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Aurora Nieto Funcia: “I am happy, very happy”

In this episode of “Fragments of History,” we explore the life of Aurora Nieto Funcia. She was a strong woman, a teacher and mother of three, widowed at the age of 28. In 1945, she discovered her vocation in Opus Dei as a path of dedication and encounter with God. She is considered the first supernumerary, and her story illuminates what it means to seek holiness in ordinary life.

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In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo says that the “historian of customs and ideas” is as important as the “historian of events.” The latter focuses on major issues and powerful figures, while the former engages with the background: working people, everyday concerns, the hidden evolution of souls... the things that happen on the “micro” level while the world changes on a “macro” scale. We look at the lives of otherwise anonymous individuals living simple lives; people who may not stand out among their contemporaries or come to define an era, nation, dynasty, or profession, but are no less important or necessary. This is Victor Hugo’s question: “Can you really know the mountain well if you don’t know anything about the cave?”

Those of us who study the history of Opus Dei grapple with this question every day. The lives of the people in this institution are usually simple and normal, as you would expect, since its message is one of holiness in the middle of the world through ordinary life and professional work. We have a “mountain” to explain, but above all, we have a “cave” of thousands of people whose lives are the best expression of what Opus Dei is and, at the same time, whose holiness is nearly impossible to capture. This is due in part to the limited sources available when it comes to studying their biographies. But, thanks to both a special historical awareness in the founder and the first generations of Opus Dei, and the fact that their stories are recent, from time to time we find gems that allow us to be Victor Hugo’s historians “of customs and ideas.”

Aurora Nieto Funcia, who we might call the first supernumerary of Opus Dei, lived one of those lives. We have a recording of an interview with her in 1980, the written testimony of one of her brothers and several nieces and nephews, and the letters she wrote over many years to Saint Josemaría and the first women of Opus Dei, including Nisa González Guzmán, Encarnita Ortega, Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, and others. And since she lived from 1904 to 1990, we can also find elements of her life story in newspapers from the time.

Who was Aurora?

Aurora Nieto Funcia was born in Fermoselle, Zamora (Spain), on November 12, 1904, and was the eldest of eight siblings. She pursued a career in teaching, one of the most common professions for women with access to education at the time. She

secured a permanent position as a kindergarten teacher in Fuentesauco, also in the province of Zamora. At the age of 18, she married José Gil Angulo, a well-known conservative politician from Zamora, who became the president of the Provincial Council and mayor of the city at the end of Miguel Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, as well as the civil governor of Guadalajara and Palencia. The young couple had three children: José María, Fernando, and Ignacio. Aurora was only 28 years old and all three of the children were very young when her husband passed away on October 7, 1932.

After becoming a widow, Aurora moved to Salamanca, where she lived for the rest of her life. From that moment on, she also had to work to support her children. In a letter, she spoke about the “economic hardship” she faced, which forced her to work several jobs at once in

order to provide for her children and her mother, who had moved in with them.

Her jobs were varied. First, she managed properties in Zamora. They gave her extra income, but came with their own set of worries, since they could only be profitable if the harvests were good. In the early 1940s, she worked both in Social Assistance and at the Savings Bank of Salamanca in secretarial and archival roles. In May 1951, she was appointed director of the Sagrada Familia School-Home, an institution run by the Social Work of the Savings Bank of Salamanca in the Pizarrales. Pizarrales was a low-income neighborhood which, according to reports at the time, had such high levels of hunger and corruption and low wages that even children were forced to work.

Aurora usually dressed in mourning for her husband and her son José María, who had always been sickly and in poor health, and who passed away in 1950. She often wrote about her children in her letters, especially José María, who she seemed to worry about the most.

In 1964, she underwent surgery for a detached retina and never recovered. She was blind from that point on. Her sons Fernando and Ignacio were already married, so she continued living in her home with considerable independence, although a caretaker looked after her for the next 26 years.

One of her nieces, Belén Nieto, who lived with her for a few years in Salamanca, said that she was “struck by Aurora’s integrity and the sense that she carried a secret, something that motivated her words and actions.” This niece was always

curious about that “sense of peace and acceptance,” despite the tragedies she had experienced throughout her life. Aurora died on October 12, 1990, at the age of 85.

Aurora’s secret

Another niece, Ana Nieto, remembers Aurora as an “attentive, upright, cultured, dutiful, flexible, serene, pious, and affectionate” woman. The General Archive of the Prelature of Opus Dei holds an anonymous account from someone who knew her in her final years in Salamanca, describing her as “hardworking and helpful, (...) very focused on assisting those around her.” Aurora was known for her capacity for deep and loyal friendship. Her family remembers her as elegant, very pious, strong, serene, and always striving to understand, listen, and respect

others' freedom, even when their decisions pained her.

Faith had been central to Aurora since childhood. She received it as a gift from her family, and became involved in Catholic Action at a young age, serving as the president of the Women's Diocesan Section. Before discovering Opus Dei, she was already a woman with great apostolic zeal, searching for something more to help improve society, have a greater influence, and know God better. In her own words, she "had a silent desire, which couldn't be expressed but was nonetheless heartfelt and concrete, for apostolate with young people, mainly students, university people, and in the world. Not for religious vocations, but in the world, with ordinary people."

Perhaps this is why, when she met St. Josemaría, she quickly saw the

answer to her longings in Opus Dei. She understood it as a call from God: it was her vocation. That first meeting took place in Salamanca in March 1945. The founder and Álvaro del Portillo had traveled to lead spiritual exercises (or a spiritual retreat) for a group of men and of women, respectively. Although Aurora could not attend, she had the opportunity to meet both of them days later at the Episcopal Palace of Salamanca. Fr. Pedro Altabella, a friend of the founder, introduced them.

Aurora describes how, during that conversation, St. Josemaría explained the institution he had founded, the people who were part of it, and his vision of how it would spread throughout the world and adapt to the customs and practices of each country. The meeting must have lasted about two hours, but Aurora Nieto Funcia said she was convinced

in a matter of minutes: “It was something that was already in my mind made a reality, and by a priest, which inspired me with a lot of trust. That was why my response was so swift. I needed no persuasion: I saw it right away (...). I considered myself a part of it from the very beginning.”

Before deciding to request admission, at St. Josemaría’s suggestion, she spoke with her confessor, Fr. Manuel Cuervo, a Dominican priest. Fr. Cuervo told her that he saw no problem with her “inner disposition” but that her family situation might be challenging, because she had to work so much and her children, especially José María, depended on her completely. Aurora feared that she would not fit in, describing herself as a “rickety cart” beside the other women who were already part of the Work.

But, as Aurora wrote to Encarnita Ortega, St. Josemaría told her that she could continue with her life and obligations while being part of Opus Dei. It is worth quoting the words with which she conveyed to Encarnita the clarity and confidence the founder had given her, encouraging her to request admission despite the obvious challenges: “The Father was here yesterday, at home. He came with Don Álvaro and told me how I could be admitted and belong to the Work from home without neglecting my children. It seems unbelievable, and although the idea of being far from you and outside the houses gives me some sorrow, and even some fear of not adapting well to the peculiar spirit the Father desires, I trust that he knows and sees no obstacle to it.”

She requested admission knowing that she would not live in an Opus Dei center and that her dedication to

the Work would not be exclusive, unlike the celibate members who, until that point, were the only ones in the Work. Married people would not have this possibility until 1950. In other words, Aurora was ahead of all this, and she was encouraged by the founder, who understood clearly that Opus Dei would have married faithful, and that its message was for everyone.

This woman was a pioneer among men, too, since the first men to request admission as supernumeraries were Tomás Alvira, Vicente García Hoz, and Mariano Navarro Rubio in October 1948. Aurora had done so on October 30, 1945. She would be admitted on May 1, 1952, and her oblation (that is, her juridical incorporation) was on May 31, 1953. Her definitive incorporation was on April 27, 1968.

One of the most impressive aspects of Aurora's encounter with St. Josemaría and subsequent confidence that Opus Dei was what she was looking for was her conviction that the founder's impact on her was supernatural. For her, his character and the natural sympathy between them were of little importance. What mattered was her certainty that St. Josemaría had a divine mission, and that this mission emanated from him with overwhelming force.

Difficulties did arise, and Aurora went through moments of uncertainty. She found herself in a situation very different from the other women in Opus Dei, which sometimes led her to worry about being fully integrated or feeling less a part of Opus Dei than the others. It didn't help that there were no others in her situation, nor was it legally recognized. After all, Aurora was 41

years old, had three children, and was the only one not living in a center of the Work. Her unique and different situation from the other women belonging to the Work concerned her, as she wrote in her letters. On November 8, 1945, eight days after requesting admission, she wrote to Encarnita: “The Lord’s plans are so hidden! I cannot think that the Father acted lightly when he told me that I too fit in the Work — and yet, bound hand and foot for who knows how long, what can I do in and for the Work? You have to tell me, and also guide and help me so that I can follow you as closely as possible and not be a burden or dead weight for the Work.” In those early years, until a center was opened in Salamanca, Aurora received her formation mainly at Los Rosales, a retreat house located in Villaviciosa de Odón, in Madrid, where Encarnita was the director at the time.

Even more impressive is the response she received to that letter, which shows the numeraries' trust and awareness of Aurora's full vocation. Encarnita assured her: "You can do amazingly effective work for Opus Dei at this moment by joyfully embracing the cross... Any work needs a foundation, and ours, being large, needs enormous ones, and you have had the good fortune that the Lord chose you as part of those foundations." That same year, the diary of Los Rosales also reflects an awareness of similarity between Aurora and the others. I quote: "It is an immense joy to think that another soul joins the Work to help us set the earth on fire."

In other words, it was not only St. Josemaría or Aurora herself who understood her vocation. It might have seemed surprising in the context of the time, but the other women of Opus Dei grasped that

Aurora, who was not living with them but at home with her children, a widow carrying many responsibilities of her own, was not only a part but a “foundation” of Opus Dei, just as much as those living in the center without those obligations. Their trust was key to Aurora's perseverance and confidence in her vocation. In a letter in 1947, she told Encarnita: “You reassured me that I should feel very much a daughter of the Father and very much your sister, and that is just what I wanted. I assure you, Encarnita, that as far as I am concerned, I truly feel like a daughter of the Father and a sister to you all, deeply united with everyone in everything.” In a letter to the founder, she wrote: “I am happy, Father, very happy (...). I already feel completely part of the Work, one more among the others, though I am far away, giving my life to the Work.”

This conviction, naturally, would strengthen over the years, especially with the arrival of other women in the same situation. What is now common in Opus Dei, where approximately 80% of the members are supernumeraries, was unique in the 1940s.

Aurora was a pioneer, thanks to St. Josemaría and the first women of Opus Dei, in living as a supernumerary. She knew she had a vocation, that it was equal to that of the celibate members, that she would find holiness in her work and responsibilities, whatever they may be in any given moment, and in a great desire to bring souls closer to God, starting in her own home.

She was of great help to the men's work in Salamanca when the first center opened in 1949. According to her niece Ana, her home "was a place for them to rest and feel at home in

the Work.” She helped wash and iron the oratory linens and vestments, and also made them herself. In 1950 she gifted them a humeral veil, a liturgical vestment used by priests in some ceremonies, such as Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament. At times, she also prepared desserts for celebrations and even invited them to spend important holidays with her family. Several of them came to dine in her home on Christmas Eve in 1950. And she did the same, of course, in the apostolate with women. The first vocations were her friends: María Jesús López Areal, who requested admission as a numerary on March 21, 1945, Consolación Pérez, Consi, who did the same on July 24 of the same year, Paula Gómez Trapero, Berta Boyero, María Calzada, and María Escudero, among others. Many of her letters in these early years reflect her concern for the vocations emerging from Salamanca, their

physical and spiritual health, the difficulties they faced, and their joys.

In short, Aurora was an ordinary woman of her time, with a job and a family to support, and at the same time, an extraordinary woman, who saw in St. Josemaría's message a vocation and a charism that she tried to live from October 30, 1945 to the end of her life. Her everyday life helps us understand what Opus Dei is: an institution that welcomes everyone with a vocation, living their lives – the same lives they lived before – with a desire for holiness. In this regard, Aurora helps to better understand what a supernumerary is and to grasp the importance of circumstances and availability in the same vocational reality. Ultimately, she is a forerunner of something that later unfolded with complete naturalness.

She is like a window through which we can see the reality of Opus Dei and St. Josemaría. Hers is a story of the “customs and ideas” that precede laws, that build history as a whole, and that, like life itself, are made up of both major milestones and small battles.

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