climate of faith and Christian customs of the best roots in Spain. In the villages people prayed and they prayed well. The precepts of the Church were respected; customs were healthy and moderate. There were naturally mistakes and shadows, but these were recognised as such and improvement was constantly sought. It was a baroque piety, individualistic, with defects – that we will later point out - but an authentic piety and with clean roots.

All through the XVIIIth century this faith began to crack among the higher classes and made large sectors of the clergy become bourgeoisie. But the contagion did not reach the “faithful” till very much after the War of Independence, which had – precisely because of this – the character of a spiritual and religious crusade.

Let us read the description of Baldomero Jiménez Duque: «At this time in the beginning of the century, Spanish life is still very impregnated with Christianity, with all the corresponding social

manifestations. The bells of the temples still indicate the distribution of the duties; let us say, of life above all in the villages. Their chimes are the signal for everything: the Hail Marys (three times: morning, midday, nightfall) are the framework of the working day. Bells for the departed, bells of curfew, bells for feasts, for danger (alarm); for everything... It is, so to say, a residue, but still very exponential. The night watchmen, when they were created in the middle of the century, called the hour, proclaiming them with the Hail Mary. The practice of Sunday Mass, fulfilling of the Easter duties, of receiving the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony, preparing for death, etc., are almost unanimous. The exceptions are what they are, exceptions, and are pointed out by everyone. Fasts and abstinences are observed fairly well. The Bull of the crusade is taken almost en masse. Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, the Patronal Feasts, are somewhat environmental and have an impact on everyone. The numerous Brotherhoods or Guilds, with more or less life or listlessness, continue enrolling the great majority of the people. It is true that it is limited to certain cults, and, on occasions, to some material help to the associates, remnants of the old guilds, which usually go together. All this, may we agree, has much of the traditional, established, social environment, but it maintained the faith and the Christian customs of the Spanish people.»

More bucolic or pastoral still is the panorama that another historian closer to the events presents us. Here is the portrait of the villages of the period described by the pen of Vicente de la Fuente:

«The contagion of immorality and impiety of the courtesans and of the nobility during the XVIIIth century, did not transcend the majority of the Spanish people. They remained devout, religious and fervent Catholics till the beginning of the following century. The laws compiled were full of religious dispositions, and before teaching the respect due to the throne, acts of respect and veneration due to God were prescribed... A little bell usually informed the day labourers and the artisans that it was nearing the time to abandon the bed, and at the break of dawn, while the birds are getting ready

to greet the nascent sun, the streets are already resounding with praises of Mary, singing the Rosary in chorus. There were very few villages of even slight importance where there was no Mass at dawn or daybreak; and when the farm labourer went off to the fields and the artisan went to open his workshop, they had already consecrated to God the first fruits of that day. Making the sign of the Cross and giving thanks after a meal was still not seen as a sign of ridicule; the Spanish person did not want to be ungrateful to that God who gave him his daily bread that others were deprived of. The fasts of the Church were observed with rigour. The food was, as a rule, frugal and at the midday; even the meal had a national character, and the Puchero (glazed earthen pot of typical Spanish dish of meat and vegetables), more or less substantial according to the status of the families, constituted the basis of the daily meal. When it was over, unfailingly the priest said the thanksgiving, if there was a priest at the table, and, if not, the father of the family or the youngest child, to whom praises to God were taught even before he could talk. Not raising one's hat when the bell of the Church announced the elevation of the Lord in Benediction, would have been considered an irreverence; when the bell rang for prayer, all conversations came to a halt; they greeted the Mother of the Spanish people before the sun rose and at nightfall, they bid her goodbye with the triple salutation. Which family would have gone to bed without praying the Rosary? The devotion of the Spanish to the Virgin bordered on enthusiasm: they always wore their scapular, they put an effigy on the streets, several of which would have been impassable at night if the devotion of individuals had not lit a lamp before the image of Mary or some other saint.»

It is evident that we have to remove, besides its naive bucolism, a lot of generalization from this long description. Well, one can't deny that this describes with approximation a large part of the reality in which those who like María Rafols born in the Spanish villages at the end of the XVIIIth century, were submerged. One century of polemics and dereliction was going to destroy this treasure instead of purifying it and updating it.

Because, evidently, as in this treasure, traces, which if not remedied, would occasion its ruin, began to appear. I will continue with this with the lines that Baldomero Jiménez Duque traces in his historical study:

«— It was a Christianity that was theologically and doctrinally poor, more moralizing and sentimental than profound. In a country of illiterate persons an enlightened Catholicism was difficult. But added to this are the problems of the epoch: like the total absence of a Biblical formation. Till the year when Mother Rafols was born, the translation of the Bible into Spanish was not authorized. But even then, the translations didn't go beyond the hands of the most select clerics. And there were such surprising cases like the one where, on translating into Spanish *The Christian Year of Croisset*, – which has the corresponding Biblical texts for each festivity, with a small commentary – the texts of Sacred Scripture were suppressed, leaving only the commentary. As though the Word of God was dangerous!

— Piety was profoundly individualistic: everything was directed towards one's own salvation, one's own perfection. Even the works of Mercy were done because of the benefits to the person who did them. Logically all community, liturgical and ecclesiastical aspects were lacking in the questions raised.

— It was a profoundly «devotional» piety that did not seek so much the encounter with God; rather what it sought was the accumulation of the practices carried out. The devotions pass on to be the centre rather than the path to love.

— Romantic. As a consequence of the ideological poverty, piety is predominantly sentimental, emotive, affective, soft. The prayers are plagued with adjectives; they are inundated with exclamations. The sermons seek to make one cry, rather than to convince one. The peak of perfection is situated in tender fervour.

— Active. Even though we have said that the religiosity of the period lacks anything that could be a social commitment to

revolutionary postures before such radically unjust structures, we are not faced with an inactive or sterile piety. The pious activity is charitable; the apostolate of the Word or of teaching will be the complement of the religious practices. Charity will be hence, the private door through which the better souls of this period will climb up to fly, moving away from everyday routine.»

This is the head and heels of the Spain in which María Rafols was born; this was the soil in which her tree was planted; these are the needs she tried to respond to; these are the people who went to her for help. All the men of the Church - even its greatest Saints - are sons of their centuries. María Rafols was too. Hers was a popular and simple faith like that transmitted by peasants of the XVIIIth century. Hers was a religiosity like that of her times, carefully sublimated. It was the struggle of those two Spains - one that agonised and the other that was being born - which so often tore her soul to pieces. This is what the following chapters will relate to us.



## II. THE MYSTERY OF HER INFANCY

Every infancy is mysterious. But, normally, the true mystery of the infancy is in its own simplicity. And this is the reason why always, in the biographies of those whose adult work we admire, we try to put three legs to the cat: as though the extraordinary, the prodigious, were the only important thing; as though an infancy without miracles or stories of miracles was not sufficiently profound.

This is the tendency that made the apocryphal evangelists fill the infancy of Jesus with absurd prodigies. And this is the bewilderment created for us by the authentic evangelists who had sufficient greatness to confront us with the mystery of a “normal infancy” of Jesus. In all the biographies of the Saints or of great believers we are faced with the same danger: if we did not discover that their asceticism was so profound that it did not lead them, right from the time they were babies, not to drink their mother’s milk on Fridays, or if we did not find white doves resting on their heads on the day of their Baptism, we did not feel satisfied. As though sanctity was only there where there were tales of miracles.

Even with regard to the infancy of María Rafols this craze for tales of miracles has been at work: popular traditions relate that - thanks to this child - the fields of her parents had better crops than those of the neighbours, that the storms affected all the cultivated fields except - precisely - hers, that... Let’s just forget all this. The grace of God should not be confounded with the skills of a juggler. And historical data show us that her infancy was not lived in a green house with God protecting her from all hurt. She lived - on the contrary - in the obscurity of poverty, hurt very closely by the rays of death, protected - this yes - by the climate of a Christian family that lived their Christianity in their daily struggle for food.

Maybe it would be more exact to talk about two Christian families and not just one: because the Rafols and the Bruna lived very close to each other and very united, like everything else that was normal in the villages of that period.

Rafols was an extended surname in the district. One of the forefathers of our protagonist, José Rafols, came from Granada in 1700, married Cecilia Farrán and installed himself in the Rosell House of the Costa de Santa Margarita del Panadés, in a village known by the name of Monjos, that today has a train station on the Barcelona–Tarragona line and only 4 kilometres from Villafranca del Panadés. Today the village is fairly important thanks to the cement factories installed there half a century ago, but at the end of the XVIIIth century there were just a few houses. The scenery would have been really beautiful and picturesque if it weren't for the tremendous hidden problems of malaria because of the humidity of the soil; it was an illness that would have been the cause of so many deaths of the young, as we are soon going to find out.

One of the children of the emigrant José Rafols was Cristóbal Rafols Farrán, grandfather of María Rafols and grand patriarch of the family. He would start the domestic tradition of the millers on taking charge of the Abadal Mill, where Cristobal Rafols Cunillera, seventh of his children and father of María Rafols would be born.

We have a precious document on the style of Christian life of this family in the testimony given by Juan Badía, Dean of Villafranca, who writes:

“That the Rafols family of the Abadal Mill was very pious and profoundly Christian cannot be doubted, because of all the documents that rest in the Archives of the Parish of Santa María del Panadés. There it remains deposited, for the memory of times to come, the religiosity of all the individuals of that family in the events of their life. Even though we only look at the Death Certificates, we can see how in each one of them is stated that in the last illness and above all, at the time of death, they were assisted and comforted

by Dominican and Franciscan religious of the district, we would have important data to affirm that their beliefs and their conduct was truly exemplary. It couldn't be any other way: the Mill placed as it was in the shadow of the Convent of the Dominicans, the old house of the Peñafort, from which came the glory of Villafranca and its district, the glorious patron of the same, San Raimundo.”

“The religious of the said convent, like those of the convent of San Francisco de Villafranca, had considerable influence in the district, because of their virtues and their zeal for the glory of God and the spiritual and material well-being of the inhabitants of the Panadés, to whom they generously offered not only their spiritual direction, but also their most decided support in matters that looked to material well-being. In the shadow hence, of this beneficent influence, the Rafols family was profoundly and entirely Christian and pious, and their individuals all formed part of the congregations and brotherhoods of the Parish of Santa Margarita and of the Convent of Santo Domingo, and their men also figured in the brotherhood established in the convent of San Francisco de Villafranca, with all members of the Rafols family fulfilling, with exactitude all the charges and obligations imposed by the rules of the said pious associations, weekly and monthly.”

We have a family-type that was frequent in the rural world of the XVIIIth century: simple people who earned their daily bread, who were born in the faith and in the faith were they educated, and with the enormous good fortune that, in this case, they lived in the shadow of a convent really open to the needs of the good people and worried not only about helping them to die, but also helping them to live, above all, through the little school that the Convent of the Dominicans had opened. To it we will owe undoubtedly that in a Spain that had 95 % illiterates and in which this figure was even higher for women, we find María Rafols capable of facing, in her youth, a difficult examination of phlebotomy and passing it more brilliantly than the men who appeared for the exam with her.

If the Rafols family was Christian, the Bruna family was no less, and whose head, Juan Bruna, is called in some documents “Ostalers dels monjos” that is Innkeeper of the Monks, and who lived in the “Hostal del Monjos”, which was in this period an outbuilding of the Convent of Santo Domingo.

Of the union of these two families will arise the one that will nurture María Rafols, when on the 30th of June 1771, Christóbal Rafols Cunillera marries Margarita Bruna Brugal. He was twenty-eight and she was twenty. And, apart from their love, neither one nor the other had more wealth than the sky above and their hands. They would live, hence, for almost two years in the house of the Bruna, where in October of 1772 the first of their children, Juan, would be born.

In 1773 the Alcover family of Villafranca del Panadés, distinguished people and proprietors of many lands of the district, will offer Cristobal Rafols the charge of Miller in the Rovira Mill, belonging to them. And there the new family will transfer itself. This House-Mill, which is preserved even till today, – and in which María Rafols will be born –, is situated at only one kilometre from Villfranca and is surrounded by beautiful orchards and watered by the waters of a modest stream, the Miló. This is beautiful scenery for a simple and happy infancy. A picturesque spot planted in the silence that hardly disturbs the fluttering of the doves, in which is situated a typical Catalan country home, surrounded by vineyards and a kitchen garden and crowned with several rows of pine. Property today of the religious of Charity of St. Anne, the house continues to have the fragrance of simplicity and clarity.

There in 1774 the second child of the couple would be born and in 1776 the third, but both would die, the first before completing two years of age and the second before completing two months. In 1778 would be born a girl called Margarita, like the mother. Another child would be born and die after a few days in 1779. And on the 5th of November 1781 would be born – the sixth of the children, the third of those who survive – a girl who would

be baptised two days later with the names of María Josefa Rosa, the protagonist of our story.

«IN THIS CHUCH OF SANTA MARIA DE VILAFRANCA  
ON THE 7TH DAY OF NOVEMBER OF 1781  
MARIA RAFOLS WAS MADE A CHRISTIAN-  
FOUNDRRESS OF THE CONGREGATION OF  
SISTERS OF CHARITY OF SAINT ANNE  
WHOSE INSIGNIA IS TO ALLEVIATE HUMAN MISERIES  
AND WHO, ARMED WITH CHARITY,  
DOMINATED THE BELLIC FURY OF  
THE BESIEGERS OF ZARAGOZA  
OF THE YEAR 1808.  
VILAFRANCA DEDICATES THIS MEMORIAL  
TO HER ON THE FIRST SECULAR ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE GLORIOUS SIEGES»

This is the plaque that remembers that day of her Baptism in the Parish of Villafranca. The world needed one hundred and twenty-seven years to come to know the transcendence of that date. It was not realised in 1881 and the civil celebrations of the centenary of the Sieges had to be celebrated, to discover it. But in the life of María Rafols that 7th of November of 1781 the day of her Baptism was far more profound and transcendental than all the heroic events of all the imaginable wars together.

Not much after the birth of the little María, the Rafols-Bruna couple once again changed their place of residence, to take charge now, of the Mascaró Mill in Bleda, four kilometres to the West of Villafranca. Problems of malaria at the earlier residence? Search for a better salary? We don't know. This time it is a building that has a mill on its ground floor and another floor where the Miller's family lives. Adjoining it is a second construction meant to be a straw loft, in which, according to tradition, the poor who lived in the village or passed through it spent the night. In this simple and bucolic scenery María Rafols would spend seven years of her best infancy. And here the family would grow with three more girls: Lucia – who would die when she was three months old – Josefa and Antonia.

What was that infancy like? The only documentary data we have is that of her Confirmation, received when she was four years old (together with her little sisters Margarita and Josefa, the latter who was just two months old) at the hands of the Bishop of Barcelona, Don Gabino Valladares, in the Convent of the Calced Carmelites of Villafranca. Following the custom of the period, that day the Barcelonese Prelate confirmed all the children of that district – forty in all –, including even practically newborn. María with her four little years was more fortunate and could, undoubtedly, understand something of the joy of the Sacrament that she was receiving.

At the margin of this data, we also have some testimonies presented in the Process of Beatification and conserved in the Acts. They are, true, second hand testimonies and have this tone of exaltation with which we relate the infancies of those whom we love, but undoubtedly, there are sufficient details – and some very significant – to permit us to peep, even though from far, into the mystery of this infancy.

With the motive of placing the stone that we earlier transcribed, the Superior General of the Annes, Felisa Guerri, and Mother María Naya are put up in the house of Don Enrique Alcober, nephew of Juan Pablo Alcober, who was the Baptism godfather of Mother Rafols. And here is the transcription of what the old man referred to regarding what he had heard about that newborn baby in the house of his family:

«With profound emotion and tears, this gentleman told us that the Servant of God, right from the time she was very small, stood out from among all her little contemporaries by her piety, her fervour and her recollection: when she heard the bell for Mass she went running to her mother to take her there and her recollection produced admiration because she was always on her knees before her mother till her mother told her to sit down; he told us that if she saw any poor person, she ran to ask for alms to give to them, and when she was still of a tender age she was found separated, closed in her room, praying; and in the evening when her mother wanted to

put her to bed she refused till her father came home and they prayed the Rosary».

In similar terms, Don Juan Badia, the Parish Priest of Villafranca reported in the same process:

«From the tradition in the Alcober family I was told that the child María corresponded faithfully to the religious preoccupation of her parents, standing out from the time she was very young for her sharpness and precocity of ingenuity, but specially for her piety, which everyone considered extraordinary; she distinguished herself among the girls of her village for her candour, her innocence and for the exercise of amiable virtues of infancy, principally by her modesty, humility and charity, which added to the natural fascination of the infantile age, the splendours of a supernatural grace that was like an omen and pre-announcement of her sanctity. As confirmation was the fact that on one occasion, on hearing an indecent word, she began to cry bitterly while she embraced her mother strongly, was offered as proof.»

The lawyer Santiago Abella y Battle, collecting the tradition heard a thousand times from his co-countrymen, offers this data:

«Also from continuous tradition I know that the Servant of God was, from her first years, very devoted to the Most Holy Virgin: every evening she awoke very happy to recite the Rosary with her parents, she herself leading this pious prayer from the time she was hardly old enough to do so... She was also a great lover of solitude, fleeing the company of her colleagues and seeking that of her mother; and she was so charitable towards the poor that, as soon as she saw a beggar she would run to her mother to get some alms to offer the beggar. Her love for the Lord was so great that, even as a child, she cried bitterly when she heard a blasphemy. And as confirmation of this I can add that one day when she heard a shepherd blaspheme she burst into a bitter lament.»

As can be easily seen, these are the descriptions that we would make of any good little girl about whom we talk. But there are,

however, three or four details worthy of being highlighted because of their premonitory characteristics: this strong will, this determined decision of the child who refused to sleep before saying the Rosary or who did not sit in the Church till her mother told her to do so; this interior fire of a little girl who “ran” to help the poor; this keen religious sensitivity of a child who burst out crying on hearing a blasphemy... Yes it is true – as Vigny says – that “every great work is an infantile thought carried out at a mature age”, one would say that we are seeing already in these very tiny details, the strong woman who, against wind and sea, would sustain the nascent community of the Sisters or would run to attend to those wounded by the gunfire of the Sieges of Zaragoza.

And today there are two more fields where one would say that Providence is already preparing the future Mother Rafols: the detachment from all land, with the continuous change of domicile by her parents, and the knowledge of pain in all aspects of her life.

We have already pointed out the very deficient state of the health of the country, which, together with the long days of excessive work, caused such a short life expectancy that produces in us today surprise when we see how the majority of them died so young. And thus, it would be death that obliges the Rafols-Bruna family to one more change of domicile, this time to return to the Hostal dels Monjos, from where the mother Margarita left ten years earlier. In this interval, all the men had died: Margarita’s father and her brothers Juan and Manuel. Only women remained in the house. And the good old Cristobal gave in to the desires of his mother-in-law and his wife and returned to the Hostal. There the last of their children, José, was born and who would also die in the first months like four other brothers and sisters of his.

They would live in the Hostal only one year. And one especially bitter year. Hardly had 1794 started – María was thirteen years old –, when after a few days her Uncle and Aunt Domingo and Rosa and her maternal grandmother would die. And at that same time, her own father got ill – it seems to have been malaria – and

who, after fighting death for six months, would rest in a Christian manner on the 10th of July 1794.

This death pulled the curtain down on the infancy of María Rafols. We know nothing of her First Communion, which – according to the custom of the period – she probably received later, as an orphan. We do know on the other hand sufficient to measure her childhood as anything but a gift. Clean and serene, yes, because the house had love and hope. But hard too: a father who dies of exhaustion at fifty years of age, five little brothers and sisters dead, these constant changes of residence that are definitely not done out of whims, show sufficiently the anguish of a peasant family of the period bringing up their five children. When the day after tomorrow she talks of poverty, she will not talk like Maria Antonieta who wore the dress of a shepherdess. When she feels surrounded by the embrace of death of so many, this embrace will seem very familiar to her. She will love the people from which she has come. Her weak physical frame – probably a result of her under-nourished childhood – will be what will permit her to live with poor health “steeled” till seventy-one. And it will all be in the mystery of this silent and energetic child, who grew among the marshy fields of the Panadés.



### III THE DARK YEARS

But – as if María Rafols wanted to trace the life of Jesus to the letter – the truly dark years of her life are those that follow, those that go from thirteen to twenty-three and in history, from 1794 to 1804, to the years when she, in her own way “grew in grace and understanding in the eyes of God” and without us humans knowing anything about them.

In the fifth chapter of this history we will find María already a strong woman, captaining a homogenous group that already has all the traces of a true community. But about how this group arose there are only questions and who placed on María Rafols this leadership and why, and who would have then been solid and strong to support the tremendous test that was commended to the group and which would remain there when the male twin group that accompanied them failed. And there are only questions about how the little girl we have just left in the earlier chapter acquired the tremendous greatness of soul that would be required of her in 1808 and in the difficult hours of the following years. When and how did the religious vocation arise in her? Where and when did it take place? Because evidently one has to exclude the hypothesis that the group that Fr. Bonal took to Zaragoza in 1804 would end up being constituted by a group of young girls “caught” in a few days in the villages, till then dispersed. All the events that took place in Zaragoza in those years show us that earlier there was the seed of a sufficiently solid and institutionalised community. And they equally show us that María Rafols already had true authority over them and not only one that arose from an election. That would have been done later by Fr. Bonal. At least, part of that group already existed as a group and recognised our protagonist as their spiritual leader.

To respond to these questions there are, for the moment, three possible hypotheses and it seems that, with the data that we have available today we cannot give a definite approval to any of the three.

The most traditional is the one that places Mother María during these ten years with the Sanjaunista religious of Barcelona. Sanz Artibucilla inclines openly in his *Documental Life* of the Mother towards this possibility. But unfortunately, his arguments do not seem very conclusive.

It's true – yes – that all traces of María Rafols disappear from the Parish books of the area of Villafranca. They don't even appear in the religious confraternities of the district. We do not even have data on her First Communion. All this makes one think María was away from Villafranca del Panadés soon after the death of her father. This absence left the family in a difficult situation: the mother just forty-three years old is at the head of her five children, and the eldest, Juan is already twenty-two; the others, all women, are only sixteen, thirteen, nine and seven respectively. On the top of everything, all the men – father and brothers of the mother – had died in this house populated by women. If you remember that we are in 1800 and that the family did not even have the mill it had in earlier years, you will discover how difficult it was to fill so many mouths.

In these circumstances it is logical that, if Maria had already discovered within her a religious call, she would now seek the manner in which she should could carry it out and, at the same time, free her home of one more burden, with the family remaining, above all, with her sister Margarita, the eldest of the group, to help her mother.

Hence, for all this, it is not unlikely that María looked for a new port in Barcelona. In the Convent of the Sanjuanistas and guided by don Manuel de Montolíu, who was, at that time, prefect of the Estate that the Sanjuanistas had in Villafranca? This cannot be

excluded just like that, as they had, effectively, quite a strong influence and value in Villafranca of that period.

There are, however, few positive data to affirm it. There is no documentary evidence of the period. She does not appear concretely in any of the lists of the religious of this convent in Barcelona, during those years. And there were several lists. And the argument that in this list only the religious of "the Complete Cross" figure, does not hold, as in these lists those of "Half Cross" also appear, but not María Rafols.

The data of a presence of the Mother in the Sanjuanistas reach us, yes, by a tradition. But this tradition is not written till the beginnings of the XXth century. When Fr. Calasanz Rabaza writes the first biography of the Foundress of the Annes, the only data he manages to collect is that someone had heard Doña Raimundo de Pont y Travy, prioress of the Sanjuanistas, who died in 1893, say that she, in turn had heard when she entered the convent in 1833 that "some ladies of that community had left for a new foundation". But later – in 1930 and when the prestige of Mother Rafols had risen to the clouds – the testimonies become more precise and it is assured that it was precisely María Rafols who presided over this foundation and that they went towards Zaragoza. But are we not falling into the old tendency of all the villages that want to attribute to themselves the origin of the Saints and of the great figures? We all tend to believe what honours us.

However, traditions never arise from nothing. And it is not impossible that there is some truth in this and that María Rafols would be at least for some time among the Sanjuanistas, maybe just as a pupil, with the young girls who we know accompanied many of the noble ladies of that period who formed part of the group of Sanjuanistas of "the Complete Cross".

If she was there, it's very probable that the sentiments of the young María would be divided. On one hand, she would like the military style of those religious who know to join prayer to their surrender to the sick and who, above all, in cases of war or plague,

voluntarily gave themselves to assist the wounded or those with contagious disease, sacrificing willingly, their life on the altar of charity. Actually, to the three vows common to all religious, they added a fourth vow "that is to serve every day of their lives, the sick religious men and women and the poor of Jesus Christ". Would the famous fourth vow that would mean so much to the Annes in the future have its origin here?

Much less comfortable they must have felt on the other hand, with that excision that divided the religious into two groups, so separated, those of the Complete Cross (of noble lineage, who had to demonstrate it with expedients) and those of the Half Cross, who "dedicated themselves with solemn vows to the service of the religious Ladies, helping them and ministering to them in the pious works with which they served the poor of Jesus Christ". Such distinctions would never figure in the community María Rafols would preside over, neither did they fit into her spiritual style in any manner. And neither would she have been happy with the fact – certified by many details – that in that period there was no community life in that convent, permitting them a wide field of independence, with servants, helpers and waitresses of the religious nobles who lived in it. This style of life was, besides, very frequent in the period and Fr. Claret would have to fight very hard against it in later decades: "I observed in all the towns – he writes after a trip through Andalucia – that in the majority of the convents there was no community life, but private. For example, in Seville there are actually 20 convents of nuns: in five, community life is observed and in 15 it is private life. Those who have dealt with nuns know that it is impossible that there be perfection in that community that does not maintain a community life." And the same Claret even adduces the letter of a religious lady who asked him to remove her "from this hell. It is not a convent, it is a neighbourhood house: here there is no tranquillity, it is a real labyrinth". We do not, naturally, attribute this "slackening" to the convent of Barcelona, which in that period, lived a high climate of virtue; but it is evident that their style of life was not what María Rafols would imprint on her Zaragozan foundation.

There are, on the other hand, two written documents that oblige us to doubt whether María Rafols was there at least the entire ten years of her "hidden life".

The first is the one found by J.I.Tellechea (and till today unpublished), in which, in 1812, on the occasion of one of the deepest crises of the Zaragozan Institution, María Rafols is at the point of abandoning it and asks for permission from the Sitiada to transfer herself to the Teaching Religious of Zaragoza, suggesting that she had relations with them in Barcelona. What type of relations were these? Was it with them that María Rafols was educated and initially professed with them? Nothing can be really constructed over this evidence.

More showy and orienting is – according to my point of view – another documented fact. This time it comes from the Hospital of Huesca, twin foundation of the Zaragozan one and piloted, like this one, by Fr. Bonal. In its archive we found an Act of the 13th September 1831 in which the Board of Directors of the House indicates that the scarcity of means is such that the Hospital will have to send away two of the five Sisters who worked there and that "the Board being desirous of doing it with the decorum that they merited, made it known to the Sitiada for them to have a meeting of the community and to affirm that they would go back to where they came from". This writ is replied to on the 29th of September with another writ in which it is manifested "that the first Sisters did not come from any community, but it was their director, Juan Bonal who kept collecting them from various points and giving them the habit in various places; that is, there was no common centre from where they left to come here, nor was there anywhere to go to in an extraordinary case like the actual one".

After this information, would it be too daring to believe that the Zaragozan group and María Rafols' hospital vocation itself has had its origin in the different forms of Fraternities in which Fr. Bonal moved – those of the Hospital of Santa Cruz of Barcelona or the foundations of Mataró, Cervera or Valls, without excluding of

course, a certain more juvenile period in the house of the Sanjuanistas? In my opinion – and till new data appears – this would be the true path.

### The birth of the "Fraternities" of Cataluña

The Church is a very special community, called to thwart always those who come near it to measure it with human barometers. Because in it, all kinds of paradoxes could arise. It is true that on the whole it did not know to measure the spectacular turn that was being produced in the world; it is true that in the field of ideas it got left behind proportionately in these decades, that practically were not restored till Vatican II; it is true also that it permitted its flags being snatched – liberty, equality, fraternity among men – that were originally theirs; and it is also true that this end of the century lived with a mediocre lack of force that did not seem to correspond to the torment that hovered over it, limiting itself to postures cheaply condemning or defensive. But an observer, who blinds himself, will have to recognise that precisely in these years, apparently mediocre, a thousand new bonfires of charity burst forth.

Paul VI – who possessed such a profound historic vision – asked himself on a certain occasion what the Church of the future would respond to those who asked him where it was in the dramatic hours of our contemporary history, what she was doing while the world lived such a brutal change of customs as ours. And Paul VI dreamt that he could then respond: "The Church loved". While the world fought for power, the Church loved. While men argued over new ideas, the Church loved. While we were reaching the Moon and we were cutting across the Universe, the Church loved.

This affirmation is perfectly valid for the Spain and Cataluña of the end of the XVIIIth century: The Church, which delayed almost a whole one century in facing the great intellectual problems of non-belief, was still loving. The Church, which presented itself very late at the table of social ideas, was dedicated to love with the zeal of every day of so many of its children. Of the best at least.

What I write is not rhetoric. In those years we lacked great theologians, in politics we bet on the horses that lost, we made a mistake uniting ourselves to all the institutions that were going down, we were afraid of democracy that was approaching as though it were a demon instead of discovering the Christian roots it had in its core. We made a mistake in everything or almost everything. Except in charity. The clever ones failed. The saints functioned. We didn't have great geniuses. But a whole network of magnificent initiatives of love arose. The Church was weak in the Universities and Seminaries; it lost the battle of the book and the newspaper. But it knew to be at the side of those who suffered, it lived in this period, perhaps with greater passion than ever, like a true Church of the poor.

It would perhaps be beautiful to paint María Rafols as a genius who shone solitary on high. But that would not be the truth. The beautiful thing about her destiny and her vocation is that it was one more bonfire among the many bonfires that Grace lit in those years in Cataluña and Aragon. There are hours, yes, in her life when it seems she is elevated like a glorious star of heroism. But her true glory is above all in the hours of everyday struggle, together with her Sisters and together with many other Christians, more or less anonymous, who during those decades, held the torch in their hands, the honour of Christianity. In the time of the Popes who – with few exceptions – did not shine for their clarity of comprehension of the world in which they lived, in a century in which theology vegetates, it is beneficence that “saves the honour” of the Church, which demonstrates that the best of the Gospel – charity – is not asleep. It is literally as if the Holy Spirit had blown on the large bonfire of Cataluña to show that faith was much more alive than what the ash of mediocrity made one believe.

Because in this period, there is a bubbling up of initiatives in Cataluña, which would precede the many foundations of the second half of the XIXth century by half a century, when they would appear in Spain, with an authentic Court of Saints and Holy Founders. Only between 1850 and 1868, 20 feminine foundations dedicated to

beneficence or to education surged, almost one every year. María Rafols would have the fortune of being, almost the only one among the first ones, who gave true consistency to her enterprise born in the first decades of the century. Then, after the standard bearer, will come the whole army.

The first spark has arrived from France and arises from a bonfire that kick-starts from Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. But it will light in national and indigenous forms.

This is because the theme of beneficence has very special tones in the whole history of Spain. They are perhaps mentioned in the famous quatrain. It is related that in the XVIIth century an illustrious “nouveau riche”, after having squeezed and exploited all the people of his locality during decades, decided, as a sign of generosity, to invest a good part of his “modest savings” in constructing a gigantic hospital for the poor of the town. And on the day of the inauguration this was written on the commemorative tablet:

*“In proof of charity  
the illustrious Juan de Robles  
constructed this Hospital”*

To which an anonymous hand added the fourth little verse, complete with rhyme:

*Because before, he made the poor.*

Thus Spanish Catholicism has always known how to maintain injustice and beneficence very united, and surprisingly, frequently they were the same hands that made the wound and that put the bandage. In others – and this is the glory of the best ones – was a third hand, which in a country of open wounds contributed the only thing it had: a little love.

What is certain is that Spanish geography was always covered with hospitals and that the real problem was, more than their lack, their multiplication and the misery in which the majority – competing with each other – lived. At the beginning of the XIXth century we have in Spain of 7,347 houses of charity, 2,231 hospitals,

106 hospices, 67 asylums of foundling children, all this in a nation of ten million inhabitants. In some cities with a few thousand inhabitants, like Avila, we know that there were five hospitals, each one with its sponsorship, with its Board, with its Administrator, with its patients and doctors, with an impressive multiplication of expenses that could be avoided with a minimum of collaboration. But we are talking about institutions that “honoured” the family of the Founders, even though many of these foundations were already lost in time and did not produce any income at all.

By all this, it will be understood that the enlightened fought this type of institution. And we would be wrong to see in all their criticism and even sale of church lands, a simple attack on the Church. It was certain that beneficence needed urgent reform during that period. Frequently though it occurred, – as is common – that the “reformers” attack the weakest more and their reform would begin precisely where it was least necessary. Something very similar to what is happening today in several countries. Because, surprisingly, that beginning of the XIXth century was like what we live today with regard to hospitality. Then a certain type of transit from private to public beneficence was born, from charity to philanthropy, from hospitals directed by Boards of nobles and Bishops to management of the more democratic type governed by municipalities or deputations. At this time, while the reformers who had grand “ideas” about improving health abounded, and who finally didn’t reform anything even though they made many changes, was when a series of initiatives of the best evangelical roots surged, which do not sound like great reforms, but which put their hand on the patient to relieve his pain and the everyday dirt.

St Vincent de Paul had already lighted the first great bonfire almost two centuries ago in France, but, surprisingly, the Daughters of Charity had not managed to penetrate into Spain. There is a profound reason for this: the Boards that directed the Spanish hospitals had a very deep-rooted idea that they were the ones who truly held the reins. And they sharply opposed the Daughters of Charity being subject to and dependent on the superior in Paris,

as they wanted. Besides, at that first moment the idea of a religious attending to male patients and much less when it concerned venereal diseases so extended in Spain at that time was still not digestible in Spain. This is the reason why we do not see them reach the Hospital of Barcelona till 1790, and even there, the problems that arose for this reason, sent them towards Lérida, Reus and Barbastro.

There is in Barcelona, an intense movement of charity during this period. In 1784, a group of artisans, accustomed to assisting the sick in their free time, go to the Board of the Barcelona Hospital of Santa Cruz to manifest their desire to “leave all the cares of this world, to employ themselves fully in the care of the poor sick”. The group is directed by Jaime Sayrols, a clothes shopkeeper. And in the group there are weavers, cord makers, druggists, carpenters, wax chandlers, etc. When making their request, they did not put any condition whatsoever; they place themselves completely at the disposition of the Board. Later we will find something similar with reference to the Hospice of Barcelona.

In both cases the Board sees the offer as showers from heaven. Fortunately – from their point of view –, these groups have no intention of forming a stable body or Congregation, rather simply substituting hired paid servants for others who are voluntary and free. And the Board takes great care to fix the conditions well: the exercise of charity will be most free, which can be taken today and left tomorrow. They will not be tied down to any vow. The admission or the expulsion of the Brothers will depend fully on the Board. They would have neither Superior, nor would they pray any prayers, nor can they acquire or have any common property. They could eat together, “but without any shadow or appearance of community or anything that looks like it”. They will not wear any religious habit, “because one of the signs that most accredits the distinction of some body or Brotherhood is the singularity of the dress”; they will only have a cord round their waist and the shield of the Royal Hospice on their breast. The spiritual exercises will always be done in the Chapel, but they will not be presided over by a Priest in charge of distributing duties, because this is

“what is most revolting to the idea that they do not form or manage to form a separate body”. The Directors of the Hospice wanted, as can be seen, to prick and go ahead. They did manage, yes, to dominate the group, but, at the same time, it sapped away all form of stability and organization. From here these two institutions – and several others that arose during these years: the hospitals of Mataró, San Jaime de Olot, Cervera, Figueras and Tarragona – lived in this tension between the steel corset that the Boards put on them obligatorily and the inevitable tendency to autonomy and institution that every group experiences. Probably, a certain flow and reflow of these institutions, the change of persons, the fact that we see some names appear and disappear in diverse institutions is due to this tension. It is, I think, something quite similar to what happens in our century with some types of Basic Communities: the fervour is permanent, but the persons or forms of organization are not. And this is how Barcelona – according to the statement of Tellechea – “kept getting converted into a nursery of vocations, into a school of preparation; it was not difficult that it kept getting converted into a kind of Mother-House of the different fraternities” in spite of the pressure of the Boards of the hospitals. Did María Rafols together with her companions arise from this nursery? This is what is most probable. It is, at least, where they will spend their last months or years before leaving for Zaragoza, they will come to know their colleagues there, the first group will begin to love each other there, it is there where they will make their religious profession. And this in one or several of those fraternities that interchange their members. But perhaps very especially in those of Valls and Cervera. Because it is here that two fundamental names of our story appear: Don Jaime Cessat and Don Juan Bonal, two colossi of the spirit who will suffice to fill a hundred mediocre persons with light.



#### IV. A GIANT NAMED JUAN

On the 28th of December 1929 – perhaps because it was the Day of the Holy Innocents – the municipality of Zaragoza took a surprising and magnificent decision. On the eve of this date Mosén Juan Bonal had been declared “Hero of the Sieges” and the next day, the 29th, was the inauguration of a street in his memory, the commemorative stone of which was even engraved. But here someone pointed out that the street chosen was not sufficiently worthy of such a great personage and it was opted to delay this feast and dedicate to him “one of the principal streets of the new extension, as indicative of the importance of the heroic priest”. It must have been more – as I have already indicated – a dirty trick of the date (Translator’s note: Inocente – 28<sup>th</sup> December is like April Fools Day – jokes are played on each other) because fifty-two years later the Zaragozaan municipality has still not found a street sufficiently worthy of the heroic priest.

Fortunately, in those years gone by, something much more important had been dedicated to Fr. Bonal: I’m referring to two impressive volumes of documents – and the edition of another two is expected – that the patience and the hard work of José Ignacio Tellechea has managed to unearth from here and there. From here, the figure of a colossus of charity, of one of these personages who would be, on his own, capable of saving a century, arises powerful and enormous.

I will leave the word to the investigator: “The life of Bonal flows without pause, at the service of the sick, or better, it is consumed on the altar of charity, of an authentically heroic charity. If this heroism is manifest apparently with more splendour in moments that seem to demand, up to the last breath of human possibilities, as were those of the Sieges, it isn’t less in the long years of peace that followed that famous journal of daily events

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Fortunately, in those years gone by, something much more important had been dedicated to Fr. Bonal: I’m referring to two impressive volumes of documents – and the edition of another two is expected – that the patience and the hard work of José Ignacio Tellechea has managed to unearth from here and there. From here, the figure of a colossus of charity, of one of these personages who would be, on his own, capable of saving a century, arises powerful and enormous.

I will leave the word to the investigator: “The life of Bonal flows without pause, at the service of the sick, or better, it is consumed on the altar of charity, of an authentically heroic charity. If this heroism is manifest apparently with more splendour in moments that seem to demand, up to the last breath of human possibilities, as were those of the Sieges, it isn’t less in the long years of peace that followed that famous journal of daily events

in the annals of the Immortal City. Only with heroism could one assist the prisoners of Torrero affected by the plague, beg for alms on the Zaragoza streets, go to villages – some of them miserable – looking for alms, without rejecting the offers of even the most modest, like rags for bandages and yarn for the linen. Only with heroism could one suffer discomfort, humiliations, inclemencies of the weather, dangers of bandits, exact rendering of accounts, separation from the Fraternity founded by him, even detentions and seizure of the alms collected. No one can guess the heroism that is contained in these unending lists of towns and villages traversed by him, in which only – and by obligation – up to the last real or maravedí (old Spanish currency) collected or spent is conscientiously registered, while the quota of fatigue, of pain and of contempt that such a difficult ministry supposed is silenced, and so is the spiritual radiation that implies preaching and, above all, the long hours spent in the semi-darkness of the confessionals. There exists heroism of the shining and pretentious type and another silent and without sparkle. One can speak about both of them in the life of Mosén Bonal, and perhaps more of the second than of the first; at least it was what was more continuous and did not have the compensation of human glory”.

I want to stop to emphasize the latter and most important distinction, because perhaps both Fr. Bonal and Mother Rafols have been victims of a false concept of heroism. When their two names were rediscovered at the beginning of the century – at a time of romantic exaltation – and in the shadow of the centenary festivities of the Sieges, both were seen surrounded by haloed paths which, even though important, it is most likely that they were not theirs or – at least – not mainly theirs. With it their figures became exposed to a phenomenon of “reductionism”, elevated to the category of statues or of myths, twins of Agustina of Aragón and of Palafox. And it is certain that both shone in the Sieges. But their most important brilliance was in obscurity, in their daily struggle for a charity that does not shine, a charity for which only the ardent courage of the hour is not sufficient – short-term courage which

even very mediocre souls are capable of having in determined circumstances under the fire of enthusiasm or anger –, but rather, this other long-term courage of loving every day, during months, years, decades. It has been said a thousand times that we Spanish are magnificent when it comes to fighting and dying. Unfortunately, we are not the same when it comes to loving and living day after day. Fortunately, Juan and María, who knew to be ardent like all Spanish at a determined historical moment, also knew – before and after – to continue loving as the man and woman of God that they were. And it is this daily bonfire – far more important than the other – that draws their true faces.

Juan Bonal does not appear in his letters and writings as a luminary of intelligence. Even his diagnosis of the evils that his world traverses is a little short sighted. But he was instead, a priest with a listening heart.

There was a time, however, when his life seemed to want to be guided along the paths of culture. Even as a layperson he studied philosophy at the University of Huesca and, without concluding his studies, did and passed his first Grammar competitive exam in the towns of Ripoll and San Pedro, in which he exercised teaching activities. But the priestly vocation was already burning within him. And he renounced his professorship “so as not to abandon his career”. He studied Theology with the Dominicans at Barcelona, and Fortune (which is the name we give to Providence when we do not dare to call It by its real name) took him to conclude his studies in Zaragoza, where he completed his studies in Theology and Ecclesiastical History. At various times he acted in public celebrations in Zaragoza. It is very probable that in this period he would make ties that would later bring him to this Aragonese city that would be the centre of his fundamental apostolate.

But his literary dreams hadn't died yet. During these years he appeared once again for the competitive exams of Grammar in Reus and was conferred with the Academic Degree in this town, where he would live for seven years dedicated to teaching.

Dedicated? Not entirely. Documents of the period tell us that, “besides complete discharge of duties of teaching of youth, he was occupied – during these seven years in Reus –, as much as his tasks permitted him, visiting prisoners and the sick of the Holy Hospital, edifying the public; and in the last five years, when he was already a priest, besides those already mentioned and other acts of beneficence, he dedicated himself to instructing forsaken children and abandoned maidens”, to which is added “numerous confessions for the discharge of which he did not give way to fatigue and overcame several obstacles that normally presented themselves in such holy exercises”.

Bonal – as Tellechea affirms – “was not a priest of Mass and Stew pot, contented with his little canonry or professorship”. On the contrary: even before being a priest he lived to the full his vocation of beneficence: in the prisons and in the hospitals is where he had discovered the misery of his time. And rather than dedicating himself to vegetating or to stringing together pompous sounding witty sermons against the impiety of his times – as was usual among the clerics of the period –, Bonal responded with what he had: with his hands, with his surrender of every day, at the service of the “least” of the Gospel. Even later, thinking that teaching robbed his time, and discovering his true vocation, he completely renounces his teaching post and goes on, as vicar, to the hospital of Santa Cruz of Barcelona. We are now in March 1804.

It is, as we have already indicated, peak time for the hospitals of Cataluña, and Bonal would simply have to add his flame to the many that are already burning in the Principedom.

His meeting with a person who would be his great friend and spiritual director and apostolic model, Don Jaime Cessat belongs to this period. In 1800 Bonal was thirty-one years old. Cessat – after a period as Chamberlain of the Archbishop of Tarragona, Armañá – was the parish priest of Valls from 1786.

In 1798 we find them committing themselves with a notarial act to defray the expenses of construction and equipment of a

hospital for assistance to the sick with no resources, mainly inhabitants of Valls. A promise they would fulfil in two years.

But the problem was not the construction of the hospital, rather, it was who to put in charge of management and tasks. From what we know, the early intention of Doctor Cessat was that of getting the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, the Saint to whom he had limitless devotion and admiration. But soon the same problem, the same difficulty arose as in other places: the municipality of Valls opposed the admission of an autonomous community, for which Doctor Cessat had – God continues to write straight with crooked lines – to get a domestic solution: to place the hospital in the charge of three Vallesan maidens “for the time being and till the establishment of the Sisters of Charity which he hoped to achieve, was conceded”.

The names of these three Vallesan maidens should remain on record here, because they were the origin of the great bonfire: Paula Domingo, Teresa Bainages, and Josefa Montserrat. The three were – as required by the rule that was then elaborated – “women, maidens or widows of accredited virtue, conduct and sufficient instruction for the discharge of their work”. They – and the four that had been added the next year – “animated by the spirit of charity, received no salary of any kind for their work, even though they were maintained by the hospital”.

The first documents on this foundation – and on the two that would soon arise in Cervera – show that, even though their public organization produced an impression of being provisional, in the mind of Doctor Cessat there was already the idea of a truly institutionalised Congregation. Its rules are those of a true Institute. It talks about a Superior who was elected; of the assistant superior, of meetings and acts of community; of the acquisition of their own patrimony; the duties of the Novice Mistress are described minutely as also the mode of admission of new candidates. And there is not the slightest allusion to the intervention of the administrative boards of the hospitals. Spiritual inspiration? Evidently Vincentine but

freely interpreted. Dr. Cessat knows very well from which fountains he is drinking, but he acts like a true founder.

There is more: Dr. Cessat is conscious of the weakness that atomisation gives to these diverse communities and dreams of a fusion of all of them under a Superior General. He even draws up a common stamp for all the fraternities, with the word "Spain" as its logo.

What is the role of Fr. Bonal in this? That of colleague, counsellor, co-founder, as you please. Cessat consults with him for everything and Bonal himself acts – bringing and taking religious – like a true moral authority on all of them. In this sense, the letter of Cessat to Bonal on the 11th of October 1808, in which he dialogues about the main problems of the future organization of the common dream, is decisive. Bonal is even seen as the champion of the idea of union among the communities that "needed more solid bases than those they had till now".

"The project of uniformity in all the fraternities – writes Cessat to Bonal – I consider very important, but not less arduous. I do not know if you understand uniformity as all those of Spain or only among those of the Kingdom of Aragón and Province of Cataluña. If it is the first, it will be the case of the Sisters having a Superior General in Madrid, who would be so during her life and on her death, one of the superiors of the houses of each province would meet there to name a new superior general; and that the naming of the one who should go, would fall on the superior of each province who was oldest in the Fraternity, with the houses of the Province paying for the expenses of her trip."

This dream – already cherished in all its details – would never ever be fulfilled. And, effectively, many of those foundations would fade away. Others on the other hand, would give abundant fruit. Among them, like the plant of the grain of mustard, one of the many small ones that had just been born in Zaragoza would be one day converted into a gigantic tree.



## V. THE HOUSE OF THE SICK OF THE CITY AND OF THE WORLD

"Domus Infirmorum Urbis et Orbis": this proud title still stands today on the iron railings that surround the Hospital of Nuestra Señora de Gracia. And truly it does not lack meaning, at least in the time that our story is being related. Because the Royal Hospital of Zaragoza was at that time, one of the most important institutions of the whole of Europe, which is like saying, of the whole world.

Founded in 1425 by Alfonso V, at the request of the Council of the Zaragozan University, it justly received, the title of "royal", as the king wanted to figure as its "author, founder, rector and protector". Loved by the Catholic Kings first, afterwards personally visited by Charles V and protected by Felipe II, this great Hospital reaches its greatest moment of glory when in the War of Succession, it lent crucial help to the army of Felipe V – defeated near Zaragoza – and which went out of its way to help the Hospital in gratitude, in moments in which the situation was really precarious.

Before it, kings and popes had honoured it with all kinds of titles. From Rome it was condecorated with the laurel of the Unicorn's Horn; Pope Clement VII conceded to all the fraternities of the same and all those who helped in its conservation "all the plenary and partial privileges, indults, exemptions, liberties, immunities, indulgences" that any of their predecessors would have conceded to the most important institutions or Roman basilicas.

Felipe V inclined towards practical help. And conceded to the Hospital very succulent taxes on the sale of meats or the manufacture of the soap of the district; it was given exclusive rights on the printing of the alphabet primer, calendars, pass books, catechisms, prayer books and gazettes. Even more, they were conceded the right to impose taxes on all the "games of chance" and of ball, as also the organizing of raffles of jewels and the famous Raffle of the

Fig. All this apart from lands, houses and even some oil mills. From this the Hospital got an income of more than 1,076,000 reales of vellón (old small Spanish currency) annually, not counting what the generosity of the inhabitants of Zaragoza and Aragón would like to leave in their Wills, as “it was the custom that everyone before dying, would leave some legacy or establish some income in favour of the Hospital of Nuestra Señora de Gracia, till the point that it became *obligatory* for all the notaries to ask those who were making their will if they were leaving something for the Holy Hospital”. The statutes of Aragon of the beginning of the XXth century confirm this notarial obligation.

With all this, it is clear that we are talking about a centre that was literally the ‘apple of the eye’ of Aragón and Zaragoza, for which reason the Hospital never lacked anything. Fr. Jerónimo Román called it “the biggest house there is in Christianity” and this was no exaggeration.

Its gigantic structure – of which not a single stone exists today, after the fire and its destruction in 1808 – occupied an entire quarter and covered practically all the streets that today go from el Coso till the Church of Santa Engracia, which was joined to the great Hospital. In its charming patio of arches – of which a few drawings have remained – the welcoming of the Sisters that we will talk about in the next chapter is celebrated. Around it came up halls and more halls, capable of sheltering simultaneously more than 2,000 patients, even though at the time of the plague or in the first Siege of Zaragoza it received up to 6,000. It had special pavilions for surgery, for those afflicted with ring-worm, for foundlings, for patients with venereal diseases and, above all, for what was their great speciality, which gave it fame among the European doctors: attention to the demented and mentally ill.

The role that the Hospital played in the city will be more easily understood if one bears in mind that annually more than 10 per cent of the Zaragozan population passed through it, dramatic sign of the very bad sanitary state of that period. Because Zaragoza –

in spite of its enormous importance, being as it was the fifth town of the nation, and being situated on the same centre of communication as Madrid-Barcelona-Valencia-Bilbao – was at that time a small city. The 28,000 inhabitants that it had in the XVIIth century remained almost stable till 1750. In 1800 it went up to about 43,000 and in 1900 it had even reached almost 100,000. The giddy increase of the city is really, very recent.

Just think what this could mean: in a city of 43,000 inhabitants, a hospital through which 6,000 to 8,000 patients passed every year, reaching 12,000 in the time of epidemics.

Fortunately, the Hospital had a magnificent organization that started right from 1681 when Friar Pedro Tris, Bishop of Albarracín, wrote its rules. In them, three orders of management were established: the highest, in charge of the economic aspects and formed by a group of nobles and ecclesiastics presided over by the Archbishop of the city; – the one formed by a group of “passioneros”, in charge of the spiritual; and the medical, formed by a huge body of physicians and surgeons. To measure how fine was the work in all these fields let us remind ourselves that some of the confessors and passioneros were required to know Italian, French and Basque so that they could attend to the sick in these language groups. And the body of physicians and surgeons was formed in 1785 by five master surgeons, two doctors and two certificate holders who did night-duty, apart from an abundant group of serving young men.

But like the famous statue of Nebuchadnezzar, the magnificent edifice of the Hospital had its feet of mud: it was precisely this group of serving young men attending to the patients who annulled the enormous good will of those who managed the famous institution. And, in fact, behind a magnificent facade, the Hospital was very far from being a marvel in its daily functioning. Without reaching the dismal state of many other institutions of beneficence of the period – that either languished as sad “houses for the dying” or had been converted into simple brothels –, in the one of Zaragoza, deceit, disorder and vagrancy had made its lodging.

See for example, the report that the Directors of the Seminary of San Carlos sent to the Count of Sástago referring precisely to the years before the arrival of the Sisters:

“So as to inform Your Excellency with the ingenuity and truth proper to our character, it has been necessary for us to go back with our imagination to the time before the admission of the Sisters in this Holy House and to renew in our memory, the scant lack of diligence and cleanliness of its servants and their scandals and of the entrants that they permitted: well, one could hardly enter the said hospital without bumping into immodest men and women in the passages and the rooms, specially in the surgery, talking in the corners, or seated for long hours on the beds of some of the less ill women patients. A confessor could hardly sit at the head of a patient; he would have to take great care so as not to dirty his clothes with the waters and the filth of the floor or get insects from their beds; this over and above the offensive stench that these and the rooms gave out. We could hardly preach in quiet silence and with regular attention, whether to the patients, and more specifically to the servants, who at times were, in the view of the preacher eating and drinking, others smoking and talking, and others even playing cards and making merry. The repeated and many complaints of the patients were innumerable; they could hardly get the servants to make them a cup of chocolate or some other extraordinary trifle, without gratifying them with some money or making some other sacrifice of the misery they endured; and even in the things in which they help them in the house, we cannot help but tell about the rash haste and the bad way in which they did the distribution, throwing the bread, eggs, meat or sponge cake that was theirs on the beds and passing in front of them with the soup, without trying to get those with little or no appetite to drink it; leave alone the trading of rations and the substitution of the same by money or sweets, and the frequency with which they were cheated outright by the servants or the outsiders; and doing away with the basic soup, its cooking or seasoning, about which the patients frequently complained; all this, Sir, despite the most exacting vigilance.”

This living portrait introduces us, better than anything else, to the real climate in which our story was lived out: a world of rogues and of thieves, that palpitated on the other side of the venerable face of a magnificent institution. And this even though it had such vigilant, such realistic and dedicated vigilants like the Count of Sástago, Don Vicente Fernandez of Córdoba himself to whom the report just cited was addressed.

A second step in the knowledge of this reality will be offered to us in a passionate memorial of the Count of Sástago himself, found recently and still unedited, in which, all through the 40 manuscript sheets, he tries to summarize all the wide experience of forty years of working in the world of hospitals. I will summarize some of the most significant paragraphs (leaving for another place the two passionate pages which in this same memorial are dedicated to the Sisters of Charity).

The report begins with a curious and passionate defence of the need for hospitals, given the fact that precisely in this period their convenience began to be doubted by men of the calibre of Jovellanos himself:

“The poor and ill citizen is one of the objects of more importance, as, more than being the art of superior charity, he is most useful to religion, politics and to the State, because he cannot help himself. Without hospitals, how many would die without spiritual and temporal assistance? How many would we find dead in the streets and in the most fetid corners of the houses if we did not have the help of the hospitals? I confess that in part, this opinion that considers them useless and even detrimental, as they are believed to be protectors of vagrancy and of mendacity is certain, and by this opinion the Hospital will not be lacking for me. If the faithful fulfilled their obligation of assisting and looking after the sick, helping the poor and receiving the pilgrim, according to the works of mercy... this opinion is very good... in word. But, what are we men? If we do our duty so badly, and we do not carry out the obligations that are of interest to us ourselves, how are we going to do our duty to our neighbour?”

After defending the need for hospitals, he goes on to trace a portrait of those who go to them:

“Nobody is unaware that hospitals are only going to take care of those who have no other means, people weakened by their misery, vagabonds, those without work or benefice and the vicious and voluntary sick, these are the most... Most of those who go to a hospital have never known a bed, white bread and meat. This is like a gift and it makes them abuse their stay, it makes them pretend to have accidents, well, all these people know to have fever at the time that it is convenient to them, they complain of a pain that cannot be seen and which is only checked knowing the strategies of these people. Many examples can be cited, but I will give only two: a venerable old man who we could not get to leave the hospital, even though he was well; with the pretext of facilitating his cure I ordered that his famous beard which reached his chest be shaved. As soon as he saw the operation that was going to be done, he took his clothes and ran away to save his right to have his beard. Another with four or five years of supposed sciatic pain, ran away very fast when an injection was going to be given in the part that was painning him. The hospitals are full of this kind of patient”.

Later we will refer to what he calls “gazapos”, tramps in moral matters between the patient and the visitors. “How can one avoid Peter saying he is the husband of the woman of number 5, whereas she is really his mistress or his concubine? How can one check if woman N. is the wife of patient N? And even like this, how can one avoid that the wife of Peter looks indecently at the patient on the bed at the side?” “These people – the visitors – are the ones who rob or exchange the rations of the patients and of the Hospital. There is no dearth of employees who do the same. And these are the rations that are served rotten or with worms, and they keep the fresh ones for themselves.” “There are patients who sell their ration of bread or meat for an onion, a couple of cigarettes or an extra drink of wine.”

He then underlines the struggle for cleanliness in the hospital of Zaragoza: “Because in this Hospital no new patient entered into

the bed of another, without even the mattress having been washed. A good meat soup, the best wine of the town, a bread so good that it was eaten by the canons, when has a poor person ever had this? But even like this they had the guts to complain, many times about this very thing and so unjustly that in many of the complaints it was made to be believed that the wine was changed and they praised the very ones they had despised: these are the hospitable ones.”

What was very serious was the problem of the mentally ill in which the Hospital specialized: “There are mentally ill who pretend to be so, many times to flee from the punishment their crimes merit; others are driven to insanity by their wives, their husbands or their presumed heirs. The evil meted out to those unfortunate persons was so evident and so very precise that, it is unbelievable; it made a man mad even if he wasn’t so. All the precautions taken by a body dedicated to this care was not enough to prevent these victims from experiencing this evil. The declaration of the doctor, the justification of the mayor and the corroboration of the priest, – without these documents no one was admitted. And how many strings have I seen attached to these documents? I have seen an infinite number of false documents, absolutely false, in which they are declared mad so easily, with the good conscience of freeing themselves of impertinences, expenses and cares, when only genius or just resentment is made madness. It is difficult to believe the scorn and disdain with which the mentally ill were treated even by the most interested.”

The Count continues with this same realism portraying “the horrendous evils committed in all the hospitals”: “Feigned illness hospitalization is venial sin. Visit and dress wounds in minutes is too much of zeal for the hospital, the *quid pro quo* of the pharmacy, bread and wine for the money they get, the ripping of linen for bandages and sanitary towels; robbery of all this is almost unascertainable; bread is short, the meat ration the same, the wine is diluted in a deal to produce five times more; not giving the patients the medicines at the correct time, not dressing the wounds, making fun of them, despising them, causing inconveniences and even being

struck by the practitioners, is more effective than Christian charity. I have seen them make a prescription for a dead person; rob a dying person and counting him as healthy for his ration. And this, where? In the Hospital that I persuade myself had the best administration in the whole of Europe.”

I believe this magnificent document – for its realism, its good sense – situates better than anything else what we are now going to relate. A man like this Count of Sástago – whose Christian spirit made him conclude his long report with these beautiful words: “If my humble jottings are of the most minimum relief to a poor patient, it will be for me great glory”, to which he adds the touch of humour by saying that he hopes for “the compassion of whoever reads my patter”- he could not be content with the situation that was so clearly seen in that Hospital, theoretically a colossus, but really a nest of villainy and misery.

Where was the solution? The directors of the Hospital of Nuestra Señora de Gracia in Zaragoza were able to see it with clarity: so much misery could only be counterbalanced by much charity. There is no salary in the world that, in the long run, could compensate for the surrender of a whole lifetime to combat, day and night, such great moral and material poverty as was accumulated over there. Only a great love could make it tolerable. They would have to, hence, look for people – if there are such – who would as a vocation and not for money, dedicate themselves to the sick. And this is how the Hospital Directors went out in search of a religious group, an Institution that would like to take charge of converting the mired feet of its great enterprise in to a solid base of love.

This would not be the task of just one day. In 1790 we already have documentation of this search. Effectively, in November of that year, the Zaragozan Board wrote to the administrators of the Hospital of Santa Cruz of Barcelona asking them “to kindly do us the favour of informing us the advantages experienced, after the establishment of the Society of honest maidens who, united in charity, dedicated themselves to the care and assistance of sick

women and foundling children; so that we may (instructed by that practice) examine whether it be convenient, in this one that is in our care, to set-up a similar establishment”.

The administrators of Barcelona would respond “that they were sure about this society; but it was still the beginning and without a number sufficient to cater to all the works and departments to which they should be destined. Also that, when the new ones were admitted, they should be with the spirit and practice that could be acquired, directed by the six who had experience with the Sisters of Charity in Paris, and would thus have been formed with their statutes and rules. In this case they would take care of informing us about everything, according to what they thought convenient”.

This courteous postponement makes the Zaragozans direct themselves to other ports. In Madrid they investigate the group called the Obregones, to attend to the male wards. And they begin contacts, for the women, with the Sisters of the Sabiduría of La Rochela. “And the pacts for their admission were already cast – says a document of 1816 – and some of the actual directors preserve the idea of having seen in the books of those years many replies regarding the matter with a Vicar General who the Bishop of La Rochela had in Madrid, who was like an attorney of the religious who they thought of bringing, but they do not remember why this thought was entirely abandoned.” Today we can know why: in the Constitutions of this Congregation their strong sense of independence appears very clear, which would forcibly clash with the conditions that hospitals of Spain of the period usually put to those who worked in them. “If the administrators of the hospital – says a clause of these Constitutions – want to oblige them to do away with some of the essential rules of the Institute, they should not agree and by informing first the superiors, be ready to leave it.”

This was the situation. They had to wait for the Catalan experience of the Fraternities to mature. This would occur some years later. In 1804, Mosén Bonal could count on abundant fruit in his nursery. Around his confessional – wherein he spent hours

and hours daily – a full cluster of young souls had been emerging, whose surrender had besides been well tried out attending to the hospitals of Barcelona. They could try the great adventure of the transplant. And it is now when the letter from Zaragoza arrives.

The Administrators of the Board of the Hospital of Nuestra Señora de Gracia had not forgotten their decision to prop up their centre with the base of a religious group devoted to the sick with love. The plague of 1803 had confirmed this need even more to them. The multiplication of those afflicted with the plague, for which it was necessary to equip even the brokers, made the order of a community that would live their surrender passionately far more urgent.

And thus, in the middle of 1804, they wrote to Mosén Bonal, who was the Vicar of the Hospital of Santa Cruz of Barcelona from March of that same year, to renew their old petition.

Thus the official documents relate: “After the Sitiada had this news – about how well the hospitals of Cataluña attended to the patients – the Administrators wrote to Cataluña and the news communicated to them about these religious corresponded to their desires. Not doubting that they could be convenient for their hospital, it was disposed that the most exemplary presbyter Don Juan Bonal, the one who visited the hospitals with the greatest zeal, who helped the sick, giving them spiritual and temporal help, and above all, catechising the youth of both sexes, and who was helped by several priests of the same Principedom in this saintly work with happy success, should come to them.”

He was, undoubtedly, the man they required. Besides, as Don Juan was a practical man and he knew very well how complicated the hospital world of his time was, he did not want to launch his daughters and sons on a badly calculated adventure. In September 1804 we find him in Zaragoza seeing with his own eyes the state of the Hospital and dialoguing at length with the administrators to arrive at a series of pacts regarding the future of the Fraternity directed by him. He stayed at the Hospital for a full month, checking

everything. And that tremendous human and economic complex did not frighten him. A man of his enterprising zeal could only be frightened by mediocrity, but neither difficulties nor pain ever detained him. He knew besides, that he could count on human material that the Hospital needed. And at the end of September, he went back to Barcelona.

What wouldn't we give now to have information on that November in the Condal City, Barcelona. The two teams were just formed there - twelve men and twelve women – who committed themselves to the adventure. Probably joined together in Spiritual Exercises, they decided – perhaps by voting, as they would do in the future – who would be at the head of both groups, and those who had not yet made their religious profession now made it.

And it is here when María Rafols appears. She is twenty-three years old, but she is a full and courageous woman. She hardly knows any Castilian Spanish, but she is a person capable of adapting herself to all circumstances. Fr. Bonal trusted her. And he was not wrong. He could write to Zaragoza: he counts with what is promised and at the beginning of December she would leave for Aragon. And there is so much joy in the hands that write this letter as in the eyes of the Zaragozan administrators who received her. With her a new drama unfolds.



## VI. IN THE SHADOW OF PILAR

The rains were very heavy that year. So much so that when Juan Bonal writes his letter to the Zaragozaan Sitiada he does not dare to specify the day of their arrival. They would do so when they were nearby. It was very difficult to travel in those times. Spain was drawing out its first network of roads and most of them were not more than muddy paths and, in winter, covered with mud. Besides, it is not easy to transport 25 persons and their belongings without having any other mode than modest mule carts. Fortunately their luggage was very little. Those twelve men and twelve women take very little more than what they wear. This is their only wealth. A crucifix covered with a perforated silver sheet on which the image of Jesus is embossed and - surprise! - an image of the Virgin of Pilar at His feet. A crucifix that came from the Sanjuanistas as tradition says? Or perhaps a crucifix prepared then, when they knew that their destiny would be Zaragoza? Or perhaps the gift of some devotee of the Virgin of Pilar and friend of the group of religious in Barcelona? We will never know. But yes, today this crucifix is the best relic of those hours. Probably the vows of the heroic group were made before it. It certainly presided over their prayers during those days.

Hard days they were. If we believe Fr. Calasanz Rabaza, the trip must have lasted one month. If we believe Don Santiago Guallar, it must have begun on the 18th of December, and lasted hence, ten days. Be that as it may, a long and difficult trip it was. It was not easy to find, even though it be only for ten days, lodging for 25 persons in the villages and towns through which they passed. In some they could find a place to stay in religious houses. In others they would sleep in modest haylofts or abandoned houses.

But when one is young and has the soul on fire these trips are not hard. Those who were a little more than adolescents formed

the feminine group. María Rafols who goes at their head - we do not yet know with what judicial title, as their Constitutions are still not yet fully elaborated - is only twenty-three years old. Some had only just left their homes and are sweet and naive village girls. They only talk Catalan. Only with very great difficulty can they manage to speak a little bad Spanish. Part of the group hardly knows to read and write. But they are alert and awakened souls. God burns in them. And they know that their life is going to begin to be worthwhile now that they have inverted it in the hands of God. They gather together at night. They talk. They dream. They listen to the word of Fr. Bonal who, even though he does not want to frighten them, does not hide from them the tremendous task that is ahead. Huge and steep. And uphill: they are going to put order in something very important, but at the same time, very abandoned. It will not be done without difficulties. They pray. They remember their farewell of the Moreneta (little dark Virgin) of Montserrat. They ask whether the temple of Pilar is as beautiful as the one of their Black Virgin. They are afraid they will feel like foreigners in an unknown city. And as all of them live the same sentiments, the group goes on forging itself into a close, united group, like a pine cone. A pine cone that has at its centre María Rafols, a strong woman who only with her presence, exudes confidence.

Along the roads, crowded together in their wagons, they sang and they laughed. They are young and they are happy. And they have their souls open in an attitude of giving: How can they not laugh? They feel a little strange in the new habits that they have just worn for the first time. And at times a sudden gust of melancholy hits them when they remember the villages and families that they had left behind in Cataluña. And they get emotional when someone reads the evangelical words with which Jesus eulogises those who had the courage to leave father, mother and friends to follow Him.

When they are near Zaragoza, Fr. Bonal makes one of the group of 12 men go ahead on horseback to announce that they would arrive late on the 28th of December. And the news spread around the whole city like wild fire. The patients themselves spread the news through

all those who visit them. In this Hospital there is the expectation typical of any change. The 240 employees who worked in it, are logically, worried – very afraid of losing their jobs – and the most villainous of them awaited this arrival with anger: the fun that their tricks permitted had probably finished. Goodbye to the robberies of food and of wine. Goodbye to disorder and vagrancy. The true patients on the other hand breathe freely: they have heard about the Catalan Hospitals and know that everything will change for the better.

And more than anyone, the Board of Administrators wait with joy. They are good persons, but they cannot be in everything. They have to spend more time resolving complications and undoing tricks than in truly administering the Hospital. Now, on the other hand, they can be at ease, with people they can trust. Above all, if the reality corresponds to what they were told about Cataluña.

Hence, this 28th of December is an important day for Zaragoza. In the small city of that time, this arrival of 24 persons to take charge of the Hospital – one of the centres of local life – was the news of the year. And there were many thousands who awaited them in spite of the heavy downpour.

We have, fortunately, a most detailed description of what happened that day, in documents of 1810 and 1816. They are texts that describe, with almost charming candidness, the enthusiasm of the reception, without concealing the dark and worrying zones of the day.

We thus know that a real multitude thronged the Church and the enormous Cloister of the Hospital, and that the administrators of the centre, with some ecclesiastics of the house and its superintendent, decided to go in person with their wagons and their carts to receive the expeditionaries. And they met them on the path of the Gallego. There “the superintendent arranged for the Sisters to be accommodated in the carriages”, while “the Brothers would follow in their wagons up to the Door of the Angel”, from here they went on foot to the door of the Pilar to wait for the arrival

of the Sisters, while the wagons with the luggage went straight to the Hospital. “When both the groups met, they entered into the Holy Chapel, they prayed giving thanks to Our Lady for their happy arrival and asking her for protection and help to carry out the destiny for which they have come, with charity and fervour”.

It was like this, so simple. There were neither prodigies nor fanfare. There was neither rhetoric nor passion. Simply 24 young and simple souls who are with their Mother, young and simple like them. Did they imagine that there was a long chain being initiated perhaps, through which all through – at least – two centuries, thousands and thousands of young followers of those 12 women would put their whole souls at the foot of the same altar ready to spend themselves in the service of the sick? But, in reality all of them were there, as is the fruit in the seed. They seemed to be 12, but they were thousands and thousands. All of them very young. All surrendering their souls with no bartering. At the foot of the Pilar that day, was born the first religious Congregation that would live in its shadow. But that day nobody could have suspected it. The great hours of history are always lived beyond human curiosity.

Those recently arrived will then go – the Sisters in carriages, the Brothers on foot, specifies the information of the period – to the Church of the Hospital, where the multitude was waiting for them. In the vestibule they kissed the hands of the ecclesiastical administrators (Don Vicente Novella and Don José Cistué, choir-master and canon respectively of the Zaragozan cathedral) and they bowed before the others, the Count of Sástago, Baron de Purroy and the Marquises of Montemuzo and Fuente Olivar, who constituted the Board of that period. “And – add the chronicles – in the way they could express themselves in the Catalan language, they manifested the desires they had to fulfil the obligations that they had contracted and which they expected with the Grace of God to carry out”.

After the greetings they entered the beautiful Church of the Hospital, which would be the true centre of their lives in the

following years. And – the chroniclers comment – “the immense crowd that had congregated in the church and in the courtyard of the Hospital, hardly left space for the Sisters and the Sitiada to pass and climb up to the Hall, where they spoke a little about their journey, till they went down to the Refectory of the ecclesiastics where chocolate was kept ready for them and which they had with much relish and the satisfaction of the administrators, who were full of joy seeing their desires realized, having in front of them, fraternities from which they expected the best progress in the spiritual and corporal assistance of the patients and the good government and economy of the house. They then entered the wards of the sick and imponderable were the tender expressions with which they consoled them. The merriment was general.”

The enterprise was beginning, as can be seen, with the best omens. But, as “all spiritual adventures are paths of the cross”, the thorn could not be lacking here. Neither does the chronicler of the period – with notable impartiality – omit it. Because he continues:

“The merriment was general, but it is necessary to tell the truth: there was no malign tongue lacking, which, when the Sisters were climbing up the main stairs, burst forth into shouts of the following curse: May they break their legs before they reach upstairs! This indicated the discontent of a certain class of servants of both sexes that was in the Hospital and whose dismissal was inevitable, and others who, even though they had to continue, did not want to have witnesses in front of them, and even meddlers of their actions that were in contradiction to the delicacy of the conscience of the transplanted colonies.” Yes, it would not be all a path of roses. A wound cannot be cleaned without first bleeding it for the pus collected in it to come out. And about twenty centuries ago the Master had announced that whoever wanted to follow him would be persecuted like Him.

The religious then climbed up to the area where they were installed in their cells. Barcelona was already very far away. The Hospital seemed to exceed the strength of their young arms. But the enterprise seemed so beautiful!

Then María Rafols was alone, after having consoled and animated the youngest ones. She knew that the true weight would fall on her shoulders, almost as young as those of her companions. At the feet of Christ whom they had brought with them that young plant of the Congregation that had just found soil in which it would sprout, prayed. No matter the torrential rain and violent winds of Moncaya. Maybe she dreamed. Maybe the tiredness of the trip was stronger than she was and she slept when the Hail Mary to that Virgin whose mantle she had kissed that day for the first time began.



## VII. PORTRAIT OF A SOUL

What would we not give today to have an authentic portrait of María Rafols! To know her face, to study her smile, to guess the contexture of her soul behind her features. But none of this is possible. We can only count on very late approximations based on the data of those who knew her or on the imagination of artists. The same, exactly the same as happens with Jesus. Pablo Serrano, who has sculptured the best bust, offers us a sculpture of classic cut, serene, austere, in which, if the lips have the slightest hint of a smile, the eyes, without any mascara, lead us more towards the mystery. He has guessed right, yes, with this forward chin typical of one who has suffered much with courage. And he is right again with this wrinkled brow, tense – but without taking off the sweetness from the face as a whole, – of one who has judgement and will that is superior to the normal. More arguable are those long and most sweet hands of an aristocratic pianist that seem to have little in common with those of the daughter of the millers of Los Monjos.

We know she was tall – and more than the normal – because the box that guarded her remains till their transfer to the actual sepulchre measured the respectable length of one metre eighty-three centimetres, an enormous size considering it is of an old lady of seventy-one years.

We also have some affirmations made by witnesses at her beatification process, all of them taken from reminiscences of those who knew her:

- Only her presence was a total revelation: she attracted and captivated.
- Elevated structure, most sweet expression, and serious and majestic demeanour, heightened by the charm of angelical modesty.

— She was always joyous and happy.

— She possessed great presence of mind and fortitude of spirit.

But all these are approximations, none of which fully responds to what was desired as it really was. One tells us that her eyes were between blue-grey-greenish; but the wavering of the witnesses themselves continues to keep us in ignorance.

Will we have to then affirm – once more as for Jesus – that the only manner of knowing María Rafols is that evangelical one of “by their fruits will you know them”? Here, yes, we are fortunate. Both the gigantic tree of the Congregation planted by her, and the modest little plant that it was while she lived, shout loudly about the sap that flowed through their veins and which had as their direct source María Rafols.

Because soon, the group of twelve Sisters began to bear fruit in the hospital of Zaragoza. And before long, the spectacular change will be perceived in the organization and in their life.

They were still juridically not a Congregation, but simply a group of young girls who, with relative solemnity, had pronounced a simple promise to live in chastity, poverty, obedience, and hospitality, normally limited to the time that they voluntarily wanted to remain in the fraternity.

But soon it began to be perceived that it was much more than an occasional and transitory grouping. To this period almost certainly corresponds the first version of the famous Cuadernito (*Notebook*) in which Fr. Bonal outlines the seed of the future Constitutions. And in it the denomination “Congregation” is added more than once to the word “Fraternity”.

“These Congregations – it says in its introduction – composed generally of women, in whom piety makes more rapid progress, are undoubtedly very useful if, besides being subject to the observance of some statutes that direct their zeal with order, they have penetrated deep within themselves the knowledge that they

cannot flower before God and men if it is not with the conscientious fulfilment of the same.”

Because it has to be indicated immediately that the Fraternity as Fr. Bonal drew it up and Mother Rafols lived it, was at that moment at the point of breaking and almost a source of scandal. For every one else in that period, feminine religious life continued being synonymous with the contemplative life and the three grills. A nun mixed up in the life of men was a grave scandal. It was still maintained – and thus it was at the beginning in the Zaragozan hospital itself – that religious could only attend to women patients and to children. A woman attending to a male patient – and let’s not talk about venereal diseases, so widespread at that time – was incomprehensible and scandalous. In any case, religious outside the grills were like second class religious. Or a mixing up of the true vocation.

Fr. Bonal would understand how adventurous his enterprise was and hence would exhort them to specially high virtue, as they had to be – according to the famous formula of St. Vincent de Paul – religious who have no “monastery other than the wards of the sick, having only obedience as their cloister, the fear of God for grills and for their veil, holy modesty”.

Their life is uphill. Almost inventing their vocation. Too traditional for the progressives of the period. Scandalous for the puritans of that time. Understood almost only by God.

And those who look at the fruit of their work objectively. Because the volume of it was such, that one would think that the directors of the Hospital would contemplate it with astonishment, accustomed as they were to the presence of the lazy, the cheeky and the selfish male nurses.

The day of those twelve women was simply suicidal. I will copy the timetable of a normal day here:

- 4 in the morning : Wake-up, dress, wash.
- 4.30 : One hour of mental prayer.

- 5.30 : Cleaning of the utensils of the patients of the previous night.
- 6.30 : Mass. And Communion the days it was their turn.
- 7 : Treatment of the patients, sweeping the wards, making the beds and cleaning the smaller dishes of the patients.
- 8 : Accompanying the doctors during their visit to the sick.
- 8.30 : Giving the patients the prescribed medicines, bleeding them if necessary.
- 9.15 : Praying the Rosary in one of the wards.
- 9.30 : Giving broth to the patients. Taking them their food.
- 11 : Spiritual reading in the choir.
- 11.30 : Crown of Our Lady and examination of conscience.
- 12 : Lunch and Recreation.
- 1 : Retire to Rooms, rest.
- 2 : Assist at the second visit of the doctors and administer the prescribed medicines.
- 5 : Prayer of the Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity and the Holy Rosary in the wards.
- 5.30 : Broth to the patients. Dinner.
- 7 : Half hour of mental prayer and another quarter of an hour of common prayer.
- 8 : Dinner.
- 8.30 : Treatment of the patients.
- 9 : Accompany the doctor on their visit.
- 10 : All will go to bed in their dormitories, without exception, however devout the cause may seem to them, except the two Sisters who did Night-Duty with the patients till four in the morning.

A timetable that is at the same time imposing and monotonous, as is easy to see. What is impressive is the short time for sleep (six or seven hours), the length of time dedicated to prayer (one and a half hour, plus another half hour of spiritual reading, plus another long hour for other devotions), the apostolic sense that was

given to their presence in the hospitals (with constant prayers) and, above all, this surrender so total to the patients, without counting on a little decent space in their work day for personal and free life.

With what spirit did they live all this? Here we are faced with a surprise: because, even though Fr. Bonal was a man of very traditional cut and ideology, in the axes of his spirituality there are some radically modern ideas, we would almost say "postconciliar", ideas like the realization of the love of God in the love of the neighbour, points like Christocentrism, absolute clarity in placing the axis of all virtues in charity. This is how these men and women of the beginning of the eighteen hundreds appear.

Twenty years ago that scene of the novel of Cesbrón (*The Saints go to Hell*) in which the priest interrupts the Mass that is going to start, to go to help someone who needs him was discussed and presented as a visible sign of a new spirit. And two centuries ago, in the little notebook that governed our protagonists was written:

"Be it well understood that neither daily prayer nor confessions and weekly communion, nor the monthly chapter of faults, nor the yearly Spiritual Exercises, have to be an obstacle to the purpose for which the Sisters have been received; such that, if at the same time the assistance to a patient and the call to the hour for confession and communion, which is the most venerable that may occur in the spiritual life, this devotion must be omitted to go to the obligation of charity to a needy patient." (Curiously I will indicate that this paragraph that we understand perfectly today, seemed less virtuous to the first biographer of the Mother, as though it concerned a "goal" that the Sitiada had slipped in to Fr. Bonal in their directives).

This placing of charity as the "queen of all virtues", this insistence on "love with work" is central for the spirit that Fr. Bonal sowed in the Sisters. From there arise "humility and its inseparable companion, obedience". But not only – and here another very profound intuition – vertical obedience, towards superiors, but also this other horizontal obedience that takes them to "recommend the obedience to the poor sick patients, as though they were superiors".

With difficulty can something more profound be said about the vocation to hospitality.

And there is in this entire ascetic a very significant equilibrium between normality and exigency, which will have to be presented as a derivate of a virtue lived within the Catalan "seny" ('good judgement'). An asceticism that exiles idleness and which, at the same time, "summons before the tribunal of God the failure of only one moment". Poverty in which "one accustoms oneself not to beg nor to refuse anything of this earth". And all this centred in Christ, without confusing sanctity with a pure accumulation of virtuous acts in the chill of a passionless sleeping soul. Here is a definitive paragraph :

"Fasting, doing night-duty, having long prayers, using great corporal mortifications and such other things do not constitute the perfection of a good spirit; they can come together to help form it in us, if they are governed by prudence and animated by practical faith that works through charity; but stripping ourselves of the old Adam, negating ourselves, dressing ourselves with the virtues of the new Adam, Christ Jesus, according to His examples, and not separating ourselves from His will in all our work, words and thoughts, this is the essence, the substance, the perfection and true sanctity of a good spirit."

There isn't, fortunately and mysteriously, in all the ascetics of the first rules this dichotomy that was so typical of all the piety of the century and according to which piety, prayer, the "spiritual life" went on one side and apostolic action or simple social action went along another, as if they were, at the most, a consequence of them. There is, on the other hand, this profound unity of life that Vatican II illumined so much. There is the complete conviction that the patient is Christ and that attending to him is "another" way of praying. There aren't two planets, one celestial and the other terrestrial; in the incarnation of Christ there is a radical union created that converts what is apparently only human into transcendent work.

It is from here that in the asceticism of these twelve Sisters the key is in this permanent "presence of Christ".

"In all the daily work – say the rules – the Sisters will specially reflect, so as to achieve the perpetual presence of God. In the cleaning of the dirty glasses and other acts of humility, the Sisters consider that to clean our sins, the Son of God became man, living in total humility... When they give the breakfasts, they will consider that they are feeding Jesus tired from his long pilgrimages in His most holy life. When they give water to the patients, they will consider Jesus thirsty on the Cross. When they give food, they will have present the favour of Mary in serving Jesus, lodged in her house. When they give the dinner, they will consider Jesus in the Cenacle. When on night-duty and with the dying they will consider Jesus helpless and agonizing on the Cross."

This religious life was in a background of an impressive climate of poverty. If the hospital was magnificent, the departments of the Sisters were not the same. There were no recreation rooms, nor cloisters to walk around. There was no Novitiate, no infirmary. Not even cells, actually. It was all one long cloister with elementary divisions for each Sister and, at the end, a small oratory. Several Sisters slept in a kind of granary. The furniture was practically nil. When one of the witnesses at the process of beatification speaks about this, he relates that after the Mother was dead, someone proposed to the Superior, Mother Magdalena Hecho, to buy some chairs "elegant, rounded", to which the Superior responded: "Holy poverty which the Mother Foundress has left us as a legacy, we have to respect. I will not touch it."

It is touching to read today the description given by this same witness of the objects that they had in the convent:

"In the dining room we had four poor little tables with the legs in the shape of a bedstead, a picture of the Last Supper, quite big, with glass and a smooth frame of walnut; the seats were of plaster. In the cell Mother Rafols had a little iron bed painted pine tops in the form of artichokes of gilded metal. She also had a holy water

basin of 'Muel' with the attributes of the passion, a small table with black oilcloth and little flowers, in which there was a drawer with gilded knobs. A big bulrush chair with high back painted chocolate colour, the same as the table; a small basin painted blue, like the bed, washbasin and jar with a blue selvedge. The cover of the bed was of percale, with coffee colour background and full of bluish leaves."

This is the odour of simplicity and poverty. A poverty that lasted fifty years. And which reached spine-chilling heights with regard to food, as we will have to indicate several times in this history. Not only with what refers to special fasts and mortifications (of Mother Rafols as told by one of the witnesses, "who used to have only vegetables several times a week without oil or any kind of dressing"), but also even in the daily food that they kept cutting down constantly with the famous "despintes (what they are unworthy of)". "They themselves – says an accounting official of the Sitiada – kept reducing the ration assigned for the ecclesiastics of the House, because they felt they had sufficient for subsistence with another, more moderate ration, leaving the extra in favour of the poor".

This climate of work, love and simplicity – which certainly had very little to do with the commercial and swindling style of the earlier servants – had willy-nilly to be noticed soon in the Hospital. And thus witnesses multiplied to indicate it. It is worthwhile putting down here, some that perfectly summarise what was the life and activity of the religious during those first four calm years.

In the first place are those that come from the directors themselves of the hospital:

"Very soon the usefulness and advantages experienced in the infirmaries were apparent by the greater cleanliness and neatness, greater decency and composure, avoiding the conversations and uproars that used to be in them and could not be remedied, because persons of so much respect were not in view. Also by the conscientiousness and zeal with which the poor patients of the

hospital were administered the medicines ordered by the doctors, and for the consolation they received from the Sisters by their good treatment and example, and in accordance with how their painful situation permitted, leading them in exercises of devotion and inclining them towards the conformity so necessary in work and afflictions.”

They were not – this is clear from the first moment – simply nurses with habits. For them the bodies and souls of the patients were important and they faced their task with love and with faith simultaneously.

But, continuing with the same document, we find ourselves immediately, with something that draws more attention. And that is the same thing that happened at the death of Christ, the women at the foot of the beds of the patients were more resistant than the men. A group of twelve men and twelve women had reached Zaragoza together. And soon both had to experience crises and problems. Old servants of the house – who had already manifested their desires on the day of the arrival of both fraternities – decided to make their lives impossible. And thus, brothers and sisters “touched with their own hands so many vile tricks set up against them, specially that of robbing them of all they could, inciting the patients themselves to complain against the brothers. These were some of the causes of lack of clothes”, with which the brothers were put in danger “with naughty remarks and taunting”.

And this is how the brothers began to leave “as maybe – says the report of the Sitiada – their gender is not proper for this painful duty or because they had not made such a good selection of subjects; that unblemished zeal and charity as was in the Sisters, was not seen in them”.

This “selection of subjects” was evidently, the fundamental cause. But there was another, not less important, as indicated by the same document when realising the outcome of the problem:

“However, as an increase in number and zeal was experienced in the Sisters (who in 1807 were already 21), the number and zeal

of the Brothers diminished and, effectively, in the year 1808 the fraternity of men was extinguished completely, while the Sisters continued, making the greatest progress, mainly with Sister Maria Rafols at the head, named the Senior Sister at entry, in which post she continues at the moment, discharging her responsibility with the greatest ability.”

Now yes, we have hit the nail on the head. And it has to be indicated that the eulogy comes from a cold official report from the accountant’s office, which doesn’t want the panegyric of the Mother for anything.

Effectively, the group of Sisters counted on a solid support pivot, a strong and dedicated Superior, sweet and energetic, the first in work and in love. And here, as in big buildings: the beam that is least seen is the master beam. But nothing will be sustained without it.

We are going to come across even more surprises. Because the document of the Accountant’s Office continues:

They were not content only with doing their duty; filled with the greatest charity, in the fulfilment of their duties they wanted to make themselves more useful to the patients by taking the benefit of instruction and application; and thus, taking their zeal to the limits of their Institute, they dedicated themselves to studying phlebotomy, with the knowledge of the Sitiada and direction of the Lieutenant Surgeon of the House; and then, in his presence and after the necessary instruction, carried out the operation of bleeding, which they executed with great skill. When Sisters María Rafols, Tecla Cantí, María Rosa Cuchí and Raimunda Torellas presented themselves for a public examination at the Sitiada they were already perfectly prepared, doing it with great success and better than the pharmaceutical assistants with years of practice, in view of which they passed and, as a consequence, they continued executing this operation with admirable skill.”

It is worthwhile remembering that we are talking of the first years of the eighteen hundreds, when by not even the furthest stretch of the imagination was it dreamt that women would be in this type

of professional activities. And much less religious. It is most curious that in 1926 the “devil’s advocate” still finds, in the process of beatification, this gesture being discussed. How did these religious carry out something that canon law did not even foresee? The fact was really novel and the chronicler took care to record that they did it with the permission of their superiors in the Sitiada.

But there are two details that must not pass unnoticed: that in the examination they did better than the assistants with a long practice; and that, among those examined was the superior of the group. This data is sufficient for us to discover that María Rafols is not the type of superior who limits herself to “direct”, looking at everything from high above, rather she was involved personally with “hands in the dough”. On the contrary, María Rafols is the first of the list, the first to be subjected to the examination, the first to accept a task that was less pleasant, especially at that time.

We are, then, before a group of religious who are with their times, who even are ahead of it, who are not afraid of assuming postures that could turn out to be damaging, always if they are for the good of the patients. They would have felt themselves very comfortable in Vatican II.

### **The humble life of every day**

An important new text for us to discover what was their humble work of every day, one that is signed on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1807 by the directors of the Seminary, who at that time were the chaplains of the Grand Hospital. It is a long paragraph that has no garbage. It says:

“Thank God that from the time of the posting of our Sisters of Charity all those abuses (the ones we have put together in Chapter V) have disappeared and in their place the only thing that is seen in the wards managed by them, is reliability and love in assisting the patients, cleanliness, exercises of piety and examples of edification. Because there is no day when the wards are not swept;

besides, any dirt or water is cleaned up immediately, as soon as it falls on the floor; there is no day when the beds of all the patients they can manage and to whom no harm will be done, are not made and the washing up done. As soon as a patient leaves or dies the bed is removed and substituted by another clean one for the new person who will come; and changing the bed clothes of the others frequently, such that with satisfaction any of them can be reached, and they can even be confident to hear their confession without being afraid of dirtying themselves on the floor or get something from any of the beds as had happened earlier. The conscientiousness, the urgency and at the same time the affection and refinement with which the Sisters give the medicines, the ordinary food of the House and the extraordinary, but not harmful, to the patients, present the most just idea and copy of the love of a mother or a wife. The devotion and reverence with which they pray the Hail Mary and the Acts of Faith with the patients whenever the hours are chimed, the Rosary morning and evening, on their knees, and giving due thanks after lunch and dinner; care to avoid brawls, bad words, suspicious conversations and visits, reading small parts of spiritual books to the patients, stimulating them to listen to the word of God attentively, all those who can listening on bended knees, and the fervour with which they help them to prepare for a good confession and giving thanks after communion and with which they help them to die well, seem proper of a zealous pastor of souls. Things so proper and desirable in a Christian and pious hospital, that the patients themselves recognise, and some of them do not know how to explain the consolation, the joy and the edification that they cause them and things in which anyone who was led only by interest or salary would find impossible to do; not even these same Sisters, if they were not animated by a burning charity that is fomented with daily prayer, frequency of the sacraments and other exercises particular to the community that is practiced in the oratory, which renew in us the images of those congregations which with the help of devotion have been the most brilliant luminaries of humanity and the most precious fruit of the examples of the Saviour in so many countries.”

The paragraph is long. But it would be difficult to get a more living portrait of life in that hospital during these peaceful years. And it is simply marvellous for anyone who remembers the average state of the hospitals of that period of time.

There is one more text that I would not like to ignore. In the long report on the state of the hospitals elaborated by the Count de Sástago and which we have already spoken about, two pages are dedicated to presenting the great exception that had been achieved in the one of Zaragoza.

I will transcribe it in full, given that it is still unpublished:

“I take advantage of this occasion to make public a discovery, whose beginning in Spain was in Cataluña: this is a Fraternity of men and women, with the title of Charity. They are not religious, they are not an approved Institution, they do not make any vows, they only offer themselves to work in the hospitals that call them and, even though they have no formal vows they oblige themselves to live a religious life voluntarily and serve in the hospitals in whatsoever they are ordered”.

“Words are wanting to eulogise the virtues of these people, specially the women. These women with imponderable charity and economy gave all assistance that has to be given to the sick in a hospital, their care, the work they ask you to do for them, cleaning dirty vessels, clothes, in a word, everything. I have never in my life seen the patients’ hair being combed and the troublesome insects being killed, till these women came. They came to exhort the patients, to teach them the Christian doctrine and, above all, to bleed them and apply the poultices ordered by the professors, having learned the anatomy of the veins, to know the part they should bleed; they become the leaders of the women’s wards, of the Foundling Home, of the mentally ill, of the wardrobes, all with an economy so extraordinary, especially with regard to clothes that not a single piece was lost in all the time that they looked after the wardrobes, they stitched whatever was needed in the hospital, as much as their strength could take on, their principal occupation being continued

assistance in the wards, for everything. These people were a singular rest for the Administrators and servants. They contained the unfortunate remarks of the patients, avoided the frequent robberies in the hospitals and, finally, in the two invasions of the French, between bullets and ruins, they sacrificed more than anyone else. I dare to say that with these women it is easy to govern a hospital and without them, very difficult. An establishment worthy of being propagated.”

Now we can repeat the question with which this Chapter opened: it would be, yes, beautiful to know the face, the figure of Mother Rafols. But, strictly speaking, for what do we want her portraits? We have an infinitely more living portrait in her work, in the high tension that this group that she sustained, captained and inspired, lived. They were souls on fire. And it is known that “for a room to be warm, it is necessary that the fire be burning”. This burning fire was María Rafols.

A bonfire on which soon the hurricanes of a mad world would themselves unleash.



## VIII. THE HEROINE OF THE SIEGES

- «—Tell me son: who are you?  
— I am Spanish, by the grace of God.  
— What does Spanish mean?  
— Good man.  
— How many obligations does a Spanish man have?  
— Three: be a Christian; defend the country and the king.  
— Who is our king?  
— Fernando VII.  
— With what ardour must he be loved?  
— With the most vivid and with what merits his virtues and his misfortunes.  
— Who is the enemy of our happiness?  
— The emperor of the French.  
— Who is this man?  
— A villain, ambitious, the beginning of all evil, the end of all good, composed of, and deposit of all vices.  
— How many natures does he have?  
— Two: one diabolic and one human.  
— How many emperors are there?  
— One true in three deceitful persons.  
— Who are they?  
— Napoleon, Murat and Godoy.  
— What are the French?  
— Ancient Christians and modern heretics.  
— Who has led them to this slavery?  
— False philosophy and the corruption of customs.  
— Is it a sin to assassinate a French person?

- No, Father; you do a meritorious act liberating the country of these violent oppressors.  
— What have we to do in the combat?  
— Increase the glory of the nation, defend our brothers and save the Fatherland.»

With this page of the so-called *Spanish Catechism* – compiled in the style of questions and answers of the traditional catechisms – the spiritual climate that Spain breathed in 1808, a date to which our story goes back, can be perfectly summarized.

Because while our twelve pioneers initiated their path, many things have changed in the world. Beethoven had composed his first three symphonies. The first steamship had started navigating along the Huston. Goethe had concluded his *Faust* and Chateaubriand *The Genie of Christianity*. Schiller had died. Goya had painted the frescoes of San Antonio de la Florida and Haydn had the premiere of *Creation and the Seasons*. But above all, over everything and conditioning everything, one of the most fascinating and terrible figures had appeared on the horizon of the world, more loved and more hated, “the perfect hero”, as Anatole France would say: Napoleon Buonaparte, lord and whip of Europe, for his friends successor of Alexander and Caesar and for his enemies, successor of Genghiz Khan and Attila. “He was not a man of his times: he was a god who remained behind on his path”, writes Teixeira de Pascoaes, Barrés would see in him “a professor of energy, an exciter of souls”. Hegel would confess that he was a man “impossible not to admire”. Raskolnikov, the sad protagonist of *Crime and Punishment* who wanted at least once to be fully man and almost God, would say to his interrogators: “I wanted to become a Napoleon. That’s why I killed.”

This authentic genius of war and of propaganda, which all the great poets (except the Spanish), of his time would sing and mystify would be during a decade, Lord of the Continent. By blood and fire, yes; sowed with dead bodies, yes; but total master. And he would be almost more so after his death, during the time he was mythified when he could be admired without being feared.

Surprisingly, this genie of fascination did not understand at all, neither Spain nor the Spanish and in our country, he managed to collect hatred like no personage ever had before. "The Spanish are like other peoples and do not form a class apart", wrote Marshal Bessieues. And, starting from this premise, traced all his calculations of dominion. All failed miserably. What served him to impose himself in all the other nations awakened nothing but enemies for him. Here it was even found that even those who had reason to love him, hated him and vice versa.

Napoleon was convinced that only by overthrowing the old regime, the Spanish would run towards him to acclaim him. He had said: "When with my standard they take the word 'liberty', 'liberation from superstition', 'destruction of nobility', I will be received like I was in Italy, and the truly national classes will be with me. You will see how I will be considered the liberator of Spain".

It was just the contrary: surprisingly Napoleon saw the people run towards the nobles who projected destruction and saw the people he wanted to liberate go up in arms. Napoleon had not understood that ancient traditions were far more established than in the rest of Europe and that the people did not have the slightest desire of liberating themselves from it. Buonaparte did not understand, above all, the strong weight that two phenomena had in Spain: the patriotic sense and the religious. Trying to put a foreign king in Spain was madness. Attacking the Church and the religious directly was to hurt one of the levers that could most easily put the whole of Spain in a state of war.

Napoleon manipulated well both, the political and the military. But his propaganda among the populace was mistaken. He manipulated the members of the royal family like toothpicks, taking advantage of their dissensions and in Bayonne, humiliated as much the father Carlos IV as the son Fernando VII. But he made a mistake trying to impose his own brother as the king, who soon became the laughing stock of the nation. "Pepe Botella (Uncle Bottle)", "Tio

Copas (Uncle Wine Glasses)", "Rey Plazuela (Small Square King)" were the names with which they baptised him. And on the day of his arrival at the Royal Palace he found that at the very same time, all the thousands of lackeys, stable boys, postillions, and servants, without exception, had resigned.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May the fury of Spain was afire to engulf the infinitely more powerful Napoleonic army. Buonaparte had crossed the frontier with more than 200,000 troops guided by his best generals. In the face of this, the Spanish army would not muster even 100,000. And it was an army without staff, led by chiefs with mediocre preparation. But around him, would surge the first army of the people of the whole of history: bands of peasants, artisans, pastors, guided by chiefs who had arisen also from the people and born in a spontaneous and disorganized manner, typically Spanish. They were small units gifted with great mobility. They lacked uniforms and were equipped with armament that was more folkloric than formidable. By simple intuition they were to discover the essence of guerrilla warfare: attack always and never present a frontal battle, choosing always people of the area for the attacks, not aspiring to great victories, prick disconcertedly like the bee and disappear as fast as they had appeared in terrains perfectly known to the natives of the region. This wasn't a game for which the Napoleonic armies were prepared. And for the first time in history – later there would be many other instances up to that of the Vietnam War – the bee overthrows the lion.

### A Holy War

But, apart from a popular and patriotic war, it was also, for the Spanish, a Holy War. Hence the enormous participation in it of priests and religious men and women. They were the moral directors and in many cases, material of the insurrection movements. "He who knows the character of the Spanish people well – wrote Fr. Vélez – will know that it is more influenced by a sermon or the advice of a friar or cleric than by all the threats of the Government, its proclamations or its orders".

Hence the Central Board that animates the insurrection takes great care to send a proclamation to the clergy reminding the ecclesiastics about “the need to revive the faith of the faithful and manifest that the war in which we are is holy and religious”. And they ask for “the army” to be granted “some religious of well-known virtue and eloquence to give sermons to the soldiers at the time of entering into action”.

Today it is impressive to read the sermons of that epoch and see that the rising against the French was presented as a “divine and salvific war”, as “a war between two Augustinian cities and of a new crusade against a new multitude of Moors”. Affirmations that paint the Spanish people as “the new people of Israel in arms”, “the profaned inheritance of the Lord”, “the people led by the God of the armies” are found there.

But what is impressive is that all this is not only the rhetoric of the preachers, but something that the Spanish live with blood-curdling intensity and realism. They feel they are fighting for God, they see miracles in the smallest detail, they feel that dying in a crusade is equivalent to martyrdom and leads one straight to Heaven, they see the saints intervening visibly and physically in the combats, with a warlike theology that is pure emotion in a whirlwind in which the religious and the patriotic are inseparably mixed.

Perhaps it is therefore not difficult for us to understand what was the temple of Pilar in the Siege of Zaragoza. It was a species of spiritual fine gunpowder to which the Zaragozans come to arm themselves spiritually, to strengthen their consciences and prepare themselves to kill or die. This is where the uninterrupted Masses come from; the doors open day and night, the tides of people, of votive offerings, of candles, placing on the walls of trophies or flags seized from the enemy. The Zaragozans truly believed that the Virgin was one more militant and literally that she did not want to be French. They prayed and they shot. And they were convinced that they continued praying when they were shooting. Not only did they defend their city, but also their soul and their faith against the assaulting demon.

It is here, in this climate of exaltation and blood, where María Rafols and her companions are going to live the most dramatic hour of their lives. And of their deaths.

### **The great test**

The happenings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May in Madrid spilled on the crust of the whole of Spain like a rain of gunpowder. And it resounded more specially in Zaragoza, given the high emotive and patriotic sense of the Aragonese people. Soon the whole city put its soul on the alert, ready even, to see all types of prodigious announcers.

One month before the siege, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May, relates Casamayor in his famous diary, that morning “at around twelve noon” two doves could be seen with crowned paths one flying on the exterior of the Holy Chapel and the other in its interior, which provoked the enthusiasm of the multitude, that burst into shouts of “Miracle, Miracle”, seeing in the birds a sign of the patronage that the Virgin was ready to have over the city. The multitude – says the diary – “from that hour till 11 at night, inundated the Holy Chapel” and the event had abundant repercussions, even in the sermons and talks in which the event was presented as “indubitable”.

This event – presage of a great victory for the Zaragozans – intensified the preparations of the city and helped to swell the lists of donations that was published daily in the Gazette of Zaragoza. The religious face of the struggle is going to appear once again in this list: it is the ecclesiastics who head the list with the highest figures.

In the meanwhile, the troops of General Lefevre came nearer to Zaragoza. They left Pamplona on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June and the strong troops of Marquis de Lazán conquered Tudela on the 8<sup>th</sup> and on the 15<sup>th</sup> they presented themselves at the walls of Zaragoza.

At the head of the defending troops was none other than the brother of the Marquis de Lazán, Brigadier José de Palafox who, being in Bayonne with Fernando VII, had managed to escape and

come up to Zaragoza, his fatherland, dressed as a pastor. He reached the city at a time when for twenty days they had been spent looking for a chief; Palafox was acclaimed from the first moment as the "liberator of the Fatherland".

Pérez Galdos has offered us a living portrait of him in his *National Episodes*. It is worthwhile putting down some of the lines of profound psychological insight:

"His prestige was due largely to his valour; and also to his noble origin, to the respect with which the family of Lazán and his splendid and arrogant presence was always looked upon. He was young, he had belonged to the Body of Guards and he was eulogized a lot for having spurned the favours of a very high standing lady, as famous for her position as for her scandals. But what more than anything else made the Zaragoza leader attractive was his serene and indomitable bravery, that youthful ardour with which he attempted the most dangerous and difficult, for the simple zeal for touching an ideal of glory.

If he lacked intellectual gifts to direct a work as arduous as that, he had the right judgement to recognise his incompetence and surrounded himself with men distinguished in several fields. They did everything for him and Palafox remained only with the dramatic. That young general, of an illustrious family and attractive figure, who was everywhere reanimating the weak and distributing rewards to the brave, could do nothing less than exercise subjugating dominion over a people in which imagination prevails so much.

The Zaragozans had symbolized its virtues in him, his constancy, and his ideal patriotism with mystic rivets and the fervour of a warrior. Palafox appeared always at the points of danger as a human expression of triumph. His voice reanimated the dying, and if the Virgin of Pilar had spoken, she would not have done it through any other mouth. His face always expressed a supreme confidence and in him the triumphal smile infused courage like in other moments did his fierce frown. As he understood by instinct that part of his success was due, more than his qualities of general, to

his qualities of actor, he always presented himself with all the trappings of pomposity, with gold and silver braid, feathers and badges, and the thunderous music of the cheers and applauses that gratified him to the extreme. All this was necessary, as there has always to be something of mutual adulation between the armies and the leader for the emphatic pride of victory to draw all to heroism."

In one of these theatrical gestures Palafox had begun his task by directing himself to Pilar on a white horse to kiss the image of the Virgin, and two days later he would give the order to enlist all the Zaragozans between sixteen and forty years, the married, the unmarried and the widowers, both the rich and the poor. With them he would form one of the strangest armies of military history, which had a little more than 2,000 professional soldiers commanded by 19 captains and 59 lieutenants, to which are to be added a total of 14,000 men, all those in the city who managed to get some kind of arms.

With them he would resist the ferocious assault of the 15<sup>th</sup> of June when Lefevre wanted to enter into Zaragoza without troubling himself to extend a prior siege.

"In the long time that the battle lasted – writes Casamayor – many were the vicissitudes, reaching up to breaking the door of the Carmen by cannonball and entering through it, but they were driven back, and all those who managed to enter were killed or taken prisoner. The same thing happened in the Portillo, they even entered the plaza, where the artillery placed near the mud walls of Santa Inés cornered them towards the Cavalry barracks and there they were killed by our people from the House of Mercy, our peasants having made a tremendous effort on this occasion with bravery very rarely seen; on seeing that they had entered, they pitched themselves against them, without more defence than their noble chests and managed to keep pushing them out firing on them, achieving the most serious victory that has been seen in men, not through bullets and without either leader or rudder, only true love for Religion and Country. The confusion of the people did not

influence in the slightest this unequalled heroism, but trust in God and His Most Holy Mother of Pilar who helping our defenders, specially the women who, from the beginning of the attack, would go to give them water, wine and brandy, and supplied them with bullets, gunpowder, rags for bungs and whatever could be of use to them, managing to reanimate our conquerors and conquer ferocious and frightful men”.

The ingenuous, candid style of Casamayor shows better than anything else, the rustic style of war in which all participated like in a family feud; this surprised and confused the French so much. The following day, they took all the flags of the conquered enemies. From among those that took them, a boy of about eleven or twelve years who had personally seized it after killing the French standard bearer went forward. It was a crazy war of crazy people; subject more to the laws of enthusiasm than of militia.

It was undoubtedly this first experience, which induced Lefevre to organise a proper siege taking time and calmly preparing the trenches and posting their batteries, to launch the attack anew fifteen days later, this time preceded by fierce bombarding in which one thousand four hundred bombs and grenades fell on the city. But the assault of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July was not any better. Once again the struggle was bloody. On this day, in the defence of the door of the Portillo, the wife of an artilleryman, Agustina de Aragón, who took charge of the cannon when her husband fell dead by its side managed to transmit courage to those who defended the door against the French, has entered in the pages of history.

Thus the siege began to be converted into “the war of women”, who rivalled in courage with the men. But not all of them placed their bravery in shooting. The struggle of the religious women was not any less difficult; they were seen and wanted, to attend to the pile of wounded that reached the already over packed hospital. Only that day about 700 French died and their wounded numbered thousands. One has to think of similar figures for the Zaragozans (even when the chronicles of the epoch try to lessen the figures),

above all if one takes into account that the explosion of gunpowder five days earlier had necessarily caused a numerous number of wounded. It is not difficult to imagine a hospital that suddenly sees its population of patients doubled: beds in the cloisters and passages, shouts of those who arrived dying or very badly hurt, precipitated surgeries, cries of the people who came to see relatives... And just about twenty religious women working day and night for about four thousand hospitalised, multiplying themselves to make the food, to do the dressings, to calm the cries.

There was among those besieged, a zeal to present their own situation as less anguishing. A letter sent on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of this month by Fray Benito de los Dolores to Don Pedro Maria Ric relates how useless was the bombing of the French. And he adds sweet shades of miracles in the description: “A bomb fell on the general Hospital, in the very room of the patients; but without the least harm to the patients, who were astonished and gave thanks to God.”

Unfortunately, the same was not going to happen with the dreadful attack that the French unleashed on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, making the hospital where our protagonists worked as precisely the central objective of their batteries. History will not easily experience another event as shameful as the one we are going to narrate. In it, as the French historian Barón de Lejeune himself confesses, “the rights of the people were openly transgressed. And the bravery of the besieged was considered so insuperable that, not expecting to move the hearts of those chests of diamond with iron and lead, they tried to break them with a spectacle a hundred times more terrifying for them than death”.

What spectacle was this? After a ferocious bombardment on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, the batteries concentrated themselves on the third day on the holy Hospital and did not stop vomiting fire during a full day. The French – as Schepeller has commented – knew very well what that building was meant for. But, given its enormous size, they must have thought that, if they managed to occupy it – full or in ruins, – they would have been able to dominate the entire city from it. And thus the terror started.

Here is a description of the day that Casamayor offered in his *Diary*:

“Where the damage was more was in the holy Hospital of Nuestra Señora de Gracia, where bombs kept falling almost continuously, having caused some deaths, among them Don Mateo Laguna, and equally so much damage in the wards of the patients, that before midday it was necessary to have foresight and remove them, giving all those who wanted to go, permission to do so, and those who remained were sent to the Royal Audience, where they were carried in arms by some religious and by various peasants in carts and stretchers and at the same time in beds, a spectacle that caused the greatest compassion, which increased the laments of the poor patients helped by the Administrators, who with their active foresight, managed, with the charity of the faithful, to transfer them, as fast as possible and without any misfortune, in spite of the many bombs that continued to fall, placing the patients of fever in the upper corridor, the soldiers in the Sala de San Jorge, the surgery cases in the lower corridor, and the women in the Lonja de Caridad, but not having enough room for the men, they placed them in the interior open court of the said audience hall, earmarking the Notary’s Office for the Surgeons and the lower Hall of the Acuerdo for the other essential offices of the many employees. This melancholic disorder shook the nerves of everyone and the charity, so natural, of the Zaragozans, was worthy of much merit on seeing such a catastrophe.”

More dramatic still is the description of the French historian Lejeune:

“The bombs were directed in the beginning on the houses near the points attacked, later on the convent of San Francisco and, finally, on the great Hospital of Nuestra Señora de Gracia, in which were the foundling children, the demented and patients of all classes. These projectiles didn’t kill anyone, but caused so much fear, that many patients and wounded abandoned their beds and jumped to the street through the windows to save themselves as fast as possible.

They were in the streets wrapped in bloody rags and dragging themselves, horribly mutilated.

The Aragonese, who were totally occupied in the defence of their posts, extended however, a zeal superior to all eulogy in the cities where they offered themselves to these unfortunate persons. In a few hours they collected all of them in a safe place and the Hospital evacuated. The bombs smashed the feet of those who were taking the patients; one of these who was in agony, seeing that one of the explosions had not hurt anybody, even had strength to exclaim: ‘It is the Virgin of Pilar who is protecting us!’ ‘It is she!’ responded the stretcher-bearers, and continued advancing serenely, in the midst of explosions of all those missiles.”

Together with the fear of the situation, two things stood out in these narrations: the sensation that the transfer was done with order and, within the possible, with serenity; and the interior force as much of the patients as of those who transferred them. What hands, what souls prepared all this? What occult presence of strong souls is there behind this data? Between the barbarism of those who shot and the panic of those who tried to flee, someone has interposed, someone has placed peace and work, someone has made this horrible transfer become possible within a few hours; that each patient was put in his place, and this other miracle, even higher, that the wounded knew to see the hand of God in the midst of their fear.

This occult personage – of which the great chroniclers hardly speak – are the Sisters who attend to and organise the Hospital. This silent and pacifying personage is called, above all, María Rafols.

### **Florets or history?**

And here, we need to stop to formulate a very important question for ourselves: the stories that tradition has transmitted to us – and which paint Mother Rafols as the “Heroine of the Sieges”– are they really part of history or do they simply deal with “spiritual florets”,

description of the heroic reaches us: the testimony of twenty-one religious who – under the direction of Mother María – were much beyond what human nature can bear, in their surrender to their brothers and sisters. Is there a greater miracle?

### **The fire in the hospital**

And things were not easier after that fatal 3<sup>rd</sup> of August. On the 4<sup>th</sup> the French entered the hospital and on the 5<sup>th</sup> concluded its capture, when they entered “destroying it, burning the granary and killing the demented brothers who were taking care of it and committing whatever indignity that came their way”.

Fortunately, there was some consolation on the 5<sup>th</sup>: on the one hand the news of the battle of Bailén that could change the fate of the war and, on the other, the arrival of reinforcements that permitted “making up for the rout of the previous day, animating our defenders, who managed to dislodge them from a portion of the houses that they occupied in the neighbourhood of the Hospital”. “These two days – adds Casamayor with brush-stroke dramatics – the poor patients of the Hospital experienced so many afflictions, that they did not have more than soup of spices because there was no meat, nor was there any in the shops of the city.”

It was the beginning of hunger. The city – under siege now for almost two months – had resisted fairly well till then, but now everything began to be scarce. And, if it was anguishing for a mother of a family to look for food for her two, four, six children, what would it be for some religious who had to look after the food of four or six thousand children of theirs? They had lost everything in the bombarding of the Hospital. Everything perished – according to the document that Pano transcribes – “the precious and abundant articles of pharmacy, utensils, bed sheets, pillows, mattresses, grain stock, wine and oil and a numerous flock, all these losses estimated at 25 million (reales de vellón – old Spanish currency). It can all be expressed by saying that what was salvaged and remained of the Hospital, were the clothes taken for cleaning, the only resource

of the patients, and from that day, besides, having to go and look for food for them for that day and the days that followed. The patients suffered enormous inconveniences, nudity, privations, as is already known, startled at the sudden transfer, and at the moment when all the residents of this city were in a state of great excitement however, there aren’t words enough to depict what the patients and wounded suffered in the defence of the city, nor the poverty in which they were entrenched”.

Certainly no one suffered this shortage so much as the Sisters who attended to them. They also lost their own household furnishings, like everyone else, save what they had on and what was being washed. They didn’t have a headdress to change, as those that came back from washing were undone to make bandages for the wounded. The *Book of the Sieges* itself would certify later that “there was so much work and so many calamities the Sisters experienced because of the war, that only with the help of God could they overcome them.”

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1808 Zaragoza awoke free of the French when Lefevre received – after the great defeat of Bailén – an order to withdraw. But in their retreat the French left a large part of the city burning; the general Hospital was reduced, forever, to ashes. In this fire we would have lost, among other things, the archives of the Sieges, a source that today would have been priceless to document all these earlier years.

The city was, in those days, a death camp. “The streets – Casamayor gives witness with his ingenuous and inadequate style – were full of ruins, of dead bodies, of horses, all of which gave out an unbearably foul odour; but this brave people suffered everything with great gallantry of spirit on seeing themselves free of such enemies and that María del Pilar had triumphed without any harm to her temple, at which the people had gathered, full of the most expressive gratitude, to give her due thanks.”

## Peace, harsher than war

But if – for the moment – the war ended, there was no end to the misery that followed. The dramatic consequences of the battle remained, harsher than the war itself.

Fortunately, we have ample historical documentation of this period between the two sieges – as the Acts of the Sitiada reappear – and they are truly spine chilling.

To start with, a new installation for the patients and the wounded had to be found, wherever possible and as could be managed during the siege. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of August Palafox gives the order to transfer everyone to the House of Mercy. And now the second transfer begins, even though less dangerous than the first, but far more painful. And it had to be done without waste of time, because many of the wounded would not be able to bear a delay of even one day.

Surprisingly, when a few weeks later Palafox visits the hospital, he could show “his satisfaction on seeing that, in spite of the large number of patients, they were given assistance that could hardly be expected”. “And even – says the Act of the visit – His Excellency had the goodness of tasting the soup that was being given to them and indicated to the patients that they could well have it as it was well seasoned.”

And once again in this Act a significant note on our protagonists appears: “He also noted that the wards of the department directed by the Sisters were well cleaned; but he was not surprised that it was not the same in those looked after by the men, because this is a gender problem.” This sentence, signed by a bureaucratic secretary is a treasure of a eulogy. And to it is added the verification that “there was the care that is rarely found in other hospitals of an infinitely less number of patients than there are in this.”

Soon the new location will be insufficient. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of October a third transfer will have to be made, passing all the civil patients to the old Hospital for Convalescents, while the soldiers remained

in the Hospital of Mercy. In this epoch there were already, apart from the regular 2,000 patients, nothing less than 2,537 soldiers.

The needs were infinite. In October a Charity collection was authorized all over Spain and the religious communities were asked for beds. Patients occupy all the sections of the hospital and the Baron of Purroy has to offer his personal home to hold the meetings of the Board. There is not even have a little corner in the Hospital for the meetings. In this month of October another Circular is dispatched to all the priests and municipalities for the purpose of asking for alms, and a little loan is sought for the hospital.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that the army does not pay for the stay of the wounded soldiers. When they manage to get an order of payment to cover it, it remains only on paper, as they cannot encash it.

The more serious problem was the food. In spite of the gift of 300 head of cattle by the mayor, there was not enough meat for four days of the week, and this in spite of the fact that the ration had been decreased from 10 ounces to 6 ounces.

To make the situation worse, the problem of the wounded French soldiers is added. Some can pay for their expenses, but the greater number have to be received for pure charity.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November there is no meat at all. And, prodigiously, an anonymous person gifts fifty sheep, which serve for another few days. The correspondence of the Board with Palafox in these days is dramatic, pleading with him that some other institution take charge of the soldiers or at least that they be paid for arrears due to the Treasury. After a thousand requests, the mayor pays in advance 40,000 reales of vellón (old Spanish currency).

A new episode in the tragedy: in the beginning of December “putrid fevers” (“rotting”) were declared among the patients. Special wards were set up in the looms of the Misericordia for those who had the contagion. And the problem of hunger continues to be pressing. A document transcribes a dramatic order of Palafox by

which meat is given to the soldiers because they are paying – not paid – for their stay. And in the margin a note reflecting the dramatic misery of the moment: “Could not manage it”.

What do the Sisters do meanwhile? Three documents give us testimony of their activities. And it is difficult to define which of them is the most bloodcurdling.

The first is of the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 1808 and is a note of “the rations got, thanks to the Sisters of Charity”. They are the famous “despintes” (food given by the Sisters, depriving themselves) that we will find all through their life. And in that state of destitution the Sisters even found excessive what they were given and saved part of the penury that they received to return some to the Board for the patients.

The second document is not less touching: and it certifies that during these two years (1808-9), the Sisters renounced completely even the smallest amounts they counted on for their expenses.

But the fact that enhances the value of these two earlier ones is the one that unveils for us, that while they underwent such privation, several Sisters died of fatigue, of hunger, true martyrs of charity. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1808 the Superintendent Fausto Sáez writes to the Count of Sástago telling him how things are in Zaragoza and, without giving it too much importance, drops this piece of news: “On Sunday we buried Mother María Teresa, one of the new ones, and six more are still dangerously ill.” Effectively, in this year 1808 nine Sisters will die and, in the following, three more. It was fatigue, hunger, exhaustion, and contagion. These were the different variants of an enormous love that, surprisingly, still kept them on their feet.

So many deaths began to put in danger the existence of the Fraternity itself, and on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November Fr. Bonal is empowered to abandon his work of “pasionero” (chorister who sings the Passion, *an expressive word with which the priest who was “destined to assist” spiritually – sometimes even materially – the*

*patients of a hospital were designated*) of the Hospital and return to Cataluña, where he will manage to get six religious more. Fortunately, the plant had not dried up and continued offering new fruits to replace those that fell.

## The second siege

The city had not yet recovered from the terror of the first siege when the second arrived, much more horrifying than the first. The pride of Napoleon could not bear having been stopped before a small city and by an unknown general. Therefore, without leaving Zaragoza time to recover from the siege, in December he sent Moncey with a strong army (48,984 soldiers, 5,839 horses and abundant artillery), at the head of which he would later place one of his best generals, Marshal Lannes.

This time Palafox was going to commit a tremendous tactical error. Foreseeing the new enemy assault, he had been creating in Zaragoza, a much superior army to the one that had resisted in the first siege: this time he put together an astounding 35,000 soldiers, such that with the population of Zaragoza (which at that time counted 43,000 inhabitants) is doubled. Palafox did not count on the Captain “Hunger” who is, definitively, the one who always wins in any city under siege. To this is added the abominable health situation of the city, with many dead bodies still not removed from the ruins, exposed to all kinds of epidemics. To top it all, a fairly large percentage of soldiers who had arrived from Valencia and from Murcia were sick and malnourished. Thus the true protagonist of this siege was to be health much more than arms. For each man who died under bombs, four were snatched away by misery and malnourishment.

The whole of Zaragoza was converted into a growing hospital. At the end of December there were more than 6,000 patients in the hospital of Misericordia, and during those two months it is calculated that each day 400 new patients entered the hospitals to occupy the beds of the 350 that died each day.

Reading Casamayor's diary today is like assisting at this savage escalation of illness and death:

*7<sup>th</sup> January:* "The patients continued dying, more each day; and for more comfort of the patients, some houses that were closed because of the absence of the owners were ordered to be opened. They were put there, where a medical group treated the more useful half. Each day it was noted that there were more people falling dead on the streets, because of lack of hospitals and doctors."

*16<sup>th</sup> January:* The patients continued in the greatest hardships and there was no meat for them, nor was there white bread."

*21<sup>st</sup> January:* "These days there was no mutton, not even for the patients, with the hospitals experiencing great need; many died because of scarcity of beds and clothes. The troops specially drew the attention of His Excellency who ordered the Board of Health to declare that the illnesses they suffered were epidemics, to which the answer was "no", but caused by misery, lack of cleanliness, food and beds."

*28<sup>th</sup> January:* "Zaragoza presented today, the most melancholic picture, with so much fire in the air, so much ruin, so much illness and so many dead in wagons that were being taken from hospitals and houses to be buried, and with the lack of food increasing it all."

*29<sup>th</sup> January:* "Today everything was gloomy and the number of patients larger than ever, with three hundred having died which had everyone in the greatest dismay, some fleeing to the houses of others for fear of the bombs and the number of patients reaching such a sizeable number, that the whole immediate circle of the Holy Chapel (of the Pilar) was full of beds and so were even the nearby chapels, which drew the attention of His Excellency who ordered that they be taken away from there and be disinfected. The shortage of bread was no less. They knew no other bread but ammunition. There wasn't any meat either, not even for the patients, which was certainly a sight more depressing and sad than could be imagined."

*31<sup>st</sup> January:* "In everything else it was like the previous day: many patients and very many dead."

*2<sup>nd</sup> of February:* "Today some justice was done, the day starting with the hanging of the administrator of implements for having hidden 20,000 beds when the patients were dying on the floor, for which reason many thousands of soldiers must have died."

*5<sup>th</sup> of February:* "Other bombs also fell in the Hospital of Misericordia and on the Convent of St. Idllefonso, from where it was necessary to transfer the volunteers of Aragón who were ill there; the whole troop or the greater part of the troop fell ill, which was surely one of the biggest misfortunes that ensued."

*7<sup>th</sup> of February:* "These days there was no meat not even for the patients. By order of His Excellency the chicken were not sold for more than four pesetas. Well for some time they were even sold for 80 reales (old Spanish currency). This was for the patients who had increased very much in number. And as many of the troops died as did the residents, which caused the greatest distress, with food and assistance lacking even for the persons concerned themselves."

*9<sup>th</sup> of February:* "It was a very sad and forlorn day to see the large number of dead that were found abandoned in all the streets, especially at the doors of some temples."

*13<sup>th</sup> of February:* "The number of dead increased, and it was necessary to order their burial so as not to see them dead on the streets and piled up at Church doors, most of them with no clothes on, removing them from the hospitals and homes; hence it was ordered that they be taken in wagons to the cemeteries of the convents and parishes as they could not leave the city any more."

*14<sup>th</sup> of February:* "This day things reached such an extreme and urgency, that there was no food, neither for the healthy nor for the sick, and bread was so scarce that it was necessary to keep watch over the ovens, so as to give not more than just one to each one and to the soldiers, eating biscuits; the number of dead and sick having increased so much, that it took more than a day, to administer the Holy Viaticum because of the risk of bombs. The number of

doctors being equally scarce, even though there was no epidemic, the majority died of lack of will power, dirt and misery.”

20<sup>th</sup> of February: “From three to five the bombs caused many casualties that the bell of the big clock could not announce all the deaths.”

When Zaragoza was nothing more than a city of the dying they decided to surrender. When the tally was taken, there were 52,000 dead bodies not yet buried lying in it.

Pérez Galdos has painted these final hours pathetically, putting in the mouth of his Gabriel Aracelli this description:

“I am lifeless and I cannot move. These men I see passing in front of me do not look like men. They are thin, emaciated and their faces would be yellow if they were not blackened with dust and smoke. Below that black eyebrow shine eyes that cannot see except through killing. They cover themselves with dirty tatters and a tiny kerchief encircles their head like a cord. They are so squalid that they look like the dead piled on the street of the Press that had been raised to relieve the living. At intervals, between the columns of smoke, can be seen the dying in whose ears a friar murmurs religious thoughts. Neither do the dying understand nor does the friar know what he says. Religion itself is perplexed and half crazy. Generals, soldiers, peasants, friars, women, all are confused. There is no distinction of class or gender. Nobody controls any more, and the city defends itself in anarchy.”

Galdós is right when he describes the horror of this hour. But he is mistaken to think that nobody knows what he is saying, that no one struggles with his or her faith well grounded in his or her head.

And, fortunately, we do not have, not even this time, to have recourse to legends. The historical documents – short, but sufficient – document for us the tremendous energy of María Rafols and her sisters in this terrible hour.

To her work with the sick will be added now what is done with the prisoners, much more difficult than what the patients demand. The Acts of the Sitiada contribute sufficient documentation. The one of the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1811 transcribes for us the official petition made by the Commandant of the Plaza so that “the Sisters of Charity take charge of cooking and distributing the food of the prisoners of war.” And in the Act of Resignation of Mother María of September of the same year, we find the allusion to what “they had tried to fulfil... with the duty given to them by the Government for the assistance and relief of the poor prisoners.”

There must have been no lack of complications in this work. Do we have to believe here the narrations created by the tradition of the Sisters and according to which the Mother would have used her ingenuity to liberate some of these prisoners, dressing them as women or camouflaging them in the food wagons or in the wagons of the dead? It is difficult to be sure. What is certain is that there are many documents that seem to establish a curious relationship between “the clothes” and “liberty”. Here we have below some things taken from the certifications given to Fr. Bonal in 1817 and 1828:

“The universal care of the captives was always handled by the priests of this House... many were ransomed, they were prepared, and with ingenious charity given clothes and footwear and with it, just freedom”. What “ingenious” charity is this? “And during the siege a countless number of prisoners received from this pious asylum clothes with which to cover themselves and with it many of them recovered their desired liberty.” Why, once again this relationship between clothes and liberty? Any number of ancient documents of the period would confirm what tradition points out.

And what can one think of the famous visit that Mother Rafols had made to the French lines to plead of the French Generals the freedom of several persons condemned to death? This narration appears, with some variants – sometimes it is General Lefevre, others it is Lannes; sometimes it is during battle, at others on the

conclusion of the same – in diverse reports presented by the Sisters in the Process of Beatification and seems very solid in the tradition transmitted within the Congregation. But, is it historical? The harshness of the French generals, the terrible atmosphere in which they then lived, would invite one to think that this concerns more a beautiful legend than a reality. Lannes softening himself before the pleading of a woman, when so cunningly most of the times he breached the things signed in the surrender of the city! However, the historical data is once again in favour of tradition.

We know for certain that the Sisters “went, in the midst of fierce gun battle, to cure the wounded Spanish in the French field itself” (*Report* of 1869). We know – and here, two documents coincide to the letter, of 1820 and 1828, signed by Don Vicente Ximénez and Don Agustín Sevil in strong commendatory letters of Fr. Bonal – where Fr. Bonal “together with the Sisters of Charity managed to free two Spanish sentenced to death.” It can be then that the scene – the general on horseback, getting down to receive the Sister; or the Sister entering into the victory banquet – be an imaginative addition of tradition. But the substantial fact is related in the documents of the period.

And if this occurred with the prisoners, how much more with the sick, who were their children as of always! Nobody is surprised that at the moments of greatest hunger of the second siege, Mother Maria crossed the enemy lines and reached “Torrero to plead of the Besieging General provisions for her patients” (*Report* of 1869). But this time let us leave the word to Mother Josefa Bádenas, who tells us with her simple language:

“During the sieges of Zaragoza, the essentials were lacking for the sustenance of the patients. And Mother Rafols, with two other religious, one named Tecla Cantí and I think the other was called Juliana, went to the French camp crossing through great danger and many threats of the advance parties of the enemy and, after great difficulties and insults, managed to arrive in the presence of the French general, to whom they exposed, in the Catalan language,

the financial stringency and the misery that afflicted the Holy Hospital because of lack of means and provisions. They spoke to the French general with so much humility and such persuasive words, that he granted their petitions, giving them provisions and besides a safe-conduct document which I myself saw in the cupboard of the Holy Hospital, and which Mother Martina Balaguer showed me, so that Mother Rafols and the Sisters could continue collecting the remains and left-overs of bread and meat of the French army.

This is how Maria Rafols acquired the right to be considered the angel of the Sieges of Zaragoza. If in those days other women stood out for their bravery at the cannons, there was one woman who – captaining a group of Sisters – knew to be at the side of the other, much more important canon of love. Where others destroyed, they cured. Where others shot with hatred, they put bandages with love. It was the heroism of those who love in silence, of those who give witness to the fact that God is Life in the midst of death.



## IX. THE WIND OF INGRATITUDE

When a war finishes, the war does not end. It is difficult to say, whether in a war, the worst is to fight or to grapple its consequences. For Zaragoza, certainly, the first years of the French domination were not easier than the terrible ones of the sieges. The surrender stopped the killings, but not death.

The disorder in the city was absolute. The simple removal of the dead from the debris took several weeks, so epidemics continued destroying lives: 8,000 civilians died only in the first year of the French occupation. The prisons were overflowing with prisoners, the hospitals with patients. The principal defenders of the city – Palafox among them – were deported. Zaragoza was evacuated of Spanish troops and the French imposed a dominion not less hateful than the siege.

Sadness dominated the Zaragozans. In their humbled pride not many dared even to leave their houses. Hatred towards the invader seemed to have multiplied now that he had been converted into the owner and lord and he did everything possible for his status as conqueror to be clear at all times.

The grand hospital being integrally destroyed and without possibilities of reconstruction, one had to be resigned to the idea of installing the new – giving it the old and glorious name of Nuestra Señora de Gracia – in place of what was for the convalescents, founded in 1677 by Don Diego Castrillo, the then Archbishop of Zaragoza. Besides, as this building was not designed as a hospital as such, many necessary conditions were lacking. It was composed only of two enormous rooms without light downstairs to which another two were added in the upper floor, without sufficient height and without vaulting. The result was a unit lacking hygiene, comfort and free movement. But what it had, had to be accepted; they were only able to persuade General Suchet to permit joining the old

convent of the Nuns of the Encarnación to it. But even with this addition, the hospital was so oppressive because of the number of patients, that Count Sástago himself would relate, in one of his letters that “on entering through the doors of the Hospital joy left him and he was overwhelmed with grief”.

It would be in this sad place where María Rafols and her companions would live out their lives and where they would have to supply with their own efforts, the lack of joy of the place where, even without preserving on their old iron gates the glorious title of “*Domus Infirmorum Urbis et Orbis*” it is nothing but a weak souvenir of the gigantic edifice that preceded it.

Here María Rafols would live for more than forty years “governing her small community with vigour and gentleness”, “loving silence and inculcating it in her daughters”, as they later related to their successors. She would be ahead always with her example, not as superior who orders from a distance, but rather as one who doesn’t shrink from being near the patients, “being nearest the most serious and most repugnant principally”, practicing with them all kinds of works of mercy, trying to get them spiritual consolation up to a point where, as one of her daughters remembered, “none of the patients assisted by her died without the Sacraments”. This would oblige her “not to stop, neither day nor night” till the point where, “when some of the other Sisters went for night-duty, they found that she had been there before them to do the necessary services.”

In these years work multiplied because everyone went to them for the discharge of all the delicate services: in 1811 they were put in charge of cooking and distributing the food to the prisoners. Later, the Spanish officials, imprisoned in the Castle of Zaragoza, sent a petition to the Commandant of the Plaza, in which they said that, “on the other difficulties that Your Lordship is not unaware that they have to put up with, it is found that the rations supplied to them by the Government cannot be eaten and they are wasted because of lack of condiments”. And it continues: “Desiring to trouble the Government as little as possible, and having learnt of

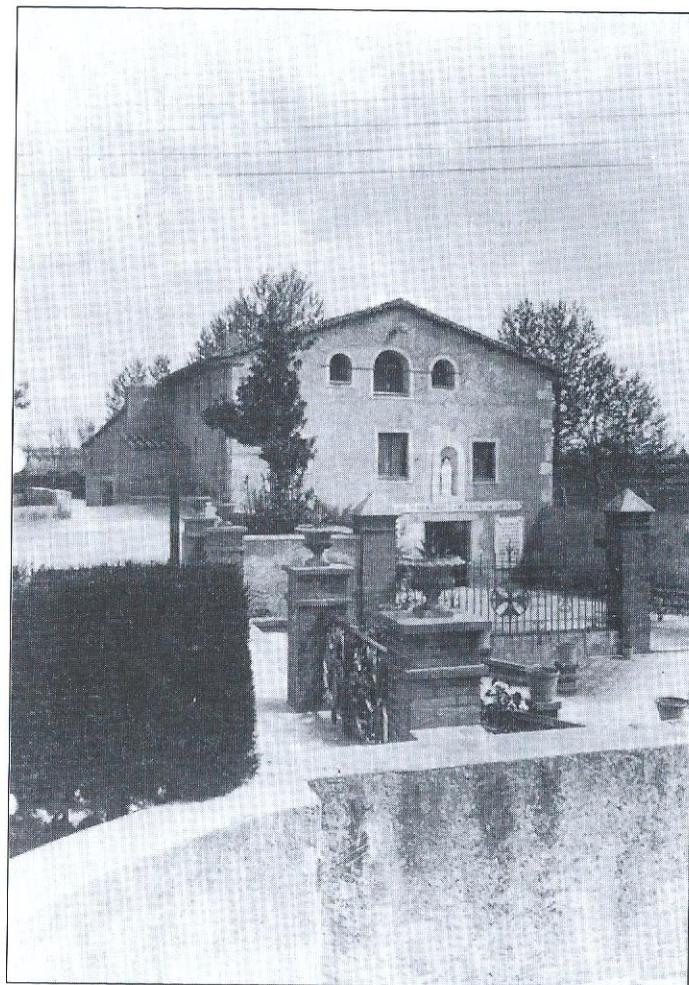
the examples that exist in the Hospital of our countrymen, a Fraternity of Charity which has managed the functions of seasoning the food of the Spanish prisoners and other works of the Institute, we supplicate you to deign to decree that the Sisters of Charity of the Hospital of the countrymen of this city continue their good offices as they have done with other prisoners, so that we do not die of hunger and the rations that are so conscientiously and wisely ordered by the Government to be given may not be wasted". And the Sisters will have to take charge of this too.

If this was not too little, when some turmoil took place in the Hospital of Torrero, the Administrator of the Sitiada, Señor Herran proposed that two of the Sisters spend the night there to direct the care of those infirmaries. The Sitiada would respond that, "there being many Sisters ill, they can hardly cope with attending to the Hospital", besides the fact that there could be some inconveniences "for them to spend the night in that place". The solution is that of Solomon: they would not spend the night there, but two of them would go to this hospital every day to attend to it. There is more still: they even ask them to accompany those who are condemned to death. And our Sisters would reach up to the scaffold of the gallows to extend their tenderness.

And now once again the astonishment: in the midst of so much misery, in this climate of absolute hunger, the miserable quantities of food they received was extra for them and the Acts of the Sitiada are full of receipts of these "despintes" (their rations that they gave back for the patients) given back by them:

*16<sup>th</sup> September 1809:* The Sisters of Charity have been of help in the past months of July and August giving 576 rations of bread and 358 of meat.

*17<sup>th</sup> February 1810:* The Sisters of Charity have in the months of October, November and December of 1809 surrendered the quantity of 679 rations of meat, which makes 56 pounds and 21 ounces, and 252 rations of bread.



*House where María Rafols was born in Villafranca del Panadés, slightly done up at present.*



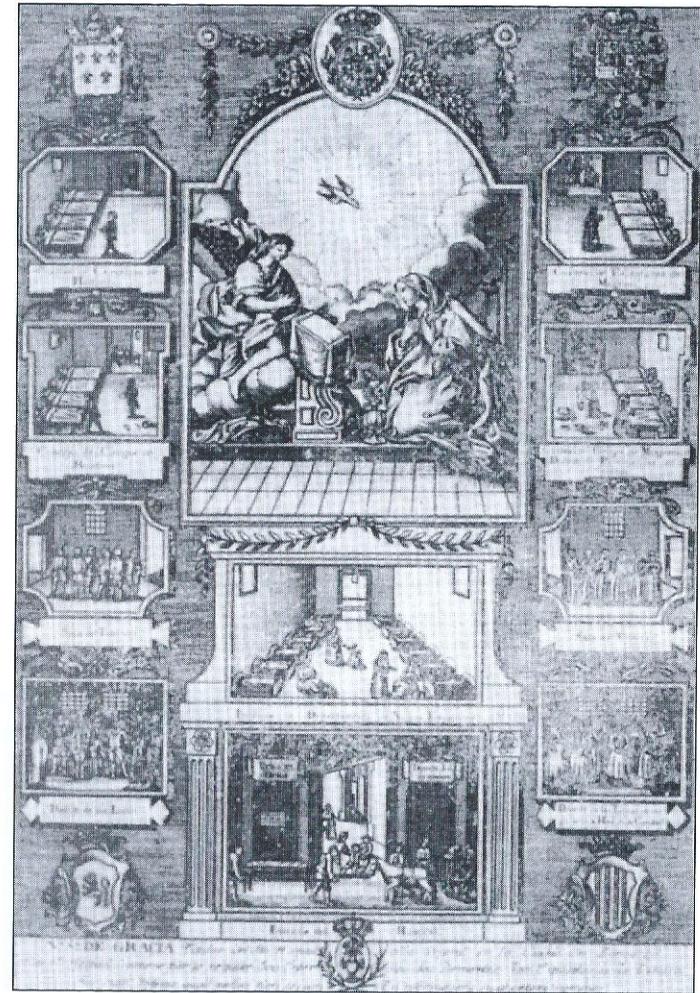
*Pictorial reconstruction of the figure of Mother Rafols, done according to the insights of her contemporaries.*



*Fr. Juan Bonal*



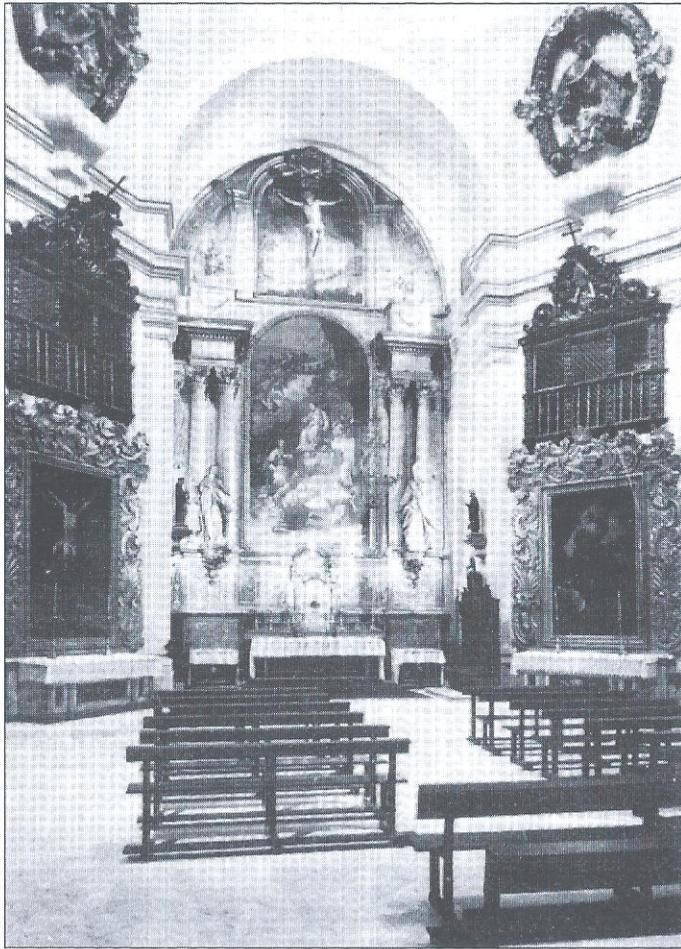
*Sculptural group of St. Joaquim, Saint Anne and the Virgin Child which the first Sisters took from Barcelona to Zaragoza when they went to found the new house.*



*Vision of the Hospital and its diverse wards, according to an engraving of the epoch. In the centre, the image of Our Lady of Grace.*



*The old Hospital of the Convalescents, when the patients were installed after the Sieges.*



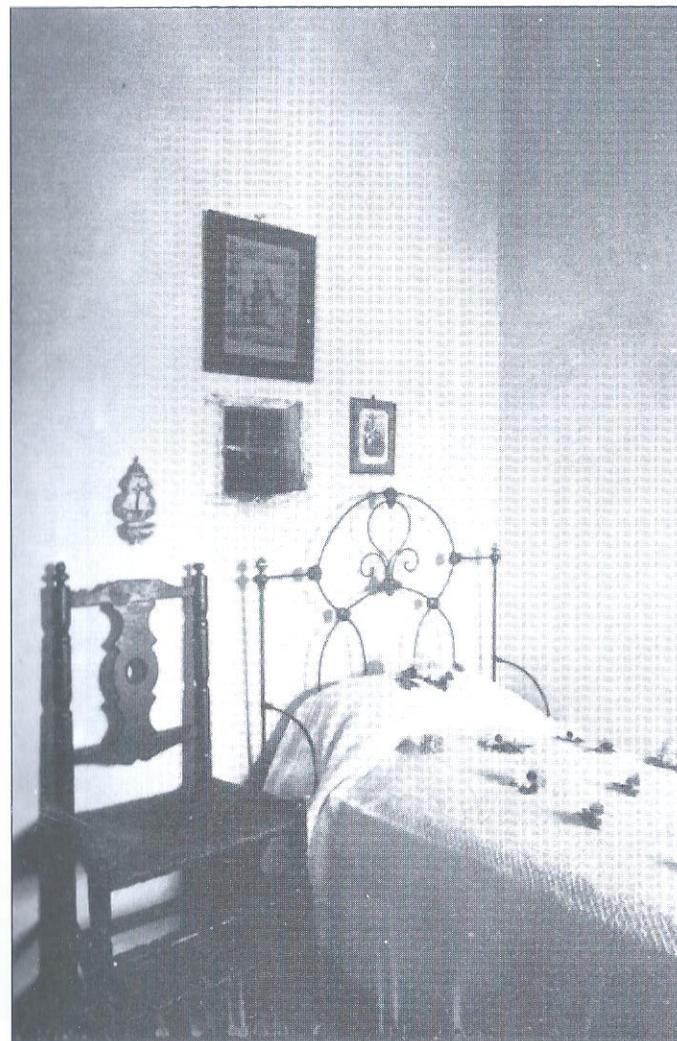
*Principal Church of the Hospital, with the lattice windows where Mother Rafols often used to go to pray.*



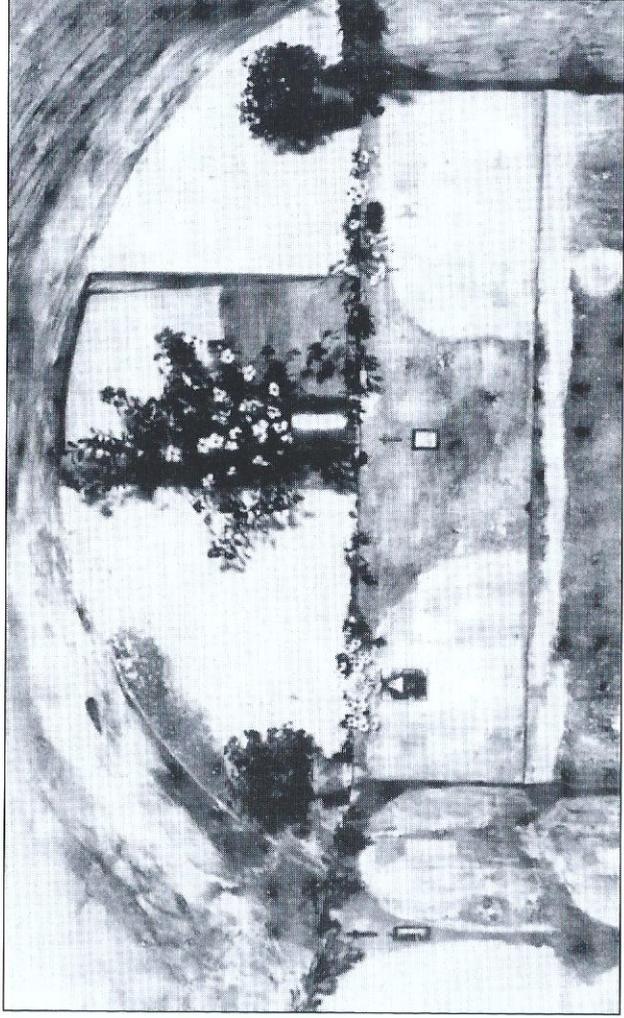
*The Foundling Hospital where Mother María lived out the larger part of her life.*



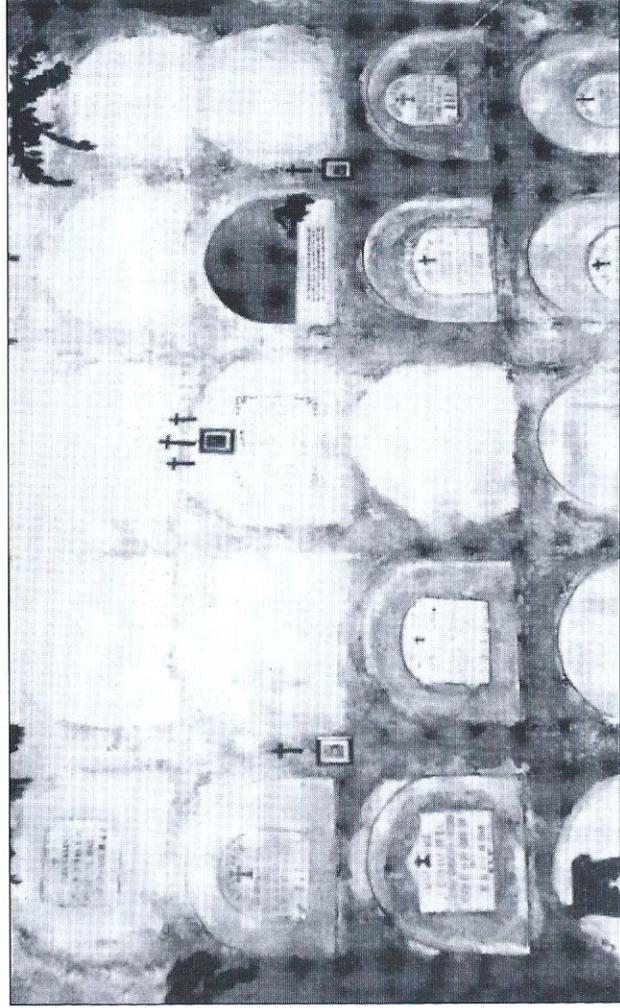
*The Old Prison of the Inquisition, in which Mother María was more than a month waiting for the judgement that would declare her innocent.*



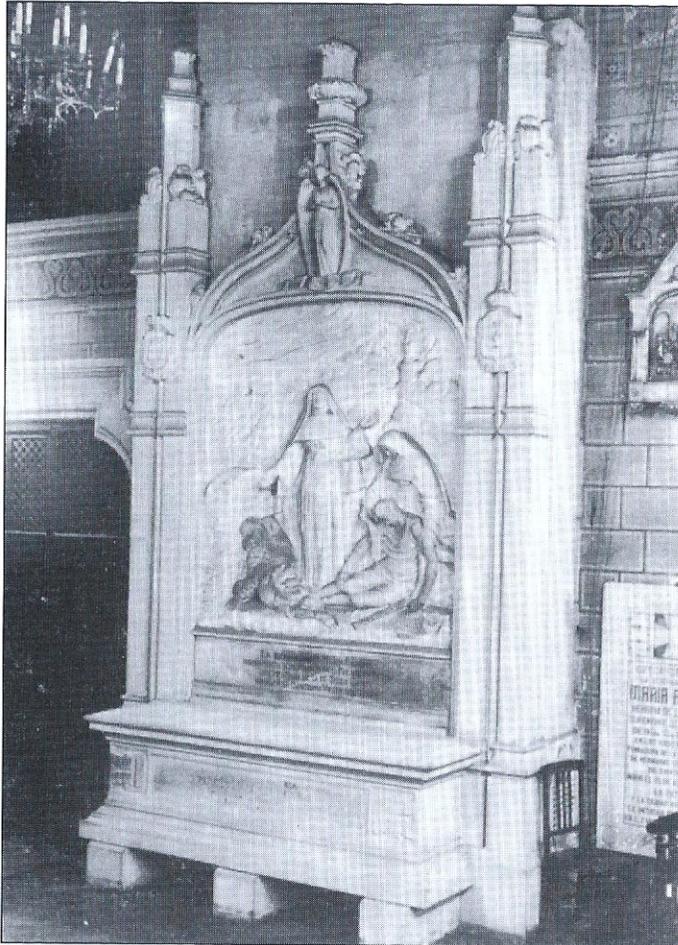
*Cell in which Mother María died, with the bed and some articles used by her.*



*Niches in which the remains of Mother Rafols and Fr. Bonal rested till 1925,  
when they were transferred to their new sepulchres.*



*Niches where the remains of the First Sisters rest,  
part of them of completely nameless.*



*The new sepulchre of Mother Rafols, at the Novitiate House of Zaragoza. Sculpture of José Bueno.*

*12<sup>th</sup> June 1810:* Don Mariano Roncal presented an account that the Sisters of Charity had surrendered, in the first six months of 1810, the ration allotted for them, and it is the following: Meat 2,450 rations, which makes 204 pounds and six ounces. Bread 864 rations, which makes 288 pounds.

*22<sup>nd</sup> October 1810:* The Secretary makes an entry in the Cashier's Office on page 47: 200 pounds, 13 sueldos, 8 dineros (old Spanish currency) that have been ceded by the Sisters of Charity to benefit the poor patients of this holy Hospital, which quantity is noted in their Assistance Certificates with what they had to contribute, corresponding to the years 1808 and 1809.

*9<sup>th</sup> November 1810:* The Sisters of Charity have not taken, in the whole month of September 1810, 770 rations of meat, which makes 64 pounds and six ounces. They have also not received in that same month, one arroba, and twenty pounds of bread in 168 rations.

The list could be enormous: month after month, punctually, the scribes keep certifying that the religious (to whom was allotted the same food as to the ecclesiastics) returned a large part of what was received: either the ecclesiastics were served a lot of food or they ate very little!

There is still more: the religious not only returned from their nations, but also what charity brought to their pockets. In this field the enormous pockets of Mother Rafols are very justly famous. They were like an itinerant pantry in which there was always something. As a witness said, it was not at all strange that "because of the prestige of her virtue she would receive alms and donations for her patients and foundlings", for which the book of Acts of the Sitiada could well qualify the alms as "plentiful".

She had special affection towards the prisoners, to whom "she supplied all kinds of food". Chocolate, sponge cake and all kinds of sweets that she bought with the alms that people gave her. At other times the officials and prisoners themselves "asked her to buy

that dainty food – chocolate – for pounds or quarter pounds and she would conscientiously get it, even order it to be made, according to the importance of the duty undertaken”. And this charity would give her, as we will see, many a headache.

In this period we also come across once again, with accounts, which we do not know whether to attribute to history or to golden legend. Fr. Calasanz Rabaza describes them with naturalness and enthusiasm. They are also counted as real religious as they have lived always, by tradition in their communities. Sanz Artibucilla himself – even though less rhetorically – considers them good. Here is the summary

“Their presence illumined the sad hours of the prison; they were always accepted with joy; in their zeal for charity, no obstacle came in their way, and thus, today one and tomorrow another, using clever stratagems, helped their escape, changing their clothes, taking them in the wagons of the dead and under the supply wagon. This was a rashness bordering on madness; a constant exposure of their lives; but the Lord safeguarded them in a surprising manner. Accusations followed: The wagon was detained in one of the trips and providentially that day they were not carrying any prisoner and they let it pass. But they were not always so fortunate. Another time they caught them saving prisoners. She was already on her knees offering her life to the Lord and waiting for the unloading when those men accustomed to the horrors of war, for no human reason whatsoever that could explain it, lowered their arms and they left her in peace. The attitude of the servant of God disarmed them; the magic of her goodness conquered the ire of the warriors.”

History? Little flowers of legend? We would need much more data and documents to respond to these questions.

We know then, on the other hand, other problems, far more painful and vivid with no less spiritual surrender. What is brilliant is not always the most important.

Because a cruel wind begins to blow around Mother Rafols and her sisters. In *The Backless Shoe* of Claudel, one of the characters asks the king of Spain what prize he had prepared for Rodrigo, the man who has conquered several nations in America for the Spanish crown. And the king answers: “My son, his recompense will be the only thing that is sufficiently great for him: Ingratitude.”

Ingratitude, this will be the dark shadow that will fill the dream of Mother Maria for several months. At the Board of the Sitiada that governs the hospital most of the gentlemen loved and appreciated them. Those who had just arrived were pro-French, people who are at the mercy of new ideas and who try to be on the good side of the new governing persons. They are people who have constantly exhibited their “openness of spirit” and one already knows that there is no worse progressive person than the one who needs to demonstrate it every day. They are people who mistrust the Sisters, see them as enemies. And they behave with truly incomprehensible niggardliness with them.

And they go to attack the most absurd. Haven’t the nuns always shown the same generosity, the same sacrifice in everything? The new directors are going to accuse them of being wasters, of being squanderers. Is there a more absurd accusation? There isn’t, but they chose this as if they know that there is nothing that hurts them more than, having been generous, to be accused of being miserly.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1811, when the Acts were full of the excess of generosity of the Sisters, the new Accountant of the Board asks them to give an exact account of the alms they receive in the collections in the Churches.

And on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, one more false report: After the Acts insisting once again on them presenting their accounts with minute detail, a new intrigue is added:

“That they themselves give an account of the expenses occasioned and what the chicken house produces, the pigeons and the rabbits, indicating what they do with the produce.”

Any motive is good to cause harm! And a good scribe feels very proud because he “is going to keep a close rein on the little nuns”.

This time Mother María cannot contain herself and, in a document that impresses one at the same time for its humility and its resoluteness, begins assuring that “the Sisters of this Holy Hospital, obedient to the dispositions of Your Most Illustrious Excellency, present the accounts of the amounts declared and are committed to hand over, weekly in the Receiver’s Office, whatever is collected in it from now on.”

But, once obedience was expressed, she proclaims that the Sisters “have left their own food and the assistance with which they contribute for their indispensable expenses in favour of the poor; these facts being generally known, they stand out in the account books of the hospital”. She then goes on to explain – countering another calumny – that no chocolate has passed through the hands of the Sisters other than that given in alms for the patients and which the wealthy prisoners asked them to buy. Because “the Sisters only have it when they are ill and the doctor orders it”.

She then goes on to the topic of the hens and the rabbits and adds:

“The Sisters have never had pigeons nor hens and have never invested anything in this field: and if they had six hens that Don Genaro Labairu brought from Huesca, sent by the Sisters of that city, with the hospital spending nothing on it, and thinking they could not be of benefit to the hospital, they were killed and put in the cooking pot for their sustenance; and that they had some rabbits and that they were in no way burdensome, as they were maintained with grass from the orchard and that the Sisters are ready to do with them what the Sitiada ordains; consequently, it is inferred that there was no utility whatsoever in those fields of which the Sisters could give an account”.

The faultfinding and niggardly zeal of the new directors is impressive as a contrast to the abundant generosity of the religious Sisters. But unfortunately, this niggardliness was only the first of the contentions of the great battle that was being got readied and which would endanger even the existence of the Fraternity.

What is there under all this? There is, suddenly, a profound ideological quarrel that the political problems are going to complicate. The pro-French see in María Rafols and Fr. Juan Bonal two remnants of a world that they want to erase. And instead of initiating a serious dialogue with them, clarifying postures, they try – urged on by this tense political climate – to disqualify them just like that: they are enemies who have to be put out of the game so as to be able to apply their ideas and reforms. Unfortunately, those who come with more liberal ideas will act like the worst dictators, they will oppress, and they will crush. This way of putting into action their plan led to the interminable carlista wars. Here there will not be war. The pro-French have run into a man and a woman of God, who would fight quietly and clearly, who would let themselves be stepped upon and would accept humiliations in silence. May be for them the third great “siege of Zaragoza” would now start. In the interior of their souls.



## X. THE INTERIOR WAR

From the 29<sup>th</sup> of April 1811, the date on which the new Board of the Sitiada is elected, this third Siege starts for the Sisters, which will make them suffer even more than the earlier ones. Surprisingly, it is their lot to play the role of “the bad guy” of the story by a personage who doesn’t seem to be called for it. The Capuchin Friar Miguel de Santander (baptised Joaquín Suárez Victorica, will be known as Miguel Suárez of Santander) is, undoubtedly, one of the most interesting personages of the period. He was born in 1744, and was already 67 years old at the moment of our story. A man of a sincere interior life, of really extraordinary oratorical and journalistic gifts, of solid formation and well-informed, open to all foreign currents, above all the French, can be considered as the most important reviver of sacred preaching at the end of the XVIIIth century. Fray Diego de Cádiz, who was a great friend and admirer, qualified him as “a wise man of the first order, a most religious and exemplary man... one of the columns that God had placed in our days so as to sustain true piety, virtue and religion”.

After many years of exemplary work as preacher in the whole of Galicia, Leon and the two Castilles, he is named Auxiliary Bishop to Don Ramon-José de Arce, Archbishop of Zaragoza, who at that time resided in Madrid because of his duty as Inquisitor-General.

He carried on his apostolic activity in Zaragoza with great zeal from 1803, but his life was altered notably by the invasion of the Napoleonic troops. At this time Friar Miguel de Santander casts his lot with the French without vacillation and he places himself passionately at their service. His good intention cannot be questioned in his zeal for the modernization of the nation and Spanish Catholicism, but the options to which such an incisive bet led him to, are debatable, yes.

In 1809 we see him presiding at the “Te Deum” and preaching the sermon of Thanksgiving for the surrender of Zaragoza. We see him equally rhetorical at the sacred prayer at the feast day of the intruder king and on the occasion of other victories of the French over the Spanish troops. And – what is more serious – we see him in 1810 accepting at the hand of José Buonaparte his nomination for the diocese of Huesca and his taking possession – without having received the necessary Roman bulls – of the diocese of Huesca surrounded by French troops and under the Presidency of General Suchet.

The judgement of Menendez Pelayo is, for all this, less eulogistic than that of Blessed Diego of Cadiz, “With such bitter and intimate pain it has to be said – writes don Marcelino – that in the Spanish episcopacy there weren’t lacking some who volunteered to bless that bloody usurpation! Like this too (it is painful to say so, even though the truth obliges one to do so) the eloquent Capuchin missionary Fray Miguel de Santander, Auxiliary Bishop of Zaragoza, who anti-canonically took power of the Bishopric of Huesca, with the help of the troops of General Lannes.”

Unfortunately neither in our story did Fray Santander play a very precisely lucid role: submitted to the influence of the French rulers, he acted, being as he was a liberal, with the worst style of the worst dictator, if such be possible, that many of the persecutions that was the lot of our Sisters to live through would pass unnoticed by him and would be the work of people of the second order.

Because the war had, effectively, begun. And it had three central objectives: the first was to submit the Sisters fully and totally to the desires, style and manner of the new Board. The other two – necessary to achieve the first – were to marginalize Mother Maria and Fr. Juan, the only ones with prestige to resist this assault.

The tactic against Mother Maria was that of the insignificant details, the controls, and the zeal, to which will be later added calumnies. So many years of work in Zaragoza gave the Zaragozans absolute confidence in Mother Maria: the best donations went to

her directly, she was called when a will was to be made in favour of the Hospital, she was consulted by the Parish priest when a patient or an orphan child was to be taken there. Soon the new administrator wanted to centralize all this, indicating that all these functions were not hers, as if something turbid was to be hidden when it was done directly with the Mother. There was even a case where calumny was openly crossed which involved a jealous parish priest of the city, a case where the Mother would shoot out a valiant manuscript addressed to the Archbishop of the city “manifesting the plain and simple truth to vindicate my honour and that of my Sisters”.

But the worst part of this war is that it suddenly achieved something more serious: create divisions in the bosom of the Fraternity. It is what years later Don Ramón Segura would indicate as the birth of a partisan spirit which would be resolved with the resignation and virtue of “the prudent Mother Maria”.

Effectively, this heroic woman that had borne up with all kinds of suffering – bombarding, hunger, quarrels, calumnies – understood now that it was preferable to renounce her position: the union among the Sisters went beyond personal reasons. It was thought that without her, everything would be settled. And generously she left her Charge. Even though later we will see, the wound too deep to be cured, only with generosity.

Here is the document that expounds this resignation in the Acts of the Sitiada:

“Sister María Rafols, Superior of the Sisters of Charity, expounded in a memorial that, having been named for this job and confirmed in it by the Most Illustrious Sitiada, has endeavoured to fulfil this duty in all its aspects, as also with the charge given to her by the Government for the assistance and relief of poor prisoners. And, this job being of such responsibility, and having served in it already for seven years, she desires to rest from this fatigue for sometime. She finds herself troubled in some periods and hence thinks she will feel relieved if you exonerate her from this

obligation. And for all this, pleads of the Sitiada to deign to attend to her request and exonerate her from the job of Superior, remaining always with desires to fulfil the dispositions of the Sitiada, recognising the singular benefits and affectionate demonstrations she has merited from the same for the space of seven years.”

With difficulty will we find a more serene and impartial document than this. No one will deduce from it the tremendous interior torment from which it came. Everything is camouflaged under the three “ages” (the Mother writes ‘aje’ with g) which probably were true weaknesses, as effectively the health not only of the Superior, but of the major part of the Sisters, was at that time very beaten up.

Impressed perhaps by the quality of the document – or because it still didn’t have its strategy sufficiently prepared – the members of the Sitiada acted this time with moderation: even accepting the resignation, they asked Mother Rafols to continue as President till a new order was passed. With this her mandate will be prolonged by one year, a difficult year too, as we will see.

### **The new Constitutions**

The principal battle was that of the new Constitutions. And here we find our first surprise. Fray Santander himself, after indicating that the Sisters are “women adorned with the spirit of God, who sacrifice themselves for the health of their neighbour” and after recognising having received great spiritual consolation on examining their moral customs, “the good example that they give and the edification they cause by their solidly virtuous conduct”, adds something surprising: they lack “written rules” that organise their active and contemplative life. “We have not found Constitutions approved and published by the Most Illustrious Sitiada, neither admitted nor signed by the Sisters, so that everyone knows our mutual obligations and that they be fulfilled like a sacred contract by both parties.”

It is right, effectively, to say there are no Constitutions “approved and published by the Sitiada”, but not to affirm that there do not exist any. And the famous *Notebook* of Fr. Bonal, which has governed their life during these years and which we have the good fortune of knowing today in not less than three copies, published with a very detailed study of Tellechea?

As it does not seem probable that Fray Santander lies openly, one will have to think that the Sisters had maintained these norms as their internal rules without presenting them – to avoid frictions – to the men of the Sitiada, as even the earlier Board would never have accepted their trying to search for union among the Fraternities, in the style of a true Congregation, which appears clearly in the notebook.

What is certain is that the new President of the Board, or by disciplinarian zeal, or – as Fr. Calasanz Rabaza suggests, with cruel irony – “to achieve the honours of founder”, he prepared a new Constitution without certainly having been asked by them in any way for new rules.

And this is how on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1811 the Sitiada received the following letter from its President: “Desiring to satisfy the obligations that are included in the duty that the Most Illustrious Sitiada has deigned to place as my Charge, I have formed among the frequent occupations of my pastoral ministry, the present Constitutions for the Sisters of Charity, servants of the patients of the Hospital, whose direction is managed by Your Lordships with such great care.”

It is fitting to point out a paragraph that is absolutely fundamental to describe the spirit of these Constitutions and of its author from this prologue to this long letter :

“I have looked at the small Society of the Sisters, not as just a few and poor women who at the moment serve with edification. I have not looked at them as a toddler in the cradle that has nothing to be afraid of and distrust, but

keeping in view the coming centuries and learning from past experiences which, beginning weak, became strong and almost irresistible, I have totally closed the door to any exaltation on their part, establishing inalterably their absolute subordination to the Sitiada. This is the corner stone on which the building of these Constitutions was raised.”

It is difficult to find a sadder paragraph: starting from the disdain with which the Sisters are treated (“some few and poor women”), it seems that the only important thing was to chain them, foreseeing possible future “independent management”, “to fear and distrust” that one day they become important, tie them up not to obedience, but to “absolute subordination”. A sad, unstable corner-stone on which to construct a building! Sad spirit of a dictator that seems to have no horizon beyond chaining them down.

Surprisingly, the Constitutions that follow this depressing prologue do not lack grandeur in many of its paragraphs and manage to set forth ideas that would not make one suspect. The reference to the Bible is constant; the spiritual bases continue to be centered in charity; the model of religious life proposed is of persuasion and liberty, not of violence; the equilibrium between the active and the contemplative life continue with solidity. But the disciplinarian spirit invades and ruins everything. As these mad men are normal people in everything except in one theme, so Fray Santander constructs magnificent pages in all the cases except in the infallible postscripts in which free and religious obedience is mixed up with submission to the whims and fancies of the lay patron. In all his pages there is a kind of obsession to convince them that they are more servants than religious, more a servile group than a community of service:

“You do not form a religious congregation approved by the Church, you all are not more than servants of Jesus Christ destined to the care of the sick of this Holy Hospital, under the obedience of the Most Illustrious Sitiada, of the Regidor of the week and of that person to whom the daily, weekly, monthly or annual distribution of your occupations is entrusted. What a sure life for Heaven! Because each one of the Sisters, at the beginning of each month,

has before her eyes the orders of the immediate superior, approved by the Sitiada of the previous month, and says: I have come to assist the sick. Here things with which I have to occupy this time are ordered. God orders this through my prelates. This is the will of God. I am going to fulfil it for obedience and charity. With this simple and solid method all causes that could induce disagreements are exiled forever from the hospital.”

How truth and lies, pious exhortation and hypocrisy are mixed up in this paragraph! How badly free Christian obedience is differentiated from “I ordain and I command” of the men of this world!

For greater irony, the Sitiada is still presented as a fountain of generosity: the Sisters will receive fourteen duros a year, room, headdress, frugal food. They can receive chocolate as a gift but never money and even the chocolate, with the permission of the Regidor. Even though “total detachment of all possessions” is indicated as the ideal, they are provided with fourteen duros a year as a grand gift, as “in proportion to the elaborate effort in serving, it has been the goodness of the Most Illustrious Sitiada to pay”.

This was certainly not the most glorious work of the illustrious capuchin. Certainly there are in it pages of high spirituality, but two defects corrode it from its roots: the first, lack of generosity to look backwards and recognise that the Sisters already had a father who had given them a deep religious root: the second, the lack of audacity to look to the future: the zeal to subject the Sisters to the Sitiada in the present, made them forget about the future evolution and the tendency of the whole group to look for stable and permanent forms.

The punishment of this double de-focusing was the negative significance they had in the history of the Congregation. Two years after their editing, they disappeared when the French Sitiada left. They were not even printed and only very recently was it done by Tellechea.

And in *The Extract of the Rules and Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Anne* that was printed in Zaragoza in 1833 it was assured that those of Fray Santander “did not come to have effect”. On the other hand, when talking about those of 1824 the Foreword that Fray Manuel Gil Garcia wrote to be put before the cited *The Extract* was copied: “As the Rules and Constitutions printed in 1824 ensure that they are the same as those in this House of Zaragoza and are being faithfully observed from the year 1805, when the actual Sisters of Charity were established in this house, we will not be able to reform them now, stripping them like this of the venerable antiquity and separating us from what the experience of so many years has tested and confirmed.”

This is how history is going to prove the “notebook” right as against the very updated “wisdom” of the great preacher.

The Sitiada had – thank God for that – the delicacy of passing on to the Sisters the model of the new Constitutions, even though they did not take into account that maybe Mother Maria would have sufficient gallantry to put, very humbly, that “yes”, and give the final touches to the project. The greatest fruit of these Constitutions was to give the moral support to the document in which, signed by all, the enormous prudence and practical sense, besides the resoluteness of Mother Maria was displayed.

The manuscript begins with reminding one that the Fraternity did not start from zero, and openly citing their true father, Don Juan Bonal, and indicating how the Sisters got along always perfectly with the earlier Sitiada:

“These things (among others) were dealt with and agreed upon between the Regidores, on the part of the Holy Hospital, and the presbyter Don Juan Bonal, on the part of the Sisters: and in this came the first concept and all the others that have followed them: and thus it has been observed till now, as far as possible. The Sisters however, being content with less and even with only a plate of beans with no bread, when the extraordinary public needs that had

has before her eyes the orders of the immediate superior, approved by the Sitiada of the previous month, and says: I have come to assist the sick. Here things with which I have to occupy this time are ordered. God orders this through my prelates. This is the will of God. I am going to fulfil it for obedience and charity. With this simple and solid method all causes that could induce disagreements are exiled forever from the hospital.”

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occurred in these years have not permitted the Sitiada paying them what had been agreed upon.”

The Mother has taken great care to remind the Sitiada that she has to fulfil what had been agreed upon and to affirm that, if they had not demanded it, it does not mean that the obligation was suppressed. She indicates then with bravery her decision of obedience, but also the obligation of the Superiors to govern well, and makes them aware about the interference of “second rank bosses” who do nothing more than disturb the peace of the community:

“The Sisters are very clear that they have not come to this house to order, but to obey, and in this they recognize a very sure and easy means of serving God, doing His Will in that of their Superiors, who take upon themselves the work of discovering, meditating, determining and preparing things, with no other care on their part than that of executing them the best they can. And they will have their greatest satisfaction, calm and rest that they and only the Lord Regidors who, without interest or hope of any temporal recompense, have always lent themselves to this charitable service of God in His poor sick; well persuaded that with their superior lights, zeal and prudence they will always lay down what is most appropriate. They will govern in the best manner, without passion of any kind or self-interest, rivalry or emulation, to be feared in any other that is dependent. It would be very sensible on the part of the Sisters, not to want anything more than to work in peace.”

It is difficult to say what draws more attention, their courage on proclaiming their rights or the delicacy with which they defend it. This woman has her heart very high, but her feet are on the ground. That is why now, after pointing out that they take charge of the utter poverty in which the Hospital lives, and after ensuring “that they are happy and they make others happy with what can be given to them”, adds that “as the detail that is fixed in the Constitutions will remain and will govern in future, they cannot but say with simplicity that the two shirts that are now assigned for them every two years, cannot normally be sufficient as they

generally tear”. “The Sisters – it specifies then – who do not want more than a simple habit in this holy House and just enough for decency and human necessities and frugal and moderate food, sufficient to maintain life and sustain the work that they are carrying out, when they are well, and caring for their health, when they are ill”. And, guided undoubtedly by experience, it goes on to add the duty of the Hospital of “maintaining them also when, because of age or accidents that may occur in the service of the House, they are rendered unfit, not throwing them out from it except for serious reasons in which after being informed, corrected and threatened by the Most illustrious Sitiada, they do not reform themselves.”

It even adds another specification: the religious “do not want to order, but to obey”; but they do not need to be deprived of authority before the patients and the nurses, hence “they do not seek other authority than that necessary to maintain the calm and impede excesses and scandals in the wards and offices that are in their care”, as, it indicates once again, with realism, these defects “cannot be regularly pointed out to them, except those they commit continually”.

Even though this report is written – which is signed by all the Sisters, headed by Mother Maria – with all the moderation of the world, her underlying firmness was not liked by the directors of the Sitiada, who responded with a coarse refutation that was directed specially to Mother Maria:

“Even though they do not admire the Sitiada, the Sisters having lived till now without written laws, seeing them now compiled.... caused a sensation among them, they could not help but observe that some had been incorrectly interpreted, in spite of having been written with such solid principles, with such refined good judgement and discernment, with a knowledge of the human heart so profound, that the more it is meditated on and studied, the more it is admired.

If the Sisters, or, rather, whoever dictated their *Exposition* to them, had meditated that the glorious title of honour of Sister of Charity does not happen only by demanding by way of contract,

obligatory in justice, house, bed, inner and outer clothes, lunch, dinner and an assigning of money, then, maybe with more property they could be called salaried rather than Sisters of Charity, whose voice seems to signify that by charity they live and by charity happily they die undoubtedly, they would have omitted the trifle of some ounce of food, substituting it for a larger quantity of something else.”

This toughness impresses, directed at persons who give their whole life to the Institution and ask only for a little clarity, announcing that they are ready to renounce once more what is stipulated. Ingratitude reached the peaks. And the document concluded without accepting any of the proposals of the Sisters and indicating the coming into force of the Constitutions twenty days later, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1812. It hurts to think that the pen that strikes this heavy blow is the same one that only four months earlier had responded with a negative to a moving petition of Mother Maria: till then the Fraternity of the Soup had been serving breakfast to the Sisters, but stopped doing it in April of that year. Mother Maria then wrote to the Sitiada asking to be given some bread, as the Sisters “cannot do without breakfast, as they wake up at four in the morning and have to wait till twelve to eat something, eight hours.” The reply is that, “given the tremendous scarcity”, their ration could not be increased. This is the “trifle of some ounce of food” that the Sitiada throws up in the face of the religious. And what is more serious is that, in the same document, in which the religious are given a heavy blow, an Act is raised that in the months of March and April they had saved 378 rations of meat, that for the Hospital was worth 11 pounds, 16 ‘sueldos’ and 4 ‘dineros’.

The Board did not stop there: now they had understood that those outbreaks of what they called rebelliousness and was simple dignity, were centred in one person, “in who dictated the *Exposition*”. The procedures would have to be accelerated for the election of a new Superior. And on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the same August, the 10<sup>th</sup> was fixed for her election.

Shall we play prophets? It would not have been too difficult then to do it. Because it was sufficient to go the Acts of the Sitiada to perceive, a few days earlier, strange eulogies for a concrete religious who seems to be the favourite for the new Sitiada. Thus, with the excuse of an inventory of clothes the act says: “Attending to the fulfilment, good discharge of duty and integrity of Sister Tecla Cantí and considering her very useful for the good order and cleanliness of the clothes, she will remain in this office as assistant to the Senior Wardrobe presbyter, who can bestow on her the confidence that she merits.” We would not make a mistake in our prophecy. She was, effectively, the predestined one.

The voting, which took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August with all solemnity, with the full Sitiada presiding, revealed the reality of the division in the bosom of the community: there were six votes for Sister Cantí, another four went to Sister Maciá, one to Sister Torella and one still – even being rejected to start with – for Mother Rafols. The voting concluded, the Bishop President of the Board, “through a brief and forceful discourse” (why “forceful”?), exhorted all “to fraternal charity and to the fulfilment of the obligations of their respective duties”. Duties that would a few days later be reserved for Mother Rafols... the sacristy, the least important and least responsible of all. Those who sought to marginalize her had achieved it. They will not achieve, on the other hand – as we will see – her bitterness.

### **The battle against Fr. Juan**

We had left Fr. Bonal at the moment of the foundation in Zaragoza, his head full of ideas and of dreams of a future unification of the diverse Fraternities that worked in Spain to achieve the creation of a strong and stable religious congregation. He saw the seed of this future precisely in the nascent community of Zaragoza and Fr. Juan thought that he should follow from close quarters its birth and its growth. That is why he asked to remain in the Hospital as Passionero or Chaplain. The members of the Sitiada – who were

so grateful for his search for the twelve brothers and the twelve sisters – saw the idea with satisfaction, as like this – as a document of 1814 signed by the Secretary Sevil will certify – “at the same time he discharges this ministry he could be at the head of the said Fraternities”. His life thus was lived on the track of a double function of Passionero and of Founder of a nascent religious congregation.

But Pope John the XXIII has already said “the most characteristic of the authentic servants of God is to be taken by God to tasks that are different to those for which they theoretically seemed to be called”. It would occur thus with Juan Bonal. The War of Independence was going to twist his life like it would of so many Spanish: the misery, the hunger, the shortages of so many patients was going to draw him out from a relatively comfortable life as Confessor of the Hospital and to launch him through the roads of Spain, to convert him into – according to the happy description of Tellechea – an authentic Don Quixote of charity.

For those times the catastrophe of the Hospital of Zaragoza was immeasurable: the annual deficit exceeded half a million ‘reales’. The national Treasury owed them one and a half million ‘reales’ for the stay of the soldiers, who relied, for the absence of payment for pensions, on the ‘Archbishop’s Mitre’; the old rents of vineyards, houses or country estates had disappeared after some had been pulled out and others had been destroyed by war. A report of Count Sástago describes the situation of the Hospital to us in black and white; narrow building, without apparent offices, without rooms for the ecclesiastics, for the professors, without comfort or security and, even in many parts without privacy. There is no bed-linen, no cloth for bandages and even articles of subsistence most essential had to be got on loan.

To big problems there are big remedies. Fr. Bonal would convert himself into a mendicant for the Hospital, into an ambassador of the poor. And, on horseback, riding, which was something he only knew very little (falls were not lacking, sometimes into one of the rivers he had to cross on horseback, with grave danger of drowning),

Fr. Bonal would go from town to town all through the northern geography of Spain with the title of ‘Veredero (travelling preacher)’ of the Hospital.

A very special ‘veredero’ because Fr. Juan would never limit himself to asking for alms. In the towns he is a mixture of popular missionary and collector of alms, who dedicates as much time – and he will be many times pulled up for it by the people of the Sitiada – to preaching and above all, to the confessional as to the collecting of alms. Even like this, he would always return from his ‘veredas’ loaded with the most heterogeneous donations: grain, money, bed-sheets, shirts, cotton waste, hemp, waste rags, all included. Hence the greater part of his writings is today a collection of papers full of numbers, lists of things collected, accounts and more accounts.

A terrible and heroic job this ‘veredas’ that occupies him sometimes for entire months he spent largely on the roads, sleeping in basements and straw lofts or wherever night caught up with him. A job that will not be recognised by the new Sitiada Board, which will begin to crucify him with silly details, bureaucracy, exigencies that would have been good for a thief, but not for a martyr of his work.

More serious than this zeal for bureaucratic control will be the determination to separate him from the Sisters that he had founded, as though his influence would be dangerous for them. It is logical that, if the Sitiada wanted to cut all roads to the future progress of the Sisters in the form of a Congregation and if they wanted to underline their absolute submission to the Board of the Hospital, they would see in Fr. Juan an adversary. The shots would be against him.

Shots that at times reach a doubly painful game: they reach out to him when they need new Sisters, but if he indicates any condition for their coming, they reply to him with a dry “here there are no conditions other than the decisions of the Sitiada”. Little by little they take care to keep him far from the community and

cut out his contacts with the Sisters. When on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 1812 Fr. Bonal writes thanking them for the room they had given him in a part of the old convent of the Incarnation, but permits himself to suggest that, given that from this “a great deal of inconvenience follows for the Sisters to take his food from so far, to kindly grant him the room of the carpenter”, they reply dryly that “the Sitiada cannot accede to his request”, without taking the trouble to give any explanation whatsoever.

They then see to it that Fr. Bonal spends as much time as possible outside the Hospital. And when he asks for a substitute almoner so as not to fully abandon his tasks as Passionero and Confessor of the Hospital, he is not granted a substitute.

The hardest blow comes when two months later, the Bishop of Santander, forgetting him, names a director and immediate superior of the Sisters. It is worth quoting the opening of the document:

“Don Miguel Suárez of Santander, by the Grace of God Bishop of Huesca, Archbishop-elect of Seville, Governor of the Archbishopric of Zaragoza, Knight of the Great Band of the Royal Order of Spain. To you, the Sisters of Charity of the Hospital of Our Lady of Grace of this present City, health and grace. Be it known to you: that even though we have provided for your spiritual benefit, Constitutions formed by your government, we have thought it necessary that a person legitimately authorized by us, could attend to its fulfilment and your progress in the path of virtue. And the sufficiency, the integrity and other good qualities of D. Miguel Gil being evident to us... In virtue of which we hope you will recognize the said D. Miguel Gil as invested with our jurisdiction and as the only one deputed for your spiritual progress.”

For such a stab so many titles or words were not necessary, nor was it necessary to underline – the venom at the end – this “only one deputed” with which Fr. Juan is definitively marginalized.

The irony of life: four months later a new document has to tell us that as “the priest who was in-charge of the spiritual direction

of the Sisters did not go to fulfil that ministry”, and – for the second time Fr. Juan is humiliated – Don Narciso Olivás is named along with other directors of the Seminary to fulfil a charge that they accept with a gesture of magnificence, assuring us that “they lend themselves to the charge of attending to the Sisters with preference even to the other good souls to whom they could give this help more easily”. And the circumstances were even more aggravated when Canon Fernández de Navarrete entered the Board; he at least had one good point and that was he took decisions firmly and called things by their name: In the Act of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1813, after informing us that Don Francisco Javier Landa was named confessor of the Sisters, it was added dryly: “Thus Mr. Navarrete expounded that he of course understood that he had to alert Mosén Juan Bonal, that not only should he refrain, as he has already done, from hearing the Confessions of the Sisters, but also to avoid as far as possible from talking to them about matters of the Fraternity, without harming the Sitiada in the good that it merits by its virtue, zeal and application in the assistance of the poor sick.”

With this last butting hand comes ingratitude at its highest point. But the Sitiada already has its hands free, as desired: it has kept the father away from his daughters, it has marginalized who could have been the leader in the defence of their dignity, so that they could be managed as slaves and servants. The plant has been locked up in its pot. It will not grow. The problem is in knowing whether it will survive to be a danger to the Sitiada.

### **The Fraternity, in danger**

And so it is. Evidently, the inherent problems are not solved with the change of Superior. And events followed immediately to confirm it. Ten days had not passed after the election of Mother Cantí when Sr. María Josefa Maciá – who had obtained four votes in the ballot and seemed the captain of the defeated group –, communicated her desires to abandon the Fraternity to enter the Convent of the Enseñanza.

This decision was doubly painful for Mother Maria: because she was losing one of her companions of the first period and... also because she felt great temptations to look for this same serene and sure door that seemed to be the Convent of the Enseñanza, with which as we have already indicated, she had had contact – or in which she had lived – before the foundation of the Fraternity. In those moments everything seemed to close on the horizon: now to this marginalization of her person was added her health broken by the sieges, and above all, the impression that the Fraternity, which both she and Fr. Bonal had dreamed about, would never be more than a group of servants at the orders of a group of whimsical personages, many of whom took beneficence as a diversion and a mark of personal prestige. Was it worth burning away her life there without leaving a furrow? Wasn't the peace of a cloister then preferable where when obeying a Superior you knew you were obeying God and not the fancy of a whimsical person? Through a document of this time that is unarguably hers, we know that the Mother went through dark hours. What we do not know is what strength her soul received to bend her head once more and continue believing in what she could not see and which seemed to be absolutely impossible. Woman of faith, that is what she was, always. But now more than ever, at this hour.

Her enemies, besides, would not rest. One month later, Sister Teresa Ribera, under advice from her doctor had “to take the most pure airs”. And, as they did not want to cause the Hospital expenses, they remembered that they could go to Horcajo de Caroca, where there was a house to suit their needs, “if Sister Maria Rafols goes with her”. What house was this? The document says it was of “the Sisters of the Hospital”, undoubtedly by mistake. It is more likely to think that the Parish Priest of Horcajo would be a brother of the Hospital who was an acquaintance of Mother Rafols. But, in any case, in this history there is a zeal for keeping Mother Maria away. And she accepts it, thinking that, even, a short time away could help to resolve her difficulties.

Soon it is seen that it is not she who is the cause of the problems. In her absence the Sitiada has to intervene to resolve tensions that had arisen between Mother Canti and some Sisters. And the crisis would conclude with two Sisters leaving in April and another two in May, these last in a violent manner and without communicating their leaving even to the gentlemen of the Sitiada.

If we think that – as another document certifies – at that time two other Sisters had died and one was in Huesca “without hope of life”, we have to think that practically, the Fraternity was dying and shortly it would not have more than five members.

Fortunately, the tension with the new Sitiada was to conclude soon: in July 1813 the French Government collapsed and with it the authority of the members of the Board. And, as history is usually cruel, now they will be treated by the same cruelty with which they treated the Sisters. Here is the dry document with which their cessation was communicated:

“Having been informed, on my arrival in this city – says the new political head, Salvador Campillo – that the Royal and General Hospital of Our Lady of Grace was found to be governed by a Sitiada composed of persons named by the intruding government, I have disposed that they cease in their functions immediately and clear the way for those who are the legitimate Regidores, the ones who formed it before the occupation of this capital.”

### Flowers in the scaristy

What is Sister Maria doing during this time? On her return from Horcajo she has discovered a new – even though in her, it is an already old – vocation: making bouquets of flowers of cloth and making little flowers with a small mould. Even today, in the little museum at the Novitiate in Zaragoza that has just been inaugurated, one can see four bouquets – ugly today with the passage of time, but with immense emotional value – that the tradition of the religious Annes has been transmitting from generation to generation as made

by her. There is also the small mould and the plate with which she made tiny little flowers. Everything has a fragrance of simplicity and good taste.

Under the torment, Sister Maria decided to wait for God to throw light and in few places could she wait for it better than in the apparent uselessness of her work as sacristan. "She took – one of the witnesses in the Process of her Beatification would say – great care of the decorum and splendour of the cult and her devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was so great, that many times she got up at night to visit the Blessed Sacrament, and her daughters, following her example, would also get up, thus there always was one or the other at the foot of the Tabernacle."

Now – far from the struggle with the gentlemen of the Sitiada, far from the dramatic labour in the wards of the sick – Maria Rafols is very near the Most Blessed Sacrament. And she does not yearn for the control of superior. She knows that now they have given her the better part, there, in the luminous darkness of the sacristy.



## XI. A PARADISE WITH THORNS

The removal of the pro-French Sitiada brought an armful of blessings for the Fraternity: the first of them being the reconciliation between Sister Rafols and Mother Canti. Probably, for Sister Maria the toughest part of her being pushed aside was the fact that her old companion and friend Mother Tecla tolerated it. Both of them belonged to the first batch of the Fraternity and had till then lived a profound union. Mother Canti was probably even the more courageous one of the two friends. How did she lend herself now to the game of the pro-French Sitiada in the labour of pushing into the corner someone who had always been her guide and superior? Later events are going to show that if Mother Tecla accepted it, it was because she was obliged to, and tolerating it was a lesser evil. We have proof of this because, as soon as the French domination ceased, Mother Tecla arranged things to entrust Sister Maria with a much more delicate and responsible task. And she does this without even asking the new Sitiada for permission, taking advantage of the time of change, but she herself exposing herself to problems with her superiors. This gesture of friendship must have alleviated Mother Rafols in her solitude and it signified the birth of a new friendship, as from this moment we will see how almost all the important documents of the community – the letters to Palafox himself – are signed by the two of them together as if Mother Canti considers Sister Maria united in her function of direction of the Fraternity.

Thus a new period begins that can almost be qualified as paradise if it were not for the painful thorns that cross even this.

Suddenly, Mother Rafols seemed to have discovered a beautiful field of apostolic action: the children. Her zeal for souls will find in these years, a very sweet task: the little ones of the Foundling Home. She will pour out all her tenderness, she will cultivate

innocent souls, she will exercise her maternal vocation with them and she will take them by the hand till she physically falls because of old age.

A paradise. A paradise if it had not been for the terrible inhuman, sanitary and economic conditions in which the Foundling Home existed. Suddenly, the number of foundling children was very high in a city that was not very large as was Zaragoza at that time. According to fairly exact data that we have, in 1819 there were more than 500; in 1830 there were 819; in the year 1833 they were more than 1,000. Later the figures would decrease a little, but in 1837 there were 662 at the beginning and 752 at the end of the year.

This same swing of figures makes us suspect something terrible that we would not fully believe if it were not perfectly documented: I am referring to the high mortality that there was among them. Many of them were abandoned at the doors of the Foundling Home without even tying the umbilical cord well, quite a number reached sick, with which the already high mortality rate among children of that period was multiplied up to unrealistic figures. Thus we know that in 1837, 368 died and in 1838 the number of dead was 139. There was a month when 42 entered and 39 died. Can one imagine what it means to see a little one dying each day or every second day during thirty years? Which human heart can bear this?

The hygienic conditions of the period were frightful and the situation of the city after the siege, with numerous troops passing through the city, had produced an authentic wave of illegitimate children. A wave that moreover was going to coincide with the period of greatest shortages in the Hospital. There was no place where they could be kept, nor beds nor cradles to put them to sleep, nor money to pay the wet nurses who were necessary. Hence, the majority of the little ones lived outside the Hospital, given to women who for a little money offered themselves to feed them and take care of them in their homes. This system – at that time there were no feeding bottles – was a kind of child trade, as many women

accepted these little creatures so as to collect a little money and there were some who looked after and breast-fed them at the same time as they did their own, such that many died of malnutrition.

To understand the anguish with which the religious in charge of them had to live, nothing better than the ample report that Mother Rafols herself presented to the Sitiada and which I will copy fully, because it concerns a document of a value that is at the same time informative and dramatic, insuperable:

“Sister Maria Rafols, in charge of the foundling children of this Holy General Hospital of Our Lady of Grace, permeated by a living sentiment for the many of them who die and desirous of contributing to their relief and prosperity without pretending to foresee the most appropriate projects that Your Most Illustrious Lordships could have formed on this matter of so much importance, if they can co-operate in something for its possible perfection, with your greater attention and veneration it has seemed to her to present Your Most Illustrious Lordships the following: The ward where the children now are is very narrow and cramped and with little ventilation, specially in the Summer that is approaching. With a little cost a place that is there at the side and only serves to dry beans during the season, can, at one end be made into a room with several small divisions, and the one that they now occupy could serve as an infirmary or area for weaned children (in Aragon ‘desvezar’ is used instead of ‘destetar’) allowing more beds. It will be more convenient to separate them. Now they are all together; and even a refectory can be made apart for the wet nurses, as it is convenient that they eat together, at the same time and in the presence of the Sister, so that they eat and not sell the ration given to them, even when it is cooked. The Sister should have the keys, so that each one keeps separate and safe the usual clothes given to them to change the children daily and thus avoid being taken away, as happens frequently when they are kept on the beds. At present there aren’t enough beds.

It would be good to feed the infected children separated in their infirmary, with goat’s milk, with sugar and with barley, because

if the wet nurses breast-feed them, they will be infected; some of them have lost the breasts and vision and have contracted other illnesses; and it is not easy. No wet nurse wants to take charge of suckling them at so much risk; and when they do and the danger does not reach so far, they regularly contract it and it is sufficient to give the contagion to the healthy and that is how some others die, unless they are removed from there. The women considered necessary, who do not have enough milk, and have done their task well could be designated to supply this food to the children who are ill and take care of their cleanliness, giving them that salary or ration that is judged adequate which will never be as much as that of the wet nurses; thus a great number of them would be saved; as a woman can cure more, even sick children, than another one breast-feeding them.

To guard against the contagion of the healthy, it will be convenient that the wet nurses wash their clothes, for which they can be given soap, even though a little of their salary is taken away, so that like this they do not use this pretext to sell some small loaf or ration as normally happens, and get annoyed and to avoid their going out frequently, which is very harmful.

It would be convenient for the wet nurses to go out, each one with their child, to stroll on the outskirts of the city some days, accompanied by the Mother in-charge, always with half of them remaining to take care of the other children on alternate days; and that the Mother in charge or some one who enjoys the confidence of the Sister goes to the city to look for bristles and other odds and ends that they may need; and that they only be permitted to go to the city to buy some clothes or something big; and for their healthy airing and robustness it is good that the children also go out."

This record shows us well and clearly what must have been the tremendous work of the religious – only one during a long time – who was in charge of the Foundling Home. Mother Maria had to take very detailed care of keeping the list of persons who took

the children, investigate their moral character and fulfil the strict norms that the Sitiada indicated in one of their documents for these "loans" of children. Never should two foundling children be given to the same woman for breast-feeding. They should never be given to beggar women. The Parish Priests and Mayors were to be asked for detailed reports of all these "mothers incharge". Problems were not lacking in this field and the Acts of the Sitiada offer us not just a few examples: the one of the girl of seven who reached the Foundling Home badly beaten by her parents, the one of the mother who deposits a child in the Foundling Home and then comes back later, repentant, to claim it. Or consoling cases like that of "Nicanor Puchol, first male lead of Comic Theatre of this city", who in 1833 asks to let him adopt definitively the foundling girl that his wife had breastfed during a certain amount of time.

Mother Maria – who in matters of charity was impressively obstinate – would get them not only to enlarge the wards dedicated to the Foundling Home, but also get the whole old convent of the Incarnation, joined to the Hospital building to be dedicated to this purpose. Besides she got the Sitiada to spend a good amount of money to make it a more decent habitation for the children (so much so that when the old owners of the building claimed it, the gentlemen of the Sitiada could say that they had spent more on making it decent than what the building was worth).

Here is where the Sister would spend the greater part of her life. Economic difficulties would never ever cease, but she would make arrangements for them to be more supportable: her prestige in the city was such that she collected the best alms, so much so that the jealousy of the Sitiada would be unleashed up to the point where the Regidores would give a norm in 1814 in which it reads "that the Sisters of Charity, put in charge of the Foundling Home by the government, which is the only office of the house that is known to have alms, collect these in the small boxes ('cajetas') or alms boxes ('cepillos') that will be put up in the same district and give an account of its collection and its use". There will always be at the side of the charitable someone fussy and meddling!

And Mother Maria will not take care only of the bodies of the children. Their souls and their little hearts are what worry her more. Hence she will teach them to pray and will compose little songs for them and "virtuous words". She will enjoy their childish games and the youngest Sisters will be motivated "to treat the children with maximum tenderness, as they have no parents, they have to be so for them". In 1835, as she had to be away, she will write a letter in which she will say; "To Sister Josefa Codina, kindly look after the children of the Foundling Home well and, when they make their Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity, don't forget me, who prayed with them everyday."

She will equally concern herself that "the wet nurses live in a Christian manner, asking them to hear Mass daily, pray the Rosary at least once a day, the Angelus when the hour strikes, some time of spiritual reading and preparing them for Confession and Communion at least monthly".

But perhaps the work in the Foundling Home could be better measured by what happened when she was not there. In 1836 – when Mother Rafols, because of events that we will narrate, is kept away from Zaragoza – everything in the Foundling Home begins to go from bad to worse and seems to regress to the worst of times. At this moment in the Acts of the Sitiada a new administrator, Don José María Paniagua appears, who begins from the first moment to show a great concern for the Foundling Home. As he does not trust the Sister who is in charge of it, proposes to his companions the idea of creating an association of ladies who will be in charge of it. He does it with the legal language typical of a bureaucrat and their type of ideas. He thus suggests "the formation of an Association of Ladies of the Foundling Home, of persons who, uniting a natural affection to a known beneficence and a regular income that permits them to attend to the work in their care taking weekly turns, examining the food, the cleanliness of the children, the wet nurses, the system, in a word, that they be established and they try their best, to do what could be of utmost use to the foundling children and to the Sitiada. How many children will be saved by

the tender care of these zealous persons and who really will be guardian angels of the foundling children... Nothing more philanthropic. Nothing more proper of the occupation of Christian women, because in the long run, not everything has to be frivolity and egoism. And with the cord of beneficent virtue and care being given for the good of the foundling children, there is no doubt that the noble hearts would respond, the spirits be elevated, the souls be charitable, at such a beautiful plea, such pious excitement."

Don Paniagua will not be wrong. The sentimental cord of beneficence being touched, a huge number of 95 ladies, among them all those of nobility and titles of the city would present themselves.

Ninety-five ladies are going to try and make up for what Mother Maria did alone from 1813 to 1835. And in spite of the indisputable good will of these ladies, the number of deaths among the little ones was never so high as also the confusion in the Foundling Home. One after the other the ladies keep getting into difficulties with all the Sisters. Hardly had they taken charge of their work, in 1836, when they are in conflict with Sister Josefa Codina, then in charge of this work, and they send a petition to the Sitiada in which they say, "being informed of the aptitude and knowledge of Mother Maria Rafols", they ask that it be made possible for her to return. When they do not achieve this, they continue their battle against Sister Codina, till they get her replaced by Sister Torrens. This does not last long and she has to resign in 1838. It is now Sister Jerónima Carreras who tries but can tolerate it for only one year. In 1839 Mother Tecla Canti herself takes charge and manages to last three years. In 1841 Mother Rafols who is now old – is back again – she takes charge – at the petition of the ladies – and two years later we find with surprise a great eulogy of the ladies of the Board, who manifest that they are "very satisfied with her zeal" and ask for a Sister to help her, as she cannot manage alone.

In 1845 the health of Mother Maria is declining and the Board in anguish asks for her retirement: "It is agreed that Mother Maria be retired, of course because of her advanced age, assigning her

to those jobs that are compatible with her age, the Board being fully satisfied with the zeal, refinement and intelligence that she has displayed during all these many years she has been offering her services". These eulogies in the mouths of those who are always so discontented really fills us with surprise. Amazement that grows when four years after her retirement – and after several Sisters had marched past and lasted a short time – they once again ask for Sister Maria "to continue with the direction of the Foundling Home", having a sub-Director to do all the heavy material work.

This is, together with the little ones, the sweetest page of the whole life of Mother Rafols. She, who according to a witness at the Beatification Process, "had a special gift to dissolve discords and where she was, there were no discussions of any kind", she would joyfully do what others could not bear to do. And in her long life of faith and obscurity, God will give her as her only consolation, the joyful happiness of her children.



## XII. THE LIGHT UNDER THE BUSHEL

It is usually thought that moments of splendour, ecstasies, miracles, hours of great pains and arduous decisions are the only important happenings in the lives of the Saints. But normally, there is not much of this in the lives of the authentic saints. And what happens in the dark years, in the numerous months that elapse between miracle and miracle, between heroic deed and heroic deed? They are not saints then? Do they come down to a lower level of sanctity waiting for the next glow that would take them once again to the glow of the shining lights of God?

The truth is that what is decisive in the saints are the long dark hours, the times in which one would say that God had forgotten them, the fidelity maintained when they are not aglow. It is the daily struggle; it is the love that does not cease in the months when it seems that everything ceases. And this is found as much in the great saints that the Church raises to the altars as in the ordinary Christians who love God without dreaming ever of climbing on to the altars.

For Mother Rafols there were also long hours, very long hours of obscurity. Times when faith shone above all and this whole series of passive virtues – tolerance, patience, acceptance of persecution, equilibrium in the obscurity of faith – is seen always as more characteristic of her personality.

An example are these eleven years between 1813 – when she is in charge of the Foundling Home – and 1824, when her life will once again turn around. They are like a long new Novitiate in which her external works are not visibly different (except in the inner quality) from that of any of the thousands of religious of St. Anne who will come after her. She lived the Gospel, putting on and removing diapers, bathing the tiny little ones, the majority of whom will not even know how to talk, "losing their life", as the clever ones of this world will say.

Only at times some rays of light in the great problems reached her. And they reached because as I have already pointed out, Mother Canti wanted to incorporate her into the tasks of direction of the congregation. These are moments objectively less important than that entire hidden and painful task that we spoke about in the previous chapter, lest they get concealed in this narration of her life. While Mother Maria dedicates herself to her little ones, the big national political problems continue affecting the small group of Sisters, the Fraternity continues going through the long crisis of its survival and growth, the tensions of the Sitiada continue and so does the common path of the Sisters towards sanctity. We will say something about these four areas.

### **The agitations of politics**

Those were tough years for the Spanish Church, that seemed to be in an upheaval, from one extreme to the other in politics and also among the religious. The War of Independence had left serious wounds on its body. Many temples had been destroyed. The silver and ornamentation of its Cathedrals had either been looted by the French hordes or had been victim of extortion of one of the two governments, the invader or the patriotic. But what had probably suffered the most were the convents. In their material and in their spiritual life. Truly the wars had depopulated the seminaries and emptied the cloisters, and the Napoleonic laws, pushing the religious to secularisation (even offering a pension of 200 ducats annually to those who accepted), had been terribly efficacious: of the 70,000 religious at the beginning of the century, we find only 49,365 in 1814, and of these, only 33,546 remained in 1820 and in just two years 1820 to 1822, another 7,244 got secularised. Among the religious women this secularisation had been much less, but was also visible. At the same time 21 dioceses were vacant and in the whole of Spain there were a number of parishes without a pastor and ecclesiastical posts were vacant.

But the scars were even greater in the morals and the daily life of the citizens. Six years of war had produced a great moral crisis

and a deep ideological confusion. But, what is worse, Spain had been ripped into two, sowing such a chain of hatred, that we have still not been able to recover from it. The division between the traditionalists and the innovators would keep changing all through two centuries, but would continue to be equally divisive, with the great danger of radicalising attitudes. On one side seemed to be the traditional faith of Spain of always (and with it the intransigence, the inquisition, the lack of education, the fear of liberty and absolutist monarchy) and on the other, where the forces that faced new times were placed, atheism also seemed to accumulate, hatred for the Church and the clergy, a social revolution.

This dramatic excision of Spain in two obliged one to many absolute attitudes: the Spanish of those days did not distinguish – or they were fully on the side of liberalism or totally on the side of tradition. And thus people who – like Mother Rafols and Fr. Bonal – were not at all intransigent or tied to old ideas, saw themselves pushed towards radicalisms that they did not share at all in reality. Both suffered because of these situations in which they never ever took part. But at that time, you were either a liberal or a carlista, or absolutist or innovator, or defender of the faith or member of a reform of the Church, in reality a persecution.

We find branches of this division in the history of the Sisters in the years we are relating, especially in the period called “constitutional trienio” (1820-23).

The most serious problem came up when the new Board of Public Beneficence, which replaced the traditional Sitiada, took possession of the Hospital, and someone, in a very strict interpretation of the laws of the Courts, ordered all public functionaries to swear to the Constitution, and thinking that the Sisters, being at the service and salary of the Hospital, should be considered as public functionaries hence, obliged to such an oath.

This theme of the oath of the Constitution divided the Spanish Catholics: while there was no dearth of Parish Priests who preached the excellence (of the constitution) from the pulpits and

didn't doubt in seeing the new democratic system as inspired in the social doctrines of the Gospel (the Government even reached the newly introduced decision of ordering the Parish Priests to explain one article of the Constitution every Sunday after the homily), other Catholics accepted the new system as only being towed along and saw in the swearing of the Constitution an acceptance 'en bloc' of new ideas, many of them clearly contrary to faith or to the Church.

In Zaragoza (perhaps as a consequence of the terrible effects of the war, or as counterweight for having had the two most pro-French Bishops of the country) this second current dominated. And inspired by it, the Sisters of Charity, refused to accept such a swearing, upholding themselves in the fact that they were religious and not functionaries.

Fortunately, the new Board did not act with intransigence and did not apply the rules with rigour (like the one that prohibited the habit of the religious) and knew to recognise the importance of the Sisters for the Hospital, and defended them with gallantry.

But the same would not happen with all the employees of the Hospital, many of whom took advantage of the circumstances to mortify the religious and make them suffer. Thus Fr. Calasanz Rabaza relates to us that on a certain occasion they cut, as a joke, a beautiful grapevine that shaded the windows of the workroom and covered the door of the room of the convent forming a cover made of branches.

More serious are some events that, as a tradition of the community, were related in the Process of Beatification by some Sisters. Thus, one of the Sisters relates that "one day, when the Sisters were at prayer, they heard only one bell of the Community ringing, and, taking it as a warning from heaven, which on other occasions had warned them in the same manner, the Servant of God told the Sisters to get ready for sacrifice as something serious was threatening them. And when the Sisters left the oratory, they came across some servants armed with the intention of killing them. And

Mother Rafols with her smile and humble bearing, contained them and passed by harmlessly."

Sister Justina Sanz on her part explains that many a time she heard Mother Raimunda Oliver who was a contemporary of the Mother relate, "how one day the revolutionaries presented themselves at the holy Hospital to take Mother Rafols prisoner. When the Sisters and the patients saw such a spectacle, that is, that the villains were taking the holy religious to imprison her, they began to cry bitterly; but she spoke to all of them with so much tranquillity and tenderness, that one of the wicked persons said: Let this lady be here, because with her word and her sweetness she is capable of making stones soft. And thus, they desisted from their purpose".

History? We cannot respond emphatically. What is certain is that happenings similar to these were not infrequent in this period. Vicens Vives himself, talking about the tension existing between religious and the people, certifies that "the bourgeoisie, that possess the repressive apparatus sufficient to avoid the excesses of the masses, lets them act with eyes if not well-disposed, at least sceptically". And certainly religious groups – whose usefulness was not so evident as that of our Sisters – had to spend many very bitter hours during these years.

### **Problems with the Sitiada**

Some problems with the different directive Boards of the Hospital continued in this period (even though to a much smaller degree than with the pro-French). They carried on the double game of generosity and miserliness. The Acts of this period continue testifying to us that the famous "despintes" of the religious, who periodically returned part of the rations that they received continued. And witness is also given about the miserliness with which the Board continues to act with them, that from time to time they have to claim their arrears or the cloth necessary for their habits. There is, however, better attention to the health and food of the religious. In 1814, and before the insistence of Mother Canti, the Acts

recognize "that from the time of the reduction of the rations, they do not have bread given to them. And persuading the Sitiada about it, it was agreed that three small loaves or 24 ounces daily will be contributed for all, so that they can make the soup for the breakfast". Finally, the Sisters could avoid the giddiness and the dizzy spells that the eight hours of continuous work and the morning without tasting a morsel till lunchtime produced.

In 1815 the same Sitiada would realise that a large number of Sisters would fall ill; and one of their members would state "that, there being three or four sisters ill, with no appetite, it would be good that they put some bacon and chick-peas in the stew pot instead of runner beans, giving the Sitiada the freedom to lay down what they thought convenient". This time too the reply is in the affirmative.

More serious is the problem that comes up connected with the phlebotomy that is practiced by the Sisters. In 1823 one of the patients who had been bled by them suffered some complications, presumably because she herself interfered with the incision of the bleeding. And this was the occasion for the group of functionaries and technicians, enemies of the Sisters to start a strong campaign against them, asking that the phlebotomy be reserved exclusively to the male doctors. The religious have then to remind the Board how they began to practice it, how they had to pass an examination, how "in the time of the sieges the Sisters took great pains in practicing the said operations not only on women but also on the troops and ill peasants, there were days when they could hardly let the lance down from the hand", how "in all the time that the Sisters did the bleeding, thanks be to God, no misfortune had ever taken place". Hence, they point out, prohibiting them now "would result in a blot on the Fraternity and would belittle the examiners and the old Board". And once again the Board will recognise that the Sisters are right and will pass a judgement that "it does not find any reason to prohibit them from the exercise of bleeding, whenever this part of surgery is approved by the professors themselves of this establishment.

## The internal crisis

In the meanwhile, the internal crisis seemed to have diminished notably. The union between Mother Canti and Sister Rafols has been consolidated and both unite their charisms in the solidity of the nascent building. "Even though she was not the Superior – one of the religious would say about Mother Maria – such was the confidence that she inspired, that all the Sisters would go to her in their doubts and their pains, and she would advise them and console them with the greatest wisdom". This, fortunately, does not create jealousy in the Superior, who, on the contrary, associates with frequency the signature of Mother Rafols with her own.

The bigger problem is that of health. The Acts of this period show us frequently phrases like this: "Sister Francisca Rusic has been given permission to breathe the air of her native town". "Sister Josefa Codina must be transferred to her village to re-establish her health". And Mother Rafols herself will in April 1815 have to ask for permission to transfer herself to her home village to rest.

Fortunately the vocations did not get scarce: only in 1815 seven entries were registered. But hardly sufficient to fill the vacancies of the sick ones. It's a pity, yes, because in this period petitions for foundations begin to arrive from distant places. In 1818 there was interest in a group of Sisters for the Hospital in Burgos. In 1824 there is a very interesting petition that Don Ramon Gregorio Gomez makes in the name of the Archbishop of the Canaries. The reply of Fr. Bonal to this petition has not left out anything because of the news it gives and above all, because it informs us about the vision that its founder has of the Sisters with whom he can count at the moment. Here are the most significant paragraphs:

"At the moment the Sisters cannot decide (about going) to attend to the new requests as they are few and in some way, some of them are ill. The superior, Sister Tecla Canti is convalescing; Sister Maria Rafols is in a village to recover her health; the third (Sister Torrellas) has gone on to Torre del Gallego (the Gallego Tower) of this holy

Hospital, with the object of seeing whether she can restore herself, as she has lost her health very badly; these three are the ones who came to found this holy Hospital; and are the only three who remain as eight died gloriously in the memorable Sieges of this immortal city. Another of the foundresses went in 1807 to found the holy Hospital of Huesca, and who died in an odour of sanctity, in the year 1812. Thus I see it very difficult to be able to oblige the Most Illustrious Bishop and Your Illustrious Highness, I would like though, in case of a foundation in these Islands, one of the three Sisters earlier cited to go as Superior, if possible. Besides, I consider it almost impossible that the gentlemen Regidors will condescend to these religious leaving for other parts, as on creating this Congregation it was proposed that they be exclusively for this holy Hospital and they only complied with the request for them to go to Huesca on the pleas of the Lord Bishop, as he was the President of the Most Illustrious Sitiada at that time, when the Hospital belonged to the Parish of Santa Engracia”.

The big problem continued then: the pot continued suffocating the plant. This, however, did not impede the Sisters (and Fr. Bonal himself) from continuing to dream of an expansion, without renouncing the old project of union of all the Fraternities of Spain. Testimony of these desires is a letter that appeared in the archive of Palafox, among the several that Sisters Canti and Rafols addressed to him, which informs us about the desires to have a foundation in Madrid in an attempt at a new collaboration with the Obregones, of whom we have already spoken in earlier pages. The text is of 1817 and says in its fundamental paragraphs:

“As in those times of turbulence all the bodies had suffered, this misfortune has reached our Fraternity. This respecter of Your Excellency, lost several religious in the two cruelest sieges, in which they gloriously ended their career on the altar of charity. Desiring to renew and perpetuate this Congregation, as many of the Sisters of the Obregones also desire, we are trying to unite with several other Fraternities, and then these two bodies could sustain themselves better and embrace the two branches of men and of women, the

Brothers taking care of the men and the Sisters of the women, to the universal consolation of afflicted humanity.

To carry out these projects we have already written to the Fraternities of Huesca, Valls and Cervera of Cataluña, who will willingly enter into the project, and equally the priest Don Juan Bonal, who brought us from Cataluña to this city, as he also brought those of Huesca, will work on the matter, since it is beneficial for the glory of God, King and Country.

The giver (of this letter) is a Brother of the Obregones, friend of the above-mentioned Fr. Bonal, and he will inform your Excellency about everything, and he will also give some news about us. Some thing has been spoken and there are some who want us to establish ourselves in this general Hospital (of Madrid). On our part, we will not resist, whenever it be the will of the Sovereign our Venerated Fernando VII, gentlemen of the Board and approval of your Excellency, of whom we await orders willingly. These subjects of your Excellency pray to the Heavens to preserve your person many years for the good of humanity, of the kingdom and public consolation of the afflicted”.

This letter, of which the carrier was Brother Manuel de la Virgen de los Alvares (the same as other contacts that the Fraternity could have with the Daughter of Charity Sister Manuela Lecina) show only too well that the old dreams of Dr. Cessat and of Fr. Bonal had not been abandoned. The Sisters were aware that they could not remain closed up in the Hospital of Zaragoza if they wanted their work to have a true solidity and continuity. And the same spirit of union continued to be breathed in the houses of Valls and Cervera, from which they had most probably started out. But, even though there exists at least a second letter in which the two Sisters once again repeat the topic, we do not know the reply of Palafox and the interest that could be taken in the topic. God willing, many years will pass before these dreams of diffusion prosper.

But the Sisters, while they dreamed about growing in size, did not forget to grow in sanctity. I would like to close the history of

this exemplary period recording a page that the archives of the Sitiada document of the 27<sup>th</sup> September 1821. On this date the priest of the Parish of San Nicolas asks the Board if any of the Sisters could take charge of the contagious women patients in Lazareto. The Board, with the respect that the matter merits, points out that this service "could not be imposed on the Sisters, if they did not accede by their free and spontaneous will". The canon Amar is commissioned to do the necessary investigation. After that, he will joyously inform: "the Sisters in common and severally offered themselves with the greatest generosity and zeal to lend all assistance to any person afflicted with a contagion, in Lazareto as in the city".

Fortunately, the plant, still enclosed in its pot, was alive and flowering. The bodies were wounded with illness, but the souls were entire. And "together as well as severally" these first Sisters took the generous step that in Spain, in Venezuela and in so many countries of the world their successors would take, demonstrating that their charity was not limited, not even before barriers of death.



### XIII. THE SUN SHINES

"What is important is not being in the sun or under the storm. What is important is to serve God there where He has placed us". With this phrase Bernanos summarises one of the axes of the life of every authentic Christian. But, who would not prefer to serve God under the sweet sun of His hands?

Certainly, God was not very generous at the time of filling the existence of Maria Rafols with sunshine in this life. I refer, naturally, to the sun of triumph, because the interior one of peace and joy was never ever lacking to her. But, how few were the times when life was caressing for her! How many more hours she lived the Garden of Olives than she lived Mount Tabor!

But, in order not to lose faith when the great approaching bitterness reached her, Mother Maria wanted to climb Mount Tabor in 1824 and sample the sweetness of the happy hours.

The first and highest of all the joys was the canonical approval of the Constitutions. This was an old wound: the first rules of the "notebook" were, yes, a treasure of spirituality, but they had to maintain them half-hidden as they had been elaborated at the urging of the Sitiada. The ones that Fr. Santander would elaborate in 1812 had not even managed to have a true birth. And in 1817, at the hour of the great crisis, the Royal visitors had indicated their concern for the number of religious who abandoned the Fraternity and showed the need for "some rules or orders that would fix the stability of the Sisters in the Hospital in a convenient and determined manner".

This warning and the same fear that they could be substituted by religious of some other group or congregation made several Sisters go to visit the Archbishop of the city, Don Manuel Vicente Montaner, to request him to resolve such a vital problem. Effectively,

the prelate chose two intelligent priests, Don Pedro Valero, Bishops-elect of Gerona, and Don Benito Fernandez Navarrete, Dean of the Cathedral, to edit new Constitutions "adjusting them to the spirit, usage and customs of the Fraternity", for which they took care to ask for the primitive Constitutions, the rules elaborated by Fr. Bonal when they arrived in Zaragoza. This time, fortunately, it would go to the real root and not to the whim and fancy of personal opinions.

Rapid and efficacious was the work of both priests, because in November of 1818 they could be approved by the Sitiada, even though later political happenings would put them back in to the shadows and they would not have full value and approval till 1824.

We are, evidently, before a crucial happening in the history of the Fraternity, as these Constitutions were not only the definitive base for all the successive elaborations till today, but rather, are objectively a perfect summary of the "charism" and the spirit that will always characterize the Sisters of Charity of St. Anne. There are moving pages in them because of the profound Christocentric meaning of their norms or for the enormous tenderness with which the topic of charity is treated. I will transcribe one especially curious page, which introduces us in to the tiny daily life of the Sisters:

"Considering each day that at the hour least expected Jesus Christ can arrive in the person of some patient, there will always be ready and prepared some extra bed in each infirmary. After a patient arrives, she will be received with affection and demonstrations of attention and compassion; she will be seated on a chair, that they will also have prepared, so that she gets her breath; she will be changed with the greatest care that delicacy asks for and during this time, one Sister or servant will warm the bed in winter and in any other season if the condition of the patient requires it, she will be put to bed with care, and they will find out if she has not eaten food for a long time, and, if there is a long time left before the distribution of the food of the Holy House, she will be given a cup of soup or something else strengthening that will not do her harm; the same will be done with regard to the medicine, if the

ordinary visit of the doctor or master surgeon is going to take time and the patient is at risk, the lieutenant or person on duty will be informed so that she is examined and remedies that they judge opportune arranged, which the Sisters will make available as soon as possible. After the patient has rested sufficiently, she will be warmed, a Hospital shirt will be put on her and hers will be collected, and will be wrapped up with all the other clothes that she has brought. It will be taken to the cloakroom, where it will be kept with her document card or number. If she has improved and she has to leave the ward, when it will be collected and handed over to her to wear."

I copy this paragraph specifically because in it we can clearly see that in its editing other hands have participated besides those of the two cited. How would they come down to such details, to this specific knowledge of the daily life of a hospital? Evidently here there is the hand of someone who has been doing this for many years, and who knows what a patient needs and requires at this moment. Is it necessary to use one's imagination to think that the two signatories worked either on conversations maintained with the Sisters or on texts prepared by themselves? And how would they not go to the one who has always been the soul of the group right from the first hours, Sister Maria? It is, effectively, her spirit – of an insuperable maternal tenderness – which remains reflected in these pages and in so many of these new Constitutions.

Significant also is the paragraph with which the goal and meaning of the Fraternity is summarised in the first chapter :

"Such are the Sisters of this holy General Hospital of Our Lady of Grace of Zaragoza: they enter in it to serve the patients without exception of contagious or foul illnesses; especially in the immediate management of their persons, cleaning them, giving them food and medicines, washing their dishes and even the dirty bed-pans, sweeping the wards or infirmaries, keeping watch over them all hours of day and night and shrouding their bodies after their death; accompanying all these corporal services with the spiritual help that

can be given to them. This is the aim of their Institute and to this they bind themselves specially animated by charity and love of God and neighbour”.

I would like to very quickly point out two more facts in these Constitutions. The first is its radicalism in the totality of the surrender. There are no half-measures, no raising of good-will questions. One of the words that appears most in this text is the augmentative ‘greatest’: everything has to be done “with the greatest care”, “with the greatest cleanliness”, “with the greatest diligence”, “with the greatest conscientiousness” and “for the greater glory of God and best assistance to the patients”. The question raised is undoubtedly, that of a vocation to heroism, exposed neither to deviations nor to contemplations.

The second fact is the absence of this classic tension between the earthly and the heavenly that creates so many dichotomies in many spiritualities. Never has the problem been planted that they would have to attend to the bodies of the patients to save their souls or that the religious should attend to the corporal and the material as a simple “trick” to revive their spirits. For these rules the patient is Christ, and all the love that is dedicated to Him is spiritual and transcendent, as much as when they attend to his wounds as when they teach him to pray. The putting of plans into action are purely simple and evangelical, are absolutely modern and we would say today, postconciliar.

Yes, they were a perfect reflection of the primitive spirit that Fr. Bonal had fixed imprinted on them at the beginning, the spirit by which nine of the first had died and which had focussed the life of the survivors. Now it will have the official recognition of the Church (on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1824 the Vicar General of Zaragoza, would grant it) and five days later, the approval of the Sitiada was also achieved without great obstacles. One year later, the thirteen religious that were there at the moment, would make their official vows on these Constitutions. I will record here their historic names, just as the Act of the Sitiada has them: Tecla Canti, President; María

Rafols, Raimunda Torrellas, Teresa Rivera, Cecilia Aparicio, Mariana Bruned, Josefa Codina, Teresa Perú, Jerónima Carreras, Ana María Barberá, Serafina Valls, Nicolasa Jimeno and María de los Dolores Muñoz. Now they were officially religious, recognised by the Church as such! The sun shone in the sky.

Some months later, fulfilling what was prescribed by the rules (“The said Vows will be renewed every year at the hands of the President or Director on the day of the Annunciation of Our Lady, who is the Titular of the House, till five years of the Vestition have been competed, when they will add an oath of stability or perpetuity”), the four Sisters who had already been with the Fraternity for long years – three of them from 1804 and the fourth from 1806 – could make their Perpetual and Final Vows. And here I prefer to leave the pen to the Acts of the Secretary of the Sitiada, because there is nothing as beautiful as the truth and nothing as warm as relating what has been seen:

“On the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 1825, at eleven in the morning, in the same inner room of the dwelling place of the Sisters that serves as an Oratory for some ceremonies, at the hands of the Very Illustrious Senor Don Vicente Jiménez, Chief Archdeacon of Santa María, President and Board Member of the Most Illustrious Sitiada, of the holy Hospital of Our Lady of Grace of this city of Zaragoza, in the presence of the Sisters who could assist and of the undersigned Spiritual Director of the Fraternity, after having given a brief explanation and exhortation of what they were going to do, Mother Tecla Canti, actual President; Mother María Rafols, Sister Raimunda Torrellas and Sister Teresa Rivera, promised to God Our Lord and swore by the four Gospels and a Crucifix that the said Lord Commissioner had in his hands, to stay their whole life in this Fraternity of the Sisters of Charity of the said holy Hospital, serving in it according to their Constitutions and the Vows they had made, and the said commissioned gentlemen and the four Sisters making the Vows signed together with me the Director and two of the remaining Sisters who were present at this ceremony.”

We seem now to see Mother Rafols again, a little pale and deeply moved, with the voice of a mature woman, a white wax candle in her right hand, on her knees, saying solemnly:

"I, Sister María Rafols, promise to keep Poverty, Obedience, Chastity and Hospitality, for the time that I remain in this Fraternity, in the presence of God our Lord and His Saints and of the Lord Director and Sisters of this Holy House. Amen Jesus."

If she closed her eyes she would remember that other day of December, so very far away, when she had arrived in the city in a poor wagon, surrounded by a group of frightened doves – How many dead already, Holy God! – to initiate this service that she was now sealing with an oath before God. If she did not cry with emotion and with joy at the same time it is because María Rafols was already a woman toughened by work and struggle.

### **At the head of the Fraternity**

The new Constitutions, on opening another chapter in the history of the Fraternity, seemed to demand also a change in direction. Among them it was pointed out that "the charge should last three years" and Mother Tecla was in it for thirteen years. And, as if God wanted to complete the return to the sources that the Constitutions supposed with another return to the roots in the persons, the election will once again fall on Mother Rafols in the voting done with all solemnity and requisites on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1826. With the joy of everyone, except the person concerned. Thus, the Commissioner gives an account of the result to the Sitiada, informing them that "in the act she asked me with insistence to accept her renunciation, attending to the fact that with regard to her health the same causes and even greater obliged her to renounce this responsibility earlier", to which he had replied that "he will make it known to the Sitiada at the time of giving the report".

Was this an excuse suggested by humility? Only in part. In fact, the health of Mother Maria must have been quite battered by

exhaustion and work. But we have already said hers was one of these "poor healths of steel" that ended up burying all those who surrounded her.

The paragraph with which the Commissioner continues is more curious, who, from what one can see, was not excessively a supporter of this re-election. In his report to the Sitiada, and after alluding to the reason of health, adds: "I find other causes for consideration. This job is incompatible with the charge that this Sister now has of looking after the foundling children and there are serious inconveniences in separating her from this job and harm in the interests of the Holy House". Once more he boycotts eulogising: the Mother has become indispensable in the care of the little ones, nobody will be capable of substituting her. However, was not her role at the head of the community more important at this moment, precisely now when the Constitutions had just been signed and the whole strengthening of the Fraternity is at stake? But probably the mother of the lamb is precisely in that state of "harm to the interests of the Holy House" that are later referred to: in fact, from the Foundling Home, through her contacts with the people and with reality, Mother Rafols received an abundance of donations and help for the Hospital. Would they not be in danger if she were enclosed in a more interior and occult labour?

What is certain is, that the Sitiada with much good sense, "considered this point with the attention that its importance demands, taking all the information" and, seeking the manner in which the Sister would not fully abandon the Foundling Home so that "the good administration and care of the foundling children whose administration is in the care of Sister Maria and from whom it does not seem convenient to separate her, does not suffer detriment", approved and confirmed however, her election as President of the Fraternity for the three years that the Constitutions prescribe.

Here, one of the most serene periods of the life of the Mother begins. The most visible signs of this peace and joy is the flowering

of vocations that is seen in this three year period: in 1826 Sisters María del Pilar, Miguela Codina, Sister Francisca Maya and Sister Gervasia Doménech take the habit. In 1827 a young girl, Magdalena Hecho, called to be an important figure in the Congregation, as Superior from 1851 to 1877 and as spiritual inheritor of the Mother, will make her Vestition. And in 1829, Sister Teresa Torrens.

These are the years when requests from many parts come in to ask what conditions are to be fulfilled to enter the Fraternity. The Mother then does not use the wide sleeve tactic. She is not in a hurry for growth. What is important for her is the quality of the persons. We have two very curious documents of this period, a kind of "conditions sheet" that is sent to the applicants and which is written with such firmness that one would say it is more to frighten away than to attract. Here are some paragraphs of one of them:

"This Hospital is general, not only for the city, but for the whole kingdom and for the whole world and all patients who present themselves are received, whatever be the gender and whatever be the illness, even though contagious and incurable.

The Sisters are in charge of the women patients and with them do what is necessary from undressing them and helping them in to the bed when required, up to shrouding them when they die (which is done by the Sisters alone, even though for this one does not go alone, but with another). Hence, they make and change the bed and clothes when convenient, they give the food and medicine (for which it is convenient that they know to read), they themselves administering the enemas, stomach remedies and damp clothes, whatever is necessary; they sweep the wards everyday and clean even the toilet bowls, and this every morning; they assist with the dressings of the operations, keeping at hand ointments and whatever else is necessary for those who do the dressing; those who know how to do the bleeding, will bleed the women patients; and two Sisters will do night duty every night, walking around the wards, one till one in the morning and the other from that time till all the others wake up, who they will call at four o'clock in the morning

all through the year. This is quite a difficult job, exposed to colds, especially in winter....

One Sister takes care of the foundling children so that the wet nurses who feed them do not cheat with their food and their cleanliness, they keep calm, etc.; but the said Sister also has her turn of night duty and she will assist with the cleaning of the dirty chamber-pots. Another Sister will take care of the women who withdraw because they are pregnant, making them work, pray (even though to assist with the delivery there is a midwife) and also do night duty and cleaning like the others; and the same with the Sister who takes care of the ironing and mending of clothes of the sacristy and of the Sisters; and the one who takes care of the wardrobe, where clothes are given and received and arranges them and gets the mental patients or other women who are good at it, to do the mending.

All this and in a public house like this, where persons from all classes, genders and conditions enter to visit the patients, because of relationship, charity or curiosity, and where there are very many servants, mainly bachelors, it makes it indispensable for the Sisters to see and deal with all kinds of people, and not to get into bad books with them, nor stain themselves in any of these ministries, and practice the others with pleasure and efficaciously, it is essential that they have the vocation of God, not anyone whosoever, but very special, and it is convenient that they all know to read and the majority to write.

The one who is called by God, will also be robust enough to carry out these jobs; courage to expose her life to illnesses, that can easily be contracted; charity to serve the patients with affability, without distinction of the contagious ones and with disdain for interests, comforts and attention of the world; well, all this is necessary and will be given by God to the one He calls to this destiny, and if He does not give it, it is a sign that she is not wanted for Him".

Both the toughness and the frankness of this writing impress. No one is cheated here. On the contrary, it seems that the objective

of the document in black and white was to frighten away romantic vocations. Better few than mediocre, seems to be the style of María Rafols.

### **A sweet and demanding Superior**

How was Mother Rafols as a Superior? In the declarations of her Sisters, in the Process of Beatification, we find a true mountain of small details that are, undoubtedly, enveloped in the veil of affection, but that transmit a reality and trace a style. Here is a small gallery of such remembrances:

- “Most observant of the rules even in the smallest detail, she made the others observe them with the efficacy of her example”.
- “Most devoted to the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, she visited Him everyday before and after work; but these visits were more frequent during the night and there is where her Sisters found her many a time”.
- “Her confessions were brief and her communions as frequent as the rule permitted; Thursdays, Sundays, Holy Apostles and festivities, and with such recollection, that she inflamed the others”.
- “She was never inactive and even in her illnesses she would get up at night to help the Sisters on night duty”.
- “Her courteous manners and noble face reflected a pure soul”.
- “Even when she was ill she ate very poorly”.

Effectively, as Sanz Artibucilla points out, “at her side one felt fine and, far from being afraid with her amazing mortification, inspired by the ardent desire of imitating her”. She was really a mother. She poured herself over attending to the patients, in defending those accused of something. She enjoyed gifting them

whenever she could, some sweet or fruit and it is remembered that never in her illness did she accept any more appetising dish if the Sister who served it to her did not take part in it herself.

She was very especially affectionate towards the Sisters who saw themselves tempted with their vocation. She couldn't tolerate them being treated harshly in these dark hours or reprehending or hurting them. “Once – relates a religious – a Sister treated another who seemed to have lost her vocation with scant charity. When the Servant of God came to know about it, she reprehended that Sister, telling her that she should have more charity with those who suffered temptation, and it could happen that she herself could be tempted and could succumb”.

Three years of sweetness and exigency: this is what is remembered of those three years when she was Superior. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1829 Mother Teresa Perú, who three years earlier was given the charge of Mistress of Novices by Mother Maria, was elected Superior. Now our protagonist could go back to the tranquil peace of the Foundling Home, among her beloved little ones.

### **The death of Fr. Juan**

The year 1829 held an even greater sorrow for Sister Maria and for the whole Fraternity: the death of Fr. Bonal. We know nothing about his earlier illness. Suddenly in the Acts of the 17<sup>th</sup> of August the news of the seriousness of his illness appears and that Sisters Tecla and Magdalena had left to attend to him. This time the Sitiada was generous: the Act relates that it was agreed that he should be helped in whatever was necessary “on the part of the Hospital, assuring him that the Sitiada is ready to contribute in every way it could to get his health and well-being back”.

But it was already too late. Fr. Juan was not ill, he was just exhausted. Fifteen years on the roads of Spain – Tellechea certifies “in a severe winter he went through 747 villages” – they had made him a very old man at the age of seventy. It was not death that he was reaching, rather his just rest.

And it reached him in a marvellous place. Thirty kilometres from Zaragoza and on the way to Huesca, in the prairies irrigated by the River Gállego, there is a sudden mountainous sharp gradient elevation on the top of which shines a small white tiny rustic hermitage, not far from the little village of La Paul, on the limits of Zuera. Dedicated to Our Lady of Salz, it offers a marvellous panorama of the whole rich lowland area. It is the ideal place for a solitary hermit. In its profound silence only the wind among the trees of the meadow, generously green when spring is approaching, is heard. And it is, in its simple poverty, like a living portrait of the soul of Fr. Juan. There it is preserved, carefully restored today by the Annes, the tiny little room in which he worked, with his poor iron bed, his rustic worktable, and the window open towards the presbytery of the rustic Church. One would say that the Father still lives there. That he has gone on one of his "veredas" (route of travelling preachers), but that he will return to this paradise-desert to prepare the next.

Here death caught up with him; here he dictated his last Will and Testament, here he died in solitude and poverty. He left in his Will just enough for the Parish of Zuera to say fifty Masses for him; he bequeathed fifty 'duros' (Spanish currency) to his elder brother and eight more to Mother Tecla Cantí, who accompanied him in his last hours in the name of the Fraternity. He adds fifty duros more for Brother Redín who accompanied him on his travelling preaching. And then books, many books, to the canon Marco, president of the Sitiada. Books that – ah! – will be going around even in 1838 and will end up in a loft to be consumed by dust and by rats.

Among his last desires would figure that of being transferred to Zaragoza, to the Hospital to which he dedicated his entire life. The Sitiada would fulfil this desire of his, "in view to the extraordinary services that this zealous ecclesiastic had lent in favour of the same", and in the funeral all the clerics would participate and who will collaborate in it "with the charity of six reales of vellón" (Spanish coin). Prayers would also be said for him "in all the wards of the patients" by order of the Board.

And there, in the small crypt, his remains will rest together with those of Mother Rafols till they were transferred – also with hers – to a beautiful sepulchre in the Novitiate House of the Congregation. Neither did he see in his lifetime his dream of a great organized Fraternity materialize. But generations and generations of Sisters, who recognize him as their Founder and true father, have passed in front of his tomb.

But neither history nor Spain has recognized the gigantic figure of this Quixote of charity that he was, undoubtedly, one of the tallest figures of the Spanish church of the past centuries. J.I.Tellechea has drawn in a few lines his most just panegyric:

"He was an authentic worker of the true Church of the poor. The poor, the 'least' of the Gospel, in all forms of destitution, were the object of his preferences and the invariable field of his activity. The less lovable side of society is converted into the setting of his life: the sick, wounded, prisoners, with scabies, the demented, foundling children, abandoned people, with neither material resources nor moral protection, in the Hospital; insignificant little villages, simple people and needy, beyond themselves. No canon of human efficacy, of social influence or of prestige could cause the slightest temptation of vainglory. Obscurity as the climate, pain like his daily bread, fatigue, poverty, contempt, like inseparable companions, mould a life spent at the service of others. His was Christianity without tinsel, difficult, solid, with deep evangelical roots, of heroic Christian virtues. Imitator of Jesus Christ, Bonal spent his life doing good, many times to people of flesh and blood, but for him, almost without face or name, with very little possibilities of ostentatious gratitude. Spreading in souls the seed of goodness, a distant image of that of God, this seed whose sower we forget, but who sends us to the source of all goodness. Precisely because of its most concrete manner of insertion in the world, Bonal is a palpable witness of God with an unmistakable style the validity of which is permanent".



#### XIV. ...AND HE WAS COUNTED AMONG THE EVIL ONES

The life of every Christian ends by being similar to that of Jesus, His Master. And at times, these similarities are so confusing, that one cannot but think that God has carefully chosen them in His designs on each man. Perhaps this is the reason why Maria Rafols is now going to live through a process like that of Jesus, confused and ambiguous like that of the Master, and to suffer an absurd absolution-condemnation when her judges recognize, as in the case of the Master, that she lacks all culpability. In spite of this the weight of justice is made to fall on her as though she were a true evil-doer. The shadow of Pilate will revolve around the following pages. And even here, someone will wash his hands.

Unfortunately, despite the long and detailed research that has been done in the judicial archives of Zaragoza and Madrid, Acts of this process have not been found. And we have to be content with the many facts that the Acts of the Sitiada offer us and that have at least the advantage of being exact and precise in their coldness.

Let us say, even before going near them, that this year 1834 is a sad time for Spain: when Fernando VII died in September 1833, the nation begins to divide itself into irreconcilable groups: Isabelines and Carlists, a trench which, more unfortunately, coincides with a certain frequency with the division between Catholics and enemies of the Church. The persecutions abound in these years. Sometimes in a frightfully bloody manner, like the famous killing of the Friars of Madrid; at others more moderately with all kinds of processes, forced secularizations and surrenders of properties. All this would push many clerics towards Carlism and it will even be said, "taking up arms in favour of Don Carlos was an absolute duty of conscience".

And what is worse: Spain will be full of suspicions. The smallest infringement will be motive for imprisonment of a person and to keep him months and months in prison given the extremely long duration of the processes of the period. Palafox himself, and in this same year of 1834, will be detained on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July for supposedly conspiring against the Queen, and even though he would be transferred to his house eight days later, he will remain a prisoner there for many months, refusing to leave his house till his honour was restored. But his declaration will only be taken in December and only in July 1835 would he be able to communicate to his friends "the honourable and satisfactory end of your iniquitous persecution", as he says in his letter of reply to the Duke of Rivas. His good friend Mother Rafols will have to live through something very similar.

She lived happy after her return to the Foundling Home when suddenly the Acts inform us of a new sorrow:

"Señor Arias made it known that while Señor Count Sobradriel, Administrator of the Week, was paying a visit yesterday evening, the 11<sup>th</sup> of this month, the Warden of the district of the grain-producing country, Don Joaquin Carbonell presented at the hospital an order or a commission of the ruling Judge of the Military Commission, who lives in the Street de la Contamina, N° 65, to transfer Mother Maria Rafols to the prisons of the Inquisition: which was carried out with the greatest attention to detail by the warden assigned to the task. The Sitiada and the president in charge were informed of this event, so as to give the said Mother Maria all the help possible to make her painful situation more bearable".

The indifference of the news and, above all, "the Sitiada is informed" baffles us: in quite a number of earlier cases, which are stated in the Acts, the members of the Board openly defended the accused Sisters demanding that being religious, they should be interrogated in the Hospital itself. And now, the Sitiada becomes aware! Yes, they prepare to "make the situation more bearable" but we do not see an open defence. All this due to – as Calasanz Rabaza

suggests – the small tensions that Señor Arias seems to have had with the Mother? It is not very likely, it being the decision of the Board.

Rather, it will have to be attributed much more to the collective fear that those who are not very valiant experience in these historic hours of tension in which any gesture can envelop one in a problem and take one, even to death. During these months there will be in Zaragoza a bloody encounter – in which canon J.A.Marco will die – to the shouts of “The Archbishop must die and the treacherous priests must die”. And soon after, the Archbishop himself will have to flee from the city, accused of being a Carlist. At times like this, the Pilates are silent.

And why is Mother Maria detained? Unfortunately we have to move in the field of suppositions. That it concerned a political type of problem is proved evidently both by the fact that the one who acts is the office of the judge of the Military Commission as is the fact that she is taken to the prison of the Inquisition which was now reserved exclusively for political prisoners.

A second piece of information contributes a little more clarity: twice, – on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May and on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July – the Judge who is handling the case cites four servants of the Foundling Home (the washer woman Feliciana Falcao, a wet nurse Ignacia Lamarca and the servant Constantina Membrado and one more) to proceed with “the ratifications of the declarations that have been offered in the cause that I am pursuing against Mother Rafols and the Señora Countess of Villamur”.

It seems that the jigsaw puzzle is beginning to fit into place. Because this interrogation is going to support the declaration of Sister Mauricia who, in a letter in which she transmits her memoirs, assures that “some Spanish nationals who were persecuted and whose lives were to be taken and she hid them”. If this was so, it is very much according to law that the Judge interrogates four of the women who worked with the accused.

But, who is this Countess of Villamur to whose fate she seems linked? This has been a jigsaw puzzle for historians for many years, as the lady appears on some side of history or other. However, a trace of a possible response comes from very recent investigations in the municipal archives of Zaragoza. From them we know that, effectively, a little before this detention of Mother Rafols, specifically on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, “a group of peasants of the Carlist Camp, instigated by the military, appeared in the areas of Arrabal and Tenerías”. We also know the names of the military conspirators: Count Juan Penne-Villemur, Captain Martín Navia and Captain Pedro Prugent, who were judged by a military commission. We know more: “It seems that Count Penne-Villemur instigated the residents and fled rapidly. The governing Queen, on knowing that he had passed over the rebels, ordered him to be separated from the army; but Captain Pedro Prugent was condemned and later took refuge in the decree of amnesty of the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 1840”. All this data we collect from the doctoral thesis of María Rosa Jiménez entitled *The Municipality of Zaragoza 1833-1840*.

Do we have the key to the enigma here? Will this famous Countess of Villamur be the wife of this Count Penne-Villemur who fled after the rebellion? And perhaps he or any of the other accused would be hiding in the Hospital after the rebellion, in the section directed by Mother María? And, if this were so, would she do it, as an act of charity, Mother Maria herself knowing about it... or without her having a clue about it?

Personally I think that the latter hypothesis is the most probable. And I am inclined to think that this was not an infrequent happening. There is one fact that proves it with evidence: Not much earlier – on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1833 – the acts of the Sitiada transmit to us a complaint about the Sub-delegate of the Police of Zaragoza, Count Ezpeleta, in which it is indicated that “some criminals abuse the charity of the establishment, taking refuge in it as patients”, hence he ordered that “the entries be checked rigorously.”

It is certainly not improbable to think that some of these rebellious pro-carlists – maybe even some acquaintance of the

Mother – would take refuge there asking for help as a patient or maybe as wounded in the same disturbances of the 27<sup>th</sup> of February. And that the Mother would receive him or because of charity knowing the truth about his persecution, or by simple ignorance, treating him like one more wounded. This latter case could be better explained by the fact that the tribunals so openly recognized the innocence of Mother Maria. In this hypothesis the affirmation of Sister Mauricia who affirms having heard related in the Convent that there was also a Judas in this matter, would also be the right one, “a Sister who wanted to be Mother General” and who was the one “who told the gentlemen who were deputed, the act of charity of the Mother, so that she would be removed from Zaragoza”.

Whatever be the causes, what is certain is that this harsh 11<sup>th</sup> of May 1834 Mother Maria, surrounded by guards, experienced the shame of leaving that Hospital, Maria, that Hospital in which she had gone overboard with her concern and care all through thirty years. It is easy to imagine the scene of the patients and the Sisters crying when wishing her good-bye. But she – as has been recorded in the testimony of Sister Casiana Berdonces – smilingly, calmly, consoled the Sisters telling them to take much care of the patients, that it was very difficult for her to leave them and asked that they pray to God for her as she would for them, and that they should accept the Will of the Lord who had so permitted it”. She would repeat very similar words later to the two Sisters who, crying, accompanied her to the prison and there they left her, behind bars.

During two months she experienced the sorrows of the prison. Two months that must have seemed unending for her, there is nothing longer than an unjust punishment. Fortunately she could receive the visit of her Sisters daily and converse with them. Her generous heart – it has been related later – pardoned them from the very outset, “without having heard her speak ill or complain of anyone”.

And in the middle of July she could enjoy provisional liberty that was granted to her before the final sentence, “because the attorney was always of this opinion as nothing came of the investigations”.

It was a difficult moment to leave in this month of July: because in those days a terrible cholera reached Zaragoza, which after infesting Andalucia, had gone up to Madrid, where, without any reason, produced the terrible deaths of the friars on the 17<sup>th</sup> of the month. Now in Zaragoza it was going to give occasion to the Sisters to demonstrate that their vow to assist the contagious was much more than a phrase of rhetoric. Effectively, the chronicle of the community indicates to us that during those days “they worked with much zeal and charity, within and outside the Hospital, with the praise of the city and the authorities”.

Another curious testimony that we guard of this period: the accumulation of patients was such in those days, that the doctors could not manage to attend to them all and they had to recur to a group of students of Medicine who offered themselves for it. The epidemic, concluded the Deputation decided to give them all a token of appreciation. But they, who had witnessed intensely during those days the anguish of Mother Maria because she did not have enough beds to give to the patients, decided to put together the amount of the gifts of all of them and invest it in beds, which they presented to Mother Maria for the patients. This story that has been related by Antonia Belzunce, daughter of one of those university students, shows only too well, that even without being the Superior of the Hospital, she continued to be Mother Maria, the spiritual leader of the religious and their visible representative before outsiders.

The Mother will have to spend ten months of anguish waiting for the sentence of her trial. Her conscience clear, “resigned and gifted with an admirable patience” – like one witness would say – but worried because she knew well how crooked the human condition was. The sentence, in spite of her innocence, could come from anywhere. In the long run, is there anything more crooked than politics?

And, effectively, thus it was. In the Act of the Sitiada of the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1835, Doctor Arias reports that, “the Royal Chamber of Crime having seen the cause for which Mother Maria Rafols was accused, even though no complicity of hers was found, exiles

her to the town of her birth, with her telling the Tribunal that she wants to because she is ill”.

One would say that Pilate had returned to this earth. No grounds were found in Jesus and yet, he was given first the flogging then death. In the case of our Sister only exile, in spite of not having found any complicity. Can this be understood by anyone?

Bewilderment must have descended on the soul of Mother Maria. Would she have to leave her religious life and return to her native village? Probably no one of her family lived there any more. But above all, why had she to be kept away from her work, her life; and her small religious world? Supporting herself on her shattered health, she would ask to be transferred to Huesca, where at least, she could live among Sisters and continue her life in her spiritual world. Her appeal is heeded. What they wanted was to keep her away from Zaragoza, because, as a document of that period indicates, “the judgement of the Royal Sitiada indicated that her presence could not be convenient for the city; in those circumstances of effervescence, confining her to the city of Huesca, was more as a political measure than as a decision of justice”.

Now we begin to understand something: it is pure politics. Someone who now has power makes use of it to avenge something we don't know about, or to eliminate a religious who does not think like him or who has more influence than someone can tolerate. Someone? Who? I don't know. Caiaphas, Annas, Herod, anyone.

### **The Refuge of Huesca**

Now the origin and history of this foundation of Huesca will have to be told – even though very rapidly – which providentially, will serve as a refuge for Mother Maria.

The epidemic, which in the year 1804 long ago scourged the whole of Spain, was especially severe in the city of Huesca, when the Hospital of Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza (Our Lady of Hope) was not sufficient for the patients, especially because of the great

organisational disorder it suffered. This fact greatly worried the Bishop of the city Don Joaquin Sanchez de Cutanda. And having known the experience of the newly arrived Sisters of the General Hospital of Zaragoza (which was at first situated in the Parish of Santa Engracia, which belonged to the diocese of Huesca, thus forming part in some way, of the parish of the Bishop), asked the Board of the Sitiada of the Zaragozan Hospital to “send some Sister capable of taking charge of the government of the Fraternity that he wished to establish within the Hospital of Huesca for the assistance of patients of both genders and the care of the foundling children situated in the House of Mercy of the same hospital”.

The Zaragozan Sitiada, which had refused any type of expansion of the Fraternity, could not refuse in this case and ceded to the Bishop Sister Teresa Calvet, “a woman of much virtue, of much naturalness, of much charity and of a disposition most appropriate for this occupation”. At the same time, Fr. Bonal himself was put in charge of looking after this small community that Huesca asked for in Cataluña.

Born of the same father and governed by a religious who was from the first group, logically both communities would remain united and interdependent. But the Bound of Directors of both hospitals took good care to separate them and maintain them independent and autonomous.

Thus they lived, united only by the figure of Don Juan Bonal and sometimes the two institutions using each other as guest quarters for sick Sisters, without any exchange except for small gifts. However, both communities maintained alive this desire for unity. The Religious of the two communities would meet at the Sanctuary of Nuestra Señora del Salz, accompanying Fr. Bonal in his last hours. And the famous letter that Mother Pabla Vives wrote to Mother Joaquina Vedruna, proposing to her the federation of Fraternities in the same tone that appears in the letter of Mother Rafols and Canti to Palafox is well known. But this meeting and embrace of the Fraternities of Zaragoza and of Huesca would be delayed till

1868, when after Mother Rafols died, providence breaks the pot in which Zaragoza had been locked in till then and the first foundations in Calatayud, Tarazona, Tudela, Caspe and Estella begin.

Now, providentially, this separated pigeon-house will serve as refuge to Mother Maria. And for a long time, as her confinement would last as long as six years.

Initially also the Sitiada of Huesca received her well, because the Board of Zaragoza this time had not limited itself to “highlight an act”, but behaved with dignity. Recognizing the innocence of Mother Maria and the many services she had contributed to the Hospital, during so many years they agreed, “they will contribute 400 reales of vellón (Spanish currency) for travelling expenses and with six reales daily during her absence from this Holy Hospital”. This was not precisely subsistence allowance of millionaires (seven reales daily was for that time the lowest salary of an unskilled worker), but at least, she could be in Huesca without being a burden to her Sisters.

The problem was that her illness soon began to occasion greater expenses and, above all, the generosity of the Zaragozans did not last too long: a few months later – in January of 1836 – the Board, without bothering to give any reasons, decide “that the token payment that was made be suspended”.

The Hospital of Huesca also lived in misery at that time. And the situation of the Mother began to become difficult. Armed with patience, she tolerated it. But in the month of July, she wrote a humble letter in which, after reminding them about the very many years of service to the Hospital of Zaragoza and explaining “the Hospital of Huesca is an extremely poor house and is not in a position to administer her the aid necessary in her habitual illnesses, that she has had to be on the flat of her back for many months....., she begs that, while her confinement lasts, they contribute towards her maintenance, especially with regard to food”.

To our surprise, the Zaragozan Sitiada responds in August... asking for a report from Huesca regarding the request of the Mother! Didn't they know that she had been their soul for more than thirty years? The reply would be delayed thus till August and they would reach a strange decision: They agree to give just once 500 reales (with which there wasn't enough to pay for the eight months of delay) and indicate this time a pension of three reales daily, “the difficulties and needs in which they find themselves to sustain this Hospital do not permit them to extend a larger grace”. They still considered grace and generosity that starvation salary to which they condemned her! Mother Maria kept quiet this time. She kept quiet once more.

Meanwhile, in fact, her health deteriorated rapidly. During many months she could not leave her room except to hear Mass and to receive Communion. And she spent many months completely in bed. “She languished – the Sisters of Huesca have related – of sheer exhaustion and weakness and her large heart, forgetting her own sorrows, continued taking an interest in theirs and in outsiders”.

This silent Calvary will stretch over six years. And in 1841, “fearing her approaching death”, requests that she be brought to die in her beloved Hospital de Gracia”. In the letter that she addresses to the Sitiada it is underlined that “the reason for which she was made to leave Zaragoza having ceased, the Board is requested to have the goodness of granting her that licence to return to this house of charity and employ her in that occupation that they think convenient”. What motive is it that has ceased in 1841? In 1840 the Regent Queen had renounced her charge of Governor and the Moderates Courts had been setup in March 1841. The political situation had changed. May be some falcon in Zaragoza whom Maria Rafols had to fear like the Holy Family had to fear Herod, had changed?

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of June finally she was able to return. And it looks as if she does so in a better state of health from the way the Act of the Sitiada relates this return: “With prior intimation Mother

Maria Rafols entered into the room, and on her arrival expressed to her Department how thankful she was for the benefits that had been dispensed to her during her long stay in Huesca, and it was only remaining to offer her services once again for whatever the Board considered useful and she could discharge. To which Don Manuel Cantin responded in the name of the Department.

If Mother Maria had been capable of irony, how many things she would have said to these generous gentlemen! But she was not capable. She smiled. She bent her head. The calumnies, the prison, the exile now began to be so far away. She hardly remembered them. From the sublimity of her seventy years she continued to be, like on that first day, in the hands of God.



## XV. "I SEE MANY PEOPLE IN WHITE"

"Youth – Anne Bradstreet has said – is the age of achieving; maturity is for improving, and old age is for giving." Perhaps this is the reason why – as a popular song says –

*Old wood is better to burn,  
Old wine the better to drink  
Old friends better to confide in  
And old authors better to read.*

And this is true: nothing better than an old man who keeps himself alive. Bad wine becomes vinegar with the passage of time. The good ones acquire better quality. Man loses with the years, his fire of youth. But lacking fire doesn't mean lacking light. The twilight of life brings with it its own light. And it is certainly the sweetest and most tender period of life.

I think of all this as I am nearing the old age of Mother Maria, which was, effectively, a multiplication of her sweetness.

We know that on her return from Huesca in 1841, she took charge once again of the Foundling Home at the petition of the famous Board of Ladies with which all the other Sisters had clashed and which – surprise! – had nothing more than eulogies for Mother Maria. Her health was not the same any more, she soon needed an assistant for the material tasks, but her heart had not aged and during four years she went back to being the mother that she had always been for those thousands of children abandoned by life. The joy of being in that house once again, recovered her honour; it probably gave new strength to her exhausted body.

But this could not be prolonged too much: in 1845 it is necessary to grant her retirement and take her to a place of a healthier atmosphere. The register of the Sitiada relates to us that on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June of this year it was decreed that she passes on to Bellver

de Cinca, in the province of Huesca, “to re-establish her shattered health, for as long as necessary”.

Fortunately we know the house in which she was a guest: that of Don Joaquin Ruiz, surgeon of the town (and who very probably had worked with her in the Hospital), and Doña Juana Castell, his wife. One of their sons, Manuel Ruiz (who later would be the Parish Priest of Fraga for forty-six years and who at that time was a student of law), has related for us the life of silence and recollection the Mother lived in his house. “She was a woman of very few words, but when she spoke she was very expressive: just one sentence of hers was as good as a sermon. She was also of a very large heart, very resolute and intrepid; in a word, a true saint”. It is impossible to make a better portrait with fewer words.

The care that she received must not have been very efficacious: her illness was just the exhaustion of a life that was treading towards its sunset. She lived now only for God. But all the testimonies of this epoch certify for us that she was neither far from reality nor from others. Those were difficult times for a believer. For this “she was greatly afflicted – recounts one of her companions – by the evils in the Church, attributing them to their own infidelities and prayed to God ceaselessly for the Pope and the Church”. “Doing extraordinary penances – related another Sister – she offered all her sufferings and work for the conversion of sinners”. “She bore severe illnesses – said a third – not only with resignation, but also with joy, without it dispensing her from the rules, which she observed to the end”. “She used to go – said a fourth witness – dragging herself and almost paralytic to the wards of the patients and thus the Sisters would find her with great edification”.

The lamp extinguishes, but it still burns. In the periods of improvement, we see her taking charge again – in 1848 – of the Foundling Home, from which theoretically she had retired three years earlier. And she continues to be the guide and counsellor of the new Sisters, who, to her joy, are never lacking now. “One day a Sister lamented because she was not able to do her prayer because

she had to attend to a patient. Don’t worry – the Mother replied to her – because prayer is to assist a patient, if this is done with love for God”. And in the moments when her body could do nothing else, she returned to her old work in the sacristy: her hands could still make flowers for the altar.

In 1849 a great joy engulfed her: the construction of an oratory in the room of the Sisters. Till then they had never had their own chapel and had to be contented with the beautiful Church of the Hospital, where they assisted at many of the cults from behind the latticework that opened onto the arcades of the presbytery. But even to reach up to them was very difficult for Mother Maria. And now the Eucharistic presence of Jesus is taken to her side. The act of inauguration was solemn, with the assistance of all the Administrators of the Board and a most solemn “High Mass”.

And joys continued for those years – as if God had wanted to put a honeycomb in the mouth of one who had suffered so much. “In 1850 the Sisters took charge of the male wards and, as the services were doubled, their number increased”. Fortunately, vocations were not lacking. It was like an announcement of the grand growth that would soon come.

One more joy was the election in 1851, of Sister Magdalena Hecho as Superior. She had come to the Fraternity almost a child and Mother Maria herself received her as a Postulant while she was Superior in 1826. She had been her most cherished daughter and was going to be in fact the inheritor of her spirit and the pilot of the first grand expansion.

One more satisfaction still: in 1852 a sculptured image of the Immaculate Conception was blessed and placed in her oratory. It was a great feast. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April twelve priests intoned before her a most solemn *Salve*. And the celebrations were extended. Because “on the 11<sup>th</sup> of the same month, the presbyter Don Agustin Oliver sang a solemn Mass, preached and the Sisters received Holy Communion... Twelve priests assisted and at the end of the Mass they sang the *Regina Coeli*, they sang the *Magnificat* and the

presbyter Don Juan Francisco pronounced a discourse for the Sisters analogous to that of the installing of the image”.

These were now the last joys she would have in life. Soon it would be impossible for her to get up from the bed. “The alarming paralysis and the progressive hemiplegia with frightening symptoms – says Fr. Calasanz Rabaza – have just started... a type of living death, that goes rounding up life and inanimating the organism, singular specie of the cross, tied down to the bed, where breath is exhaled with slow agony”.

Fortunately, she did not experience the great solitude that accompanies so many old people in their last years. Her dormitory was converted into an axis of the charity of the whole convent. “At the fall of evening, when the work of the wards was over, they all gathered around her bed and related all that had happened during the day. The servant of God had words of courage, good advice and opportune advice for all, to regulate their conduct”. Everything had already died in her, except her tongue: “The paralysis – another witness will relate – that attacks all parts of her body, left her only the free use of the word so that she could continue counselling her daughters”.

Thus came death, about which Mother Magdalena Hecho would say “very little can be said about the last moments of her life, because some hours before dying she couldn’t speak, but the Sisters who were present noted that a few moments before dying, she looked at all of them with great tenderness and a smiling face and then, with great serenity, surrendered her soul to God”.

We have, however, an important document of this final hour, which I am going to transcribe in its entirety, because it transmits all the tenderness of this serene death. It is the declaration that Mother Josefa Badens offered before the notary of the Curia of Zaragoza on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1928, reconstructing the death of the Mother exactly as she had heard related by the Sisters who had witnessed it and to Fr. Augustine Oliver, who gave the Mother the Last Sacraments. I will transcribe it without a single commentary, because there is nothing to add or to suppress:

“It was the 28<sup>th</sup> of August, feast of St. Agustin, when the Servant of God began to get more serious, such that everyone understood immediately that she was reaching her end. The circumstance of celebrating the feast day of Fr. Oliver, confessor of the Community, motive of special joy for the Sisters, now increased their sorrow, as they saw the end of their most beloved Foundress, to whom Holy Viaticum was given that day, accompanied by the Sisters filled with the greatest sadness and shedding abundant tears; but their pain was mitigated with the fervour with which the patient received the Sacramental Lord, and by the joy and ineffable happiness that was reflected on her face; she seemed to be a seraphim. The 28<sup>th</sup> passed and the next day she got even more serious, and in the midst of her sufferings she lost neither serenity nor tranquillity of spirit, and animated and moved by love for her beloved daughters, she said some things to them, entrusting them and animating them to mutual charity and giving them good advice: thus she bade good-bye to her daughters, this good mother, the Holy Foundress, who was surrounded by the Sisters, among whom were Mother Manuela Manzano, Sister Teresa and Sister Juliana. On the 30<sup>th</sup>, the servant of God entered into her last agony; this agony was tranquil, without convulsions or the death-rattle; Mother Rafols was with closed eyes, which only opened slightly to look sweetly at her daughters. There, at the bed of the patient Fr. Agustin Oliver spent many moments, and on this day he did not leave the Hospital, where he even ate, so as not to be away from the dying mother in her last moments; and such was the sorrow that this presentiment of what was nearing caused every one, that Fr. Oliver himself cried bitterly.

About eleven in the morning a very trusted servant of the Sisters (with whom I dealt much later), called Teresica came to see and wish good-bye to Mother Rafols, and even though Mother Rafols was very weak she animated her and told her with much sweetness: “Don’t cry, Teresica, don’t cry; I’m going to heaven, I will pray there for you. God will repay you all the good service you gave me”. And Teresica cried so much that the Sisters had to take her out of the room. This Teresica spoke to me often about the sanctity of Mother Maria and referred me to the fact that she accompanied

her to Huesca when the Mother was exiled, not for anything bad, but for her very great charity to her neighbour.

At mid-afternoon of the 30<sup>th</sup>, at one moment when Fr. Oliver entered the room of the dying mother once again, she, raising herself a little and looking at him, said: "Ay, Father, will you tell the Lord Archbishop to commend me to God?" And he, so affectionate, very amiably told her he would. Immediately, in a solemn silence, interrupted only by sobs and tears of the Sisters who were around the bed, Mother Rafols remained overwhelmed in a kind of lethargy; but very soon, coming out of it, with her face happy and beautiful, a portrait of tranquillity and happiness which she already enjoyed in her interior, once again opening her eyes and looking at Fr. Agustin, exclaimed all transformed and as if out of herself: "Ay, Father! I see many people in white!" These were her last words. The Sisters saw at that moment how the Servant of God expired and exclaimed: "Father, father, she is dying!" And at the time Fr. Agustin gave her the last absolution and blessing, Mother Rafols gave a few short gasps and expired: it was the feast day of St. Rose of Lima and it was five in the evening.

Sure of the death of the Servant of God, Fr. Agustin said to the Sisters: "This soul is already on her way to heaven", and all the religious left crying like disconsolate daughters who had just lost their mother, with Mother Oliver and Mother Raimunda staying to shroud her with the habit of the former as it was newer than the poor habit of the dead Mother.

As soon as this work of charity with the remains of that holy religious was complete, Fr. Agustin went up to the room where the mothers and sisters were and gave them a most touching exhortation always to imitate all the virtues of their Mother Foundress, as she had given such great examples to them all, especially of humility and charity. And so engraved did the high virtues of the Mother Foundress remain in the mind of Fr. Agustin, that it was an obligatory topic of his conversations and talks, above all when he spoke to the Sisters and even more when it was the moment to

wear the holy habit of the Novices; Mother Rafols was the mirror in which all of them had to look, the angel of humility and seraphim of charity, she had to be the model of all her daughters; the one who didn't have the courage to look at herself in such a holy Mother and to try to be like her, was not worthy to enter into her family.

Mother Rafols died in the Novitiate, in the hall of two bedrooms, at the side of the Convent of the Incarnation. There was a big hall downstairs in which there was a Crucifix of huge proportions, which belongs to the epoch of the Foundress; there she must have heard Mass sometimes. In my times, everything is as the Foundress left it, as the Sisters didn't want to touch or vary anything.

While the earlier mentioned mothers shrouded the Servant of God and Fr. Agustin consoled her daughters presenting her from the first moment as the model to look up to, the employees of the Hospital brought a very poor, painted white box with blue strips. They put her body in the box and transferred it to the Church of the Hospital, placing it in the centre of the Church on a big table, covered with a damask cloth that they brought from Count Sástago's house, whose family held Mother Rafols in high esteem.

Mother Maria, already a dead body, seemed alive; such was the beauty and gentleness with which her face had remained; it was beautiful, very white, it looked as if she was sleeping.

The doors of the Church being wide open, people kept on coming to view the body of the Mother and to pray before it. Her daughters went back and forth, ceaselessly, to take the place of those who went to fulfil their other duties of charity, watched over her body and prayed before it; the public came in continuously, all social classes were seen: rich, poor, servants, military personnel of high ranks, priests and lay people. Everyone exalted her virtues and remembered the heroic acts of the deceased in the tragic days of the Sieges and in time of public calamities; many cried... And such was the flow of people to see the dead body of Mother Rafols, that it was necessary to delay the burial of the Servant of God by one more day to satisfy the pious curiosity of the people, who in

this manner demonstrated their devotion to that holy religious, who on the altars of charity, had defied death in the midst of enemy bullets and dangers of all kinds.

When years later, Mother Raimunda related to the Novices and young Sisters these details of her edifying death and of the burial of the Servant of God and the tribute of gratitude that Zaragoza offered to her on that occasion, her eyes filled with tears. And it is not strange that this should happen, because she always saw, and from very close, the virtues of Mother Maria: she assisted her in her illness, she shrouded her, dressing her as I have said, with her own habit and kept watch over her dead body day and night, the two days that she was laid in the Church of the Hospital, because even though the other Sisters took turns so as to be able to attend to other obligations, she did not separate herself from the body of her beloved Mother Maria.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September the burial of the Servant of God took place. All the directors of the Seminary of San Carlos came to the funeral rites and to the Mass. Don Augustin Oliver sang the Mass and Don Mariano Bayo and Don Mariano de Barta assisted, and after the service the body was lowered into the pantheon, where it was buried on the right side.

When this act was near, it was necessary for the Sisters to bid good-bye to their Mother who was in the beautiful white box and she seemed asleep. All of them desolate and with their eyes bathed in tears bid her farewell, and so engraved was the image of the deceased in the memory of all of them, that after some years, when the old Sisters told the newer ones all that happened in those very sad days and they described the figure of the Foundress, they did it with such intensity that the newer Sisters believed they were contemplating it. And as some had lamented that her portrait had not been made, the old ones exclaimed: "Daughters, in those times there weren't any portrait painters".

Is it necessary to comment on this text? Its simplicity says much more than any commentary. One does not know what to admire

more: this poverty that obliges them to change the habit of the Foundress for that of another Sister that seems more presentable to exhibit the dead body before the people; or the profound tenderness of the dying Mother with Teresica; or this most profound peace of those who die in the hands of the Lord.

Now the world is far away; far away is the pain and so much illness and so much death. Now the kiss of ingratitude will not bite her any more. Now what remains is only the love of her daughters below and her encounter with Jesus above. Joy. Much Joy. Who said death is obscurity? Death for the believer is light, much light. It is beginning to feel oneself among many people dressed in white.



## XVI. THE GOOD FRAGRANCE OF CHRIST

If you go sometime, Reader, to Zaragoza, go down to the small crypt that rests below the Church of the Hospital of Our Lady of Grace. Go down and let your heart and your senses be conquered by the sweet humidity of the silence there. And when your eyes manage to open the path between the hot obscurity of the catacomb, make them go past all the rows of tiny grave stones and read – if possible in a loud voice – these old names and, above all, the young ages when they all died at the hands of hunger and fatigue. They are women of our race, but they were not people like us. They were people who believed in what they believed and knew that it was worthwhile giving their life for it. And they gave it without rhetoric, without glorious hymns, simply dying in the prime of youth like a candle exposed to the wind. Try also to read the name of the anonymous memorial stones, those that cover bodies that not even have their name left behind in history. Of eight of the first twelve only this silence remains. And the rest do not appear in the lists prepared by the wise ones of this world. Nobody will ever dedicate a street to them. They only knew to love. They only knew to let their life be shattered at the hands of others, of people unknown to them, but who show off the glorious title of “patients”. Go down and bend your knees. Go down and try to discover up to which point love is stronger than death; well, there are those who give their life for this love. Try also to discover if this love is that which they say up there, in the hustle and bustle of the streets and the rhythm of the discotheques. Go down and feel ashamed of your life. Go down and discover that they were crazy and so are we, who so skilfully squander our heart.

Enter then into the second ambience of the crypt: during almost a century two grand captains of this fantastic madness rested here. Their fragrance of simplicity, of purity, of this obscure heroism of

daily death still lingers on. Their names were Juan and María. They lived two centuries ago and still continue to live through the three thousand women who prolong their love. They dreamt a lot in life, but neither of them suspected such a large progeny. But, if it is necessary that this bonfire is burning for a room to be warmed, how much must this bonfire have burnt for its warmth to continue reaching us today? In this silence of the catacomb its crackle can still be heard. Why do only those who have never lived, die? Those who have lived once and to the full continue living always at the other side of death.

Like Mother Rafols continued living in her daughters. Let one of them – with all her daring simplicity – relate it to you:

“I entered the Congregation of St. Anne – it is Josefa Badens who speaks – in the year 1862, that is, nine years after the Reverend Mother Rafols had passed away. I was living and dealing with many Sisters who had known her, witnesses of her virtues, sanctity and heroic deeds and Don Agustin Oliver, most meritorious priest who exercised his charge even in the time of Mother Rafols, whom he hence knew intimately and whom he assisted even in her last illness. He continued being the Confessor of the Community. The fervour and enthusiasm with which the old Sisters and Don Agustin Oliver spoke about the Servant of God Maria Rafols, so fresh was their memory and so extraordinary were the events they related to us about her that they got engraved in my memory in such a way that I have never forgotten them...

Right from the first moments after the burial of Mother Maria, Sisters and Novices got great consolation from praying before the tomb of Mother Rafols and kissing the gravestone that covered her remains...

At recreation time they spoke about nothing other than the virtues of the Servant of God. This contributed to the life of the family and in poverty in which we lived in the Holy Hospital. All those who knew her, spoke with veneration about Mother Maria Rafols and of her sanctity.

The Reverend Mother Magdalena Hecho, then President of the Hospital, put her as the model for all of us and said she was the angel of Charity, the angel of the Hospital, exemplar and model of poverty...

Motivated by some excuse I would sometimes go down to the pantheon, and Mother Dolores Marín used to tell us Novices: "My girls, give many kisses to the gravestone of the Mother Foundress, who was very holy; ask her for the charity and humility she had". We would rub a kerchief on the gravestone as a sign of veneration".

This action over her tomb was so prolonged as if she were passing in front of the patients and wounded. And this is how Maria Rafols – like all authentic believers – continued winning battles after death. All love is fecund. And even death does not restrain this fecundity.

It would be impossible to put together now all the testimonies of all those who knew her. But something very essential would be lacking in this intent at drawing her true face if we do not summarize here, at least, some of these impressions that have the absolute truth of direct witness and which, precisely for being formulated with such humble ingenuity, as much more trustworthy. Reader, permit me this brief anthology.

Mother Pabla Vives y Martí, who was Superior of the Hospital of Huesca during the six years Mother Maria stayed there, took pleasure in explaining to her Sisters the perfect conformity with the Will of God that she demonstrated always in the great tribulation of exile that she, innocent as she was, suffered. Not only did she never ever permit a single word of complaint escape her, but also not even was there the slightest perception of bitterness in her. "And, however – I am certain that her soul suffered very much during that period. Frequently was she found crying, on her knees, with arms outstretched before the Crucifix in her cell; but never ever did she reply with more than a smile to our charitable questions or with her usual phrase: "The cross is very beautiful and the best medicine to sanctify souls".

"She was very mortified; – the sobriety in her food and her spirit of poverty in everything was very notable. Several times in the week she had vegetables without oil or any dressing of any kind. And the same Mother even remembered being touched, by another detail of her mortification: "in spite of her numerous infirmities, she frequently made the Stations of the Cross, walking on her knees from one station to the other".

The testimony of Mother Dolores Marín, companion of Mother Rafols during many years, reaches us through the narration of Sister Amalia Jorcano: "She was our venerated Mother with a tender and affectionate heart. Being near her, one could not help but feel in the depths of the soul that she was, in effect, our true Mother. She never took any of the delicate things that I served her because of the exigencies of her illness without giving me the first morsel; and, to please her, I had no other choice than to take it".

Sister Justina Sanz related the following: "the affection that the Mother felt towards the youth was notable. At night, because she could not at any other time, she grouped them around her, and chatted with them very beneficially, exciting their fervour, recommending to them much love for God and for their neighbour, indicating to them prudently the dangers that they could encounter in their ministries of charity. But the best tenderness of her heart was kept for the poor sisters tempted with their vocation: she spared no sacrifice whatever, to win them over".

Sister Josefa Gomez also remembered the great devotion that Mother Rafols had to the Crucifix that was brought from Barcelona, when they came to found the work; she consulted it in all her doubts, increasing her esteem for it as it had on its pedestal the Virgin of Pilar, to whom she was very devoted as her Congregation was born under it. She affirmed that during her life she always carried this Crucifix with her and from it she always received much strength.

Even though she was restrained and very prudent in her words, she was, for the rest, affable, good, of very clear intelligence and sweet to everyone, leaving edified and consoled all those who had

recourse to her. Tall, majestic in her gait, her walk weighty, measured, full of grace, her manners courteous and her face noble and beautiful, revealed an interior in which all was peace.

Sister Teresa Domenech remembered especially her spirit of poverty. So much so that “when some sister broke some plate or glass of the holy Hospital, Mother Maria deprived herself of her own food so that with that money the said object could be bought and the Hospital would not be harmed. Our Mother was so generous, that many times she told us: “My girls, don’t be ambitious, let us live for today, tomorrow God our Lord will look after us. Let us live in the arms of Providence like the Israelites in the desert, who lived on the manna; and the one who ambitiously collected more than was required for that day, was punished by God, finding it full of worms the next day. Let not the Lord have to punish us, and do not doubt that, while we are humble and we trust only in the protection of God, the Lord will take care of us and shower abundant blessings on this Congregation”.

In the memoirs of Sister Maria Clavero what the contemporaries remembered most of Mother Maria was her preoccupation for charity among the sisters themselves: “She used to say many times: It would be very lamentable that, calling ourselves Sisters of Charity and practicing the most heroic of this virtue with the patients, we do not have it among ourselves: because mutual charity and union among us makes our greatest tasks and fatigues become bearable and even pleasurable; as happened with us during the Sieges. And, on the contrary, if there is no union, any annoyance becomes difficult and even unbearable in the religious state; and more in this Fraternity where most of the occupations are so tough and naturally repugnant”.

The testimony of Mother Raimunda Oliver also is very moving, which comes to us through Sister Justina Sanz:

“Being still in good health, she would leave her cell very late at night, and after going to the oratory to pray a while, she would visit the infirmaries, doing in them the most humble and low tasks, so that in the morning the sisters would find them already done.

This spirit of charity got so deep rooted among the first sisters, that there has been the case where several of them got up at night with the same pious end. These excesses of charity had to be refrained in the Institute by holy obedience, for fear of harming their health. Later, already very ill and ailing, she did not resign herself to abandoning her visit to her beloved patients, and even dragging herself would go to them, exercising herself in the most painful ministries”. “Her zeal for the salvation of souls was extraordinary, the Lord having gifted her with an extraordinary grace to move hearts; many were those converted during the war years, both Spanish and French. With just a few words of the Mother the hearts of the most hardened were touched”.

The testimony of Mother Antonia Pinén reaches us through Sister Casiana Berdonces: “In work she was always the first, above all in the most humble and most repugnant, trying to do it when nobody saw her. She tried always to take the young sisters with her, teaching them how the patients were to be treated and urging them very much to do everything only for God, and that they should treat them with much charity, seeing always Jesus Christ in the person of the poor sick. I also remember that Mother Maria Antonia herself used to tell us that Mother Rafols was all charity”.

These memories were preserved not only by the religious, but also by lay people who worked close to them. Don Florencio Jardiel remembered having received from the lips of his father the best eulogies of Mother Maria: “Her eyes spoke the language of modesty and everything in her infused reverence and respect. At her side one felt at the same time timidity and confidence. She was sweet in her dealings and was of easy access to her person, quick to respond to any elevated manifestation and to any healthy and plausible desire, and effusive also on occasions when charity required it. With the love of God and sustained by Him two intense loves burnt in her heart: the love for the patients of the holy Hospital and the love for her daughters, which increased in number every day, as God kept blessing the new Congregation... She loved peace, and she is not known to have maintained any differences either with

the very powerful Sitiada, nor with the doctors and the practitioners and even less with her most beloved daughters. In all the wards of the Holy Hospital, in the passages and in the outbuildings, the spirit of her virtues could be perceived”.

This rosary of remembrances could be prolonged endlessly, all impregnated by this “good fragrance of Christ” which leaves behind it all the faithful servers of God. And those small happenings could not be left out – Inexplicable? Prodigious? Extraordinary? Miraculous? – that also frequently surround the faithful followers of Jesus. Tiny and tender stories that show up to what point her presence continues to palpitate among her daughters:

“One night, Mother Raimunda Oliver was on night duty at the Hospital; exhausted with fatigue, she fell asleep slightly when she felt taps on her shoulder that woke her up. She looked around: there was nobody. And she fell off to sleep once again. The taps were repeated without her seeing anyone a second time. She was transposed for the third time, and stronger taps than the earlier ones made her think that perhaps it concerned something supernatural and, spurning the fatigue went around the ward and found that one of the patients was on her deathbed and asked for a priest to reconcile herself. Mother Raimunda quickly sent for a priest, who reached on time to help the patient who died immediately after. This happening was always considered by Sister Raimunda as a message of the servant of God, who, even after death, continued recommending, as she had done so much in life, the care and vigilance of the patients, so that they do not die without the Sacraments”.

The next memoir is not any less tender:

“To the same Sister Raimunda and other sisters it happened that, as they had delayed in giving the soup or the medicines to the patients, when they went to lend this service after the time, they found that it had already been done by some other sister. And, as this was repeated in various circumstances, the sisters saw something extraordinary in this happening, and asking the patients for

indications of the sister who had given them the medicine or the soup, all coincided, giving indications that pointed to Mother Rafols, with the sisters interpreting it as a message from their Foundress, who with the permission of God, even after her death, continued preaching the charity and care that her daughters should have with the poor patients”.

Later came popular fervour that, especially from 1908 to 1940, had surrounded Mother Rafols with endless enthusiasm. There were pilgrimages; people came to visit her tomb. In hundreds of hospitals her intercession was sought to get from God the cure of so many illnesses. If we had to write a brief account here of only the list of extraordinary happenings attributed to her, we would fill pages and pages. Not just a few, in fact, are those dedicated to it in the biographies written by Fr. Calasanz Rabaza and by Sanz Artibucilla. But all this is today in the hands of the Church and it is she who will judge it.

For us it is sufficient to state that the good fragrance of Christ of his figure has not been extinguished, a good fragrance that is not centred in the marvellous, but rather in that depth of silent surrender that renounces all shine. In a certain way – without doubting the providence of God – even the most holy shine, for now. Because it is touching to remember in this moment that simple, truthful and dramatic confession of Mother Pabla Bescos, when on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1926 they tried to respond to this question: why, having died in such a grand fragrance of holiness did three quarters of a century have to pass without initiating the path towards the altars: “They did not try to introduce the Process of Beatification, in spite of the fame of sanctity in which we have always had her, because the original hospital having been burned, all the documents and data of foundation were burned, and besides, the dire straits of the Congregation did not permit attending to such a thing.”

Is there something so sad and at the same time so beautiful as this last sentence? Bernanos assured us that “the holy Virgin did not have any triumphs in life because her Son did not permit human

glory ever to touch her." One would say that the dark paths of Providence would have wanted to maintain her in her sweet shadow, precisely because of her very great poverty.



## XVII. ... AND THE TREE GETS FILLED WITH BIRDS

I think I have said several times in the pages of this book that few Christians have been asked by the Lord for such a radical sacrifice of faith as He asked of Maria Rafols. On reaching this chapter I have to repeat it. Because the God who permitted Moses to see, at least from far, the Promised Land and He conceded to Simeon to confirm the arrival of the Saviour with the eyes of an old man, he let this old lady of seventy-one die after forty-eight years of being a religious, without this minimum pleasure of knowing whether her work would last or it would finish, dying of asphyxia, enclosed in the narrow enclosure that the Board of the Sitiada imposed.

And immediately after that, suddenly as if with the death of the Foundress the test of faith had concluded, there is a surge of growth, if not excessive, at least firm and constant, such that the small grain of mustard that was planted in 1804 would end converting itself into a luxuriant tree in the Church, and on whose branches, in less than two centuries, many thousands of birds have gone to take shelter.

A beautiful tree, which is today, like a "living portrait" of Maria Rafols. If it is certain what the Gospel says that a tree will be known by its fruits, the roots of such an extensive crop must have been good.

But it can be said that God wanted the style of Maria Rafols to remain imprinted even in its growth. Because the Congregation that in 1865 began to be called "Sisters of Charity of St. Anne" only grew along the paths of the most radical surrender and heroism. It is certain that nothing grows in the Church along the paths of lack of struggle. But our Sisters were asked, more than the narrow

path, a climb almost of mountain climbers along the steep and rocky mountains of sanctity.

It was in 1855, when the cholera epidemic destroyed Zaragoza and its province. The twenty-two Sisters that there were then in the Hospital of Our Lady of Grace performed such miracles of love, that nobody could explain how only twenty-two women could have attended so zealously to nothing less than eighteen villages of the province apart from the capital and its Hospital.

We leave the word to an anonymous author of the early history of the Hospital:

“Who should lend their services to the infected population? In ordinary illnesses perhaps the relatives, friends and neighbours would do it; but in contagious illnesses like the cholera, by which in a few hours the strongest and most robust are taken to the sepulchre, very few are those who have the generosity and disinterestedness required for the labour involved. The Sisters of Charity of St. Anne did this, none the less, with a bravery that one admires. Without increasing their small number they had to lend their charitable service to the Hospital to which they were confined besides the other new one that was required to be opened because of the extraordinary number of those who invaded the Hospital. With everything, no one lacked due assistance because the Sisters made up for their small number by surrender to their work. Day and night, without giving themselves hardly a moment of rest, and in the midst of an asphyxiating and lethal atmosphere, they were seen always at the bedside of the ones with cholera, and not only to ease their suffering but also giving them the medicines that the doctors prescribed along with these services also exercise other lower and more repugnant offices. Those who in such cases, visit the hospitals, even for brief moments, generously lavishing words of consolation or other useful help, merit the applause and admiration of the whole world. What is it then, that can to be done with these extraordinary women, maybe tender and delicate maidens, who, with their affection that never waned, and with a smile that was never clouded,

and without going out for even a moment to breathe purer air, are continuously consoling and promptly serving those with cholera, absorbing kind-heartedly that breath and residual air that bring with them revulsion and death? And those who shed the deep-felt tears before the dead body of the person who having repaid their good services with words of insult, succumb unrepentant; those who remain calm before the body of the beloved Sister who had died victim of her duty, because charity is inexhaustible, trying to save the eternal life of dying souls. Such was their course of action, so admirable are the examples of heroic charity that the Sisters of St. Anne gave in the these epidemics”.

Do not think – please! – that all this is rhetoric. Unless it is considered rhetoric that during the typhus of 1868, in a period of one month, thirteen got the contagion and seven of them died. Unless it is considered rhetoric that when the provincial Board of Beneficence writes congratulatory letters to the Sisters for their heroism, they respond with unaltered simplicity that they have not done anything more than fulfil their duty “attributing it all to the Lord, for whom they are ready to sacrifice themselves, seeing Him always in the person of the patients”.

It is quite understandable that the Governor of the Province is impressed with this heroism as it is to realize that “there is no right for the villages to be deprived of religious who do so much good for humanity”, “given that the Sisters lacked the necessary faculties for other foundations”, they will ask for and get a Royal Order on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1857 in which it is laid down that the Congregation “can expand and direct new establishments, always if they are within the limits of the province”. In some corner of the heavens the soul of Mother Maria must be trembling with emotion. The little plant left the limits of the pot and began to acquire robustness.

Thus in 1857 the two small foundations of Calatayud will arise. In '58 another two in Tarazona. And another eight more in the next few years. All of them, except the Hogar Pignatelli, in villages.

Two indications already appear in these first foundations and will go on amplifying in the following. The first is the "intuition", the sensitivity with which the Superiors General keep adapting themselves to the needs of the world in which they move. The growing sisters directly projected on the patients, will soon see that there are illnesses of the soul – like lack of culture – that are also part of their task: from now on the Foundling Home not only takes care of the health, but also of the education of those abandoned.

Thus we have seen the first Sisters expanding their task from the sick as such, to prisoners, from them to those condemned to death and to abandoned children. We will see towards 1857 the Congregation discovering a great lacuna of the small villages, lack of schools. In 1883 they will found for the first time a residence for women, thinking of the loneliness of so many apparently well-situated and actually spiritually abandoned. In 1890 they will take the great heroic leap and in America they will take charge of the first leper colony. In 1891 they will be more than half a century before their times with modern day nurseries creating one so as to permit the parents who earlier had to abandon their little ones, to go to work. In 1892 it will be the first residence for the aged. In 1893 the first shelter for housemaids, in which those who have no job are taken in gratuitously. In 1925 they take charge of the first children's colonies. In 1938 they take charge of the provincial prison of Vitoria. In 1947 they discover another great loneliness on taking charge of the first residence of priests. They adapt themselves once again to the needs of the day when they take charge in 1952 of the first residence of Social Security and in 1956 of the first school-home of the Board of Trustees for the Protection of the Woman. In 1964 they begin to work in their first house for abnormals... A path that keeps getting wider at the same rhythm as the exigencies of the world.

But there is a second characteristic in this path forward: and that is that the exigency of God does not cease on this Congregation. This radicalism of their first hours continues to be questioned. It is impressive to read today the roster of vocations in which – in

plagues, in wars – God evokes in them once again this total surrender that they formulate in their vows, a roll call in which not infrequently does one read: so many got the contagion, of which so many died. I could assure you that no other work of the Church has so driven into its flesh that phrase of the Gospel according to which the grain will not give fruit if it does not die in the earth.

But these deaths will not impede – on the contrary! – the growth of the Congregation. In 1889 Rome will issue the *Decretum laudis*, and in 1898 the official approbation of the Institute will arrive. In 1904 – exactly a hundred years after the foundation – Pius X will sign the definitive approbation of the Constitutions. And in all these years and in the following we will assist at an incessant growth of the foundations and the number of Sisters. At the time of closing this book there are 250 foundations and around 2,800 Sisters extended over four continents.

You see, Mother Maria, the plant has not died. It is growing. It does not stop growing. Neither in extension nor in depth. Because fortunately, her daughters follow you, Mother Maria, resembling you. They are as crazy as you. They have not softened your work, nor have they toned it down making it mediocre. They continue taking seriously the fact that each patient is Jesus Christ and treating him as if they were truly dealing with Him. They do not have such a dizzy life like yours was, because God does not demand of most of them such a deep well of faith. But they continue knowing that the cross is beautiful and the only guarantee of permanence.

And now they feel happy to know that you are completing two hundred years, the first two hundred years of your life. And they are proud that you are their Mother and that you have been so fecund: 2,800 daughters today, so many thousands all through these two centuries. And now they understand better the strange and difficult terrain that Providence made you live in your life and after it: so much of maternity has to be paid with so much of effort and a little confusion! But what floats is always joy. And they feel proud of that young girl who, two centuries ago, was born in Villafranca del Panadés. That lass who twenty-three years later would put

herself in the hands of God for Him to lead her without she herself suspecting the stupendous adventure that 2,800 daughters of hers continue living today.



## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

To make the reading of this book easier, footnotes of the page have been completely done away with. However, to respond to the interest of the most curious readers, I indicate below the sources of this book, in which it will not be difficult to find the texts and documents cited here.

The socio-political-economic atmosphere and orientation of Spain of that epoch has been based on the studies of J. VICENS VIVES (*Social and Economic History of Spain and America*), of Manuel TUÑÓN DE LARA (*Spain of the XIXth century*), of Vicente PALACIO ATARD (*Spain of the XIXth century*), of J.M. GARCIA ESCUDERO (*Political History of the Two Spains*), of TRISTAN LA ROSA (*Contemporary Spain. XIXth century*), of RAYMOND CARR (*Spain 1808-1939*), of Luis PERICOT GARCIA (*History of Spain. Vol.V*), of F. DIAZ PLAJA (*The History of Spain in its Documents*), as also in the edition of José Valenzuela of the *Diary of Casamayor* published in 1908 with the title of *The Sieges of Zaragoza*.

The religious problematic of that time has been studied in the light of *The History of the Church in Spain*, directed by R. GARCIA VILLOSLADA, in his volume V. Works of BARRAQUER and ROVIRALTA (*The Religious in Cataluña during the Second Half of the XIXth century*) have also been used, like that of J.M. CASTELLS (*The Religious Associations in Contemporary Spain 1767-1965*), of J.R. DE LEGISIMA (*The Religious Orders in the War of Independence*), of Baldomero JIMENEZ DUQUE (*Spirituality of the XIXth century*) and various articles of the *Dictionary of Ecclesiastic History*, of Aldea-Marín-Vives, especially the reference to the word "Beneficence", of M. Jimenez Salas.

In what refers to the concrete life of María Rafols, the apocryphal writings and the works inspired in them have been completely left aside and what has especially been used are the anonymous little book of 1902 entitled *Origin, History and*

*Development of the Institute of Sisters of Charity*, the two principal biographies anterior to this (that of Fr. Calasanz Rabaza, of 1926, and the one entitled *Documented life...* of J.M.Sanz Artibucilla, edited in 1970), as also the volume of Acts of the Process of Beatification.

The principal source of this book is, however, all the material contributed by the investigations of J.I.Tellechea and collected in the six following volumes: *The Sisters of Charity of St. Anne and the Hospital of Our Lady of Grace of Zaragoza* (2 vols.); *Mosén Juan Bonal. Historical Documents* (2 vols.); *The Sisters of Charity of St. Anne in Huesca* and the offprint of ZARAGOZA, XXVIII entitled *The Hospital of N.S. de Gracia and the Sisters of Charity*,



I also want to point out here – as is the custom in this type of work, on the lines of the decrees of Pope Urban VIII – that all the affirmations that are made in this book of the degree of virtue or sanctity are subject to the supreme authority of the Church.

I must also thank the Sisters of the General House of Zaragoza, especially the Superior General, Mother Estefania Esandi, inspirer of this work, and Sr. Rosario Aznar, whose collaboration has been indispensable, for the help they have given me in the putting together and preparation of this work.



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MADRID  
PRAISE BE TO GOD AND THE VIRGIN MOTHER

**Translator's note to the Reader:** *The author talks about a period of time very different to ours and has used very specific language that will not be done justice to if translated with just one English word. Hence I have kept the same word, most of them very specific to that period of Spanish history, and here you will find explanations of these words below:*

- Regidor** = Magistrate, alderman (civic dignitary next in rank to the mayor), director, governor, prefect
- Sitiada** = Literally Siege but in this context the Board of Directors of the Hospital
- Real** = coin of 25 centimes
- Mosén** = Sir, title given to clergymen in Cataluña and Aragon  
= young men/ boys who work at the Hospital
- Junta** = Board of Directors
- Despintes** = "to be unworthy of" (food given for poor patients)
- Passionero** = chorister who sings the Passion, *an expressive word with which the priest who was "destined to assist" spiritually – sometimes even materially – the patients of a hospital were designated.*
- Veredas** = route of travelling preachers
- Limosnero** = almoner (going begging for money)
- Vellón** = fleece/sheepskin/tuft of wool; copper & silver alloy; small coin
- Duros** = Spanish currency

