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Maruja: a life lived with love

From Spain to Italy, Japan and finally Australia: the beautiful life story of assistant numerary, Maruja Caverio

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On Friday 26 April, we heard the news that Maruja Caverio, one of the assistant numeraries who came to help start Opus Dei in Australia, had passed away. Dementia had taken a toll in her final years, but a beautiful life of fidelity and adventure became

evident from the stories being recounted.

The beginning of her tale is nothing short of incredible. Born in Spain in 1932, she hailed from the Aragon region, just like St Josemaria. Also like him, she possessed that charming Aragonese combination of affection and frankness. The Spanish Civil War was raging and at a very young age, her parents were killed as martyrs (Maruja wouldn't see a photo of them until she was an adult, when a photo and a crucifix were found hidden behind a loose brick in her original house). Their only crime was that her mother was the sister of the parish priest, who was the intended victim of the attack. Maruja and her three older brothers found themselves on the streets until a kind couple took them in. Later on their aunt and uncle managed to locate them and brought them up with familial love and faith in God.

After discovering her vocation to Opus Dei, Maruja lived in Rome. Her memories of St Josemaria from this time were full of affection. She recalled telling him that an image of Our Lady, which she liked to glance at while working, depicted her as too serious. He told her he'd have another painted especially - and he did! One of her favourite memories was when St Josemaria asked her and two other assistant numeraries to go to Japan and help to start the Work there.

Anyone who knew Maruja well would know her love for Japan. She threw herself into learning the language and the culture; and could be heard singing Japanese songs even 60 years after she left. This country held a special place in her heart and she never stopped praying for it.

In 1965, the adventure continued as she was asked to go to Australia and facilitate the beginnings of Opus Dei there. She may have claimed that English was harder to master than Japanese, but once again she gave her heart to this country where she would spend the rest of her life. During World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008, she had the joy of looking after Pope Benedict XVI when he stayed at Kenthurst Study Centre. She had the chance to talk to him about her parents and show him their photo.

Georgette met Maruja at an Opus Dei Centre just a few years into her marriage. She found Maruja to be affectionate like a mother, fussing over everyone, and keen to share tips that could help young mums in the care of their homes. Georgette had been struggling to fall pregnant and before she even asked, Maruja began to pray for her. About a year later she was pregnant with her eldest –

Phillip (who turned out to be the first of nine children). Maruja, with full faith that her prayers had made it happen, joyfully claimed Phil as her own and always had a cuddle with the baby when he came to the centre with his mother. Many years later when he was ordained, Maruja attended his first mass and “cried and cried,” as Georgette recalled.

Marina couldn't hold back the tears when she spoke of Maruja, who she refers to as her “Australian mother”. They met in 1983 when Maruja wandered into her shop, always with time for a chat. Marina had recently immigrated from Spain at the time. She was balancing long work hours with looking after two little ones, and it was Maruja who eventually convinced her to take a break. They would go for a walk and these turned into much-needed releases for Marina. One wonderful memory was when Marina's mother visited from

Spain and was dancing with her and Maruja – she had both her Spanish mother and her Australian mother together!

Over the years until Maruja passed, their beautiful friendship continued to grow. Marina said that Maruja was “like a saint” – someone who was always helping everyone, never with a thought for herself. She would give the best advice but was also a good listener. Even with dementia, she still recognised Marina.

Over her lifetime, one of Maruja’s main jobs was the care of the chapels in centres of Opus Dei. St Josemaria used to say that God had a special place in His heart for those who performed these tasks with love. This included setting and un-setting the oratory for Mass; and sewing for the linen used on the altar. According to her, she had sewn kilometres and

kilometres of stiches onto oratory linen!

In her final years, even dementia couldn't strip her of her love of God or her affection for others – clearly these things were too deeply ingrained in her being. Not to say that she wouldn't be difficult sometimes and refuse the help of others! However she could also recite her regular prayers with precision and would light up when someone put on a video of St Josemaria. Left alone in the chapel, she had been known to sing to Our Lady with gusto. She would ask after the people who weren't home yet and check if everyone had eaten their dinner. Maruja was very hardworking, continuing to occupy herself with sewing when she couldn't do much else. A recurring theme in the memories of her friends is her singing and laughing – laughing until they were all crying.

She may have been an orphan in Spain, and someone who arrived a stranger in not one but two foreign lands. But the Maruja who left this earth was farewelled by a church full of Aussies, with many more praying for her around the world. By the simple act of responding to God's call in her everyday work, God granted her more family than she could have imagined.

It looked like a simple life: but was really a hidden tapestry of richness. It is clear that God blessed the faith, loyalty and love with which Maruja lived her days – as He also blessed the people that were lucky enough to be prayed for by her.

Maruja, intercede for us - for faithfulness to the commitments we make to God; for an excellent work ethic in the service of our Lord; for mothers who yearn for a child, or people that desire someone to

mother them; and for the ability to be a true friend and love others selflessly, as you did.

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