

# **Elena Blesa Yanes: A Life Between Two Continents**

In this episode of *Fragments of History*, we take a closer look at the life of Elena Blesa. Born in 1925 in Barcelona, she was one of the first associate members of Opus Dei. Historian María Hernández-Sampelayo Matos traces her life story, shaped by her work in both Spain and Venezuela.

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Elena Blesa Yanes was born in Barcelona in 1925 and passed away in Caracas in 2016, at the age of 92. The first part of her life unfolded in Spain, until she moved to Venezuela in 1958.

She came into contact with Opus Dei in Valencia and asked for admission on January 15, 1949. Later, when the path for associates opened within Opus Dei, she saw clearly that it was the way God was calling her to live out her vocation.

## **A family characterized by travel**

Her vocation as an associate of Opus Dei illuminated her whole life, from her personal characteristics, to her social, professional, and family life. We will try to touch on each of them in this short biographical sketch.

Let's start with her family. Her father, Juan José Blesa Cárdenas, was originally from Valencia and worked

at the Tolra warehouses in Barcelona. His work involved frequent travel to countries like Germany, Colombia, and Venezuela.

In 1920, after a long stay in Venezuela, he decided to return to Spain aboard the steamship *Manuel Calvo*, which sailed between the Americas and Europe. During that journey, he met his future wife, Adela Yanes León, who was traveling with her family to visit several European countries.

A mere year after that first meeting aboard the *Manuel Calvo*, the young couple married in Caracas in 1921. Juan was 35 and Adela was 20. They began a life shared between Venezuela and Spain – interrupted by the Spanish Civil War – and went on to raise a large family of nine children.

Their first two daughters, Margarita (born in 1923) and Elena (born

March 31, 1925), were born in Barcelona. Before returning to Caracas, the family spent some time in Madrid, where their third daughter, Antonina, was born. During the two years they lived in Venezuela, their fourth and fifth children, Adela and Juan, were born.

In 1931, the Blesa family returned to Spain and settled in Valencia, where Fernando and José María were born, the latter in April 1936, just three months before the Civil War broke out. As the family journeyed through various Spanish cities to escape the conflict, Pedro, the eighth child, was born in Seville. Finally, in 1939, at the end of the war, Jesús, the youngest, was born in Valencia.

The challenges of raising such a large family led to some temporary separations. Antonina and Margarita left Valencia and returned to Caracas. In 1951, their father decided

to return to Venezuela to resume work as a commercial agent. He brought Pedro, who had received a scholarship to study in the United States, and Juan, the eldest son, who started university in Caracas, with him. Meanwhile, Adela, their mother, remained in Valencia with Elena and the younger children, Fernando and Jesús, until June 1955.

Here we start to see Elena's path. At the end of the Spanish Civil War, she was a 14-year-old student at the Teresian School in Valencia. She later completed her commercial secondary education at the Institute of Commerce. In 1941, she enrolled as an independent student at the School of Higher Commercial Studies, pursuing a degree in accounting and taking advantage of fee discounts for large families.

This arrangement allowed her not only to study but also to help her

mother care for the family. Her academic record was good, with several high and outstanding marks. And while studying, she prepared for competitive exams at the Pirelli company in Valencia.

All of this activity reflects, on top of excellent professional training, a deep sense of responsibility and hard work, which led her to mature quickly in her personal plans for the future. From a young age, she was noted for her social awareness and solidarity with the less fortunate, which led her to volunteer as a teacher in a charitable association.

## **Meeting with Opus Dei and a vocation**

Elena had a true gift for empathy and friendship with people of all kinds. She was involved in nearly everything going on in Valencia at the time, and she got to know Opus Dei thanks to that openness. Opus

Dei was just beginning in the city, and she learned about it through her friend Encarnita Ortega, who she'd met years earlier through Catholic Action groups at the Santo Ángel parish.

Elena herself recounts the encounter in one of her letters: "At the time, I had a boyfriend, Emiliano. When Encarnita called to meet up, at first I told her I couldn't go because I didn't have time. But then it occurred to me that Emiliano could wait outside the hotel while I went up to speak with my friend. So I went to see her, and she asked me very simply to pray three Hail Marys for Opus Dei. She explained that, by then, Opus Dei had already started in Madrid, Santiago de Compostela, and Barcelona, and she asked me to pray for that intention. After a while, I told Emiliano: 'I think God is calling me in another direction.' And we ended the relationship."

And so, on January 15, 1949, Elena wrote a letter to the founder of Opus Dei asking for admission. She was 24 years old and already had a wealth of family, social, and professional experience. This encounter with Opus Dei was the fruit of a spiritual restlessness that had led her to wonder what God wanted from her.

She had found her place: a path to sanctity through her work (of which she had plenty) and the various circumstances of her life (which were often unpredictable), bringing souls to Christ, surrounded by colleagues and friends. Elena was deeply enthusiastic about her vocation and the apostolic mission that lay ahead. It was work for pioneers, since everything in Valencia still had to be built from the ground up. A stable Opus Dei women's center wasn't established in the city until 1953.

In February 1949, just a month after she wrote her first letter to the founder, Elena had the opportunity to meet him at the Samaniego residence. She later described the encounter in these words:

“My heart was pounding faster as we approached the residence, and when we arrived, I felt that you could breathe the presence of God everywhere. There was order, peace, and serenity: God was there; you could feel it in a special way. (...) The Founder was very happy. He spoke to us about his gratitude to the Holy See for the *Decree of Praise* (of Opus Dei) in February 1947. Since that moment, the expansion of the Work had been immense. Everything had multiplied. (...) In response to a question I asked, he told me yes, I did have a vocation, but not to let myself slacken (he was referring to the spirit of struggle and the need to turn to prayer to persevere in one’s commitment).”

Elena's love for Opus Dei and her vocation is captured in a few lines she wrote at the time: "The Work is so beautiful! Every day I discover a new facet, each more beautiful than the last. (...) I feel the greatness of this vocation more and more, and I ask the Lord to help me remain faithful, especially in the little things."

This joy and passion, which would stay with her for life, carried her through the many difficulties she encountered from the very beginning. The first was the resistance of her parents, who – amid the family's complex situation and unfamiliarity with Opus Dei – struggled to understand her vocation. But little by little, their opposition gave way.

On June 3, 1951, her father left for Caracas in search of new professional opportunities. Elena

remained in Valencia with her mother and two younger brothers. The responsibility of supporting the part of the family still in Spain fell largely on her shoulders. Her workload and obligations increased on every front, and the demands on her were intense. Yet Elena quickly learned to center her actions on the compass of God's will in everything she did.

## **Work, fragile health, and apostolic mission**

Another factor to keep in mind in Elena's life was her fragile health. Due to the years of hunger she endured during the Spanish Civil War, both she and one of her brothers, Fernando, contracted tuberculosis while still very young. The illness would leave lasting effects throughout her life. In letters written soon after her vocation began, Elena expressed her

frustration at falling ill with the flu frequently, forcing her to remain resting in bed.

Despite this, Elena maintained an intense pace. As she continued her formation, she also sought out friends and colleagues who might understand the path she had discovered, and she began forming them in turn, through personal conversations, talks, recollections, and other initiatives.

She described this in these words: “Those were the days of my youth. I had only recently seen the light of God, revealing the path He wanted for me: to ask for admission to Opus Dei in order to become a saint and help save many souls. (...) From that moment on, what made my heart beat were souls, Opus Dei, the work of spreading the faith across the world. At the time, there were very few of us in the Work, but we felt

numerous. We sensed very clearly – perhaps by a special grace from God – that we would grow and reach many places, even distant lands.”

## **Among books, factories, and neighborhoods**

In 1954, with Elena’s initiative, the “Ideas” bookstore opened in Valencia. It was the first of what would later become a chain of bookstores across Spain and beyond. This became her main professional work, which she later continued at the Bayren bookstore in Gandía.

But her fragile health and heavy workload led to exhaustion. In her letters, we see that both her family and people in Opus Dei worried about her and urged her to slow down. Elena acknowledged that health was her weak point and she feared becoming seriously ill from overwork. On medical advice, she agreed to spend some time in a rest

home in the mountains near Madrid, seeking recovery in a peaceful and healthy environment. She stayed there for four months, made several new friends, and connected with members of Opus Dei in the area.

After leaving the rest home, she spent some time in Madrid working at the Neblí bookstore. She continued her life there until September 1958, when she moved to Caracas to reunite, at last, with her entire family.

After a brief period of rest, Elena began working as executive secretary to Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonso, then Minister of Mines and Hydrocarbons of Venezuela and a founding figure of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

Later, she became the executive secretary to the president of Textilana C.A., a textile company led

by Rafael García Planas, where she would work for over 25 years.

One striking anecdote from this period occurred in the 1980s, when the company's vice president was kidnapped for three days by the factory's labor union. It was Elena who phoned the kidnappers, calmly persuaded them to allow food and clothing to be delivered, and reassured the rest of the staff throughout the crisis.

In her work at the company, Elena took on responsibilities related to employee welfare. She was gifted with an extraordinary ability to relate to others, and she connected with people from all walks of life: young and old, humble and influential, including members of the Venezuelan government.

Her commitment to social justice is evident in the many letters she kept, addressed to politicians and public

figures in both Venezuela and Europe. This commitment was not merely theoretical: she expressed it in practical ways, including teaching literacy and offering training sessions for nurses in some of Caracas's most underprivileged neighborhoods.

Upon her arrival to Venezuela, Elena quickly integrated into life in Caracas. She took a keen interest in everything happening around her, both in political terms and in terms of their social impact on ordinary people. She looked for innovative and creative ways to contribute. Her passionate yet practical personality led her to become personally involved in addressing problems, always encouraging those around her to do the same.

She was also actively involved in various apostolic initiatives launched in Venezuela during those years,

from the Los Samanes Institute for Professional Training for domestic workers to the Punto y Aparte bookstore and the National Shrine of Our Lady of Coromoto, the country's patroness. Elena helped coordinate fundraising and logistical efforts for the construction of the shrine honoring the Virgin Mary.

She also took part in many formation workshops organized in Venezuela, where associates of Opus Dei from other countries (like Trinidad, Costa Rica, and Colombia) came together to share their professional and apostolic experiences with Venezuelan participants.

The attendees at these gatherings were diverse in age and background: doctors, social workers, graduates and students in business administration, educators, mathematicians, and more.

Elena shared her experiences from Valencia – how she discovered her vocation and met the founder of Opus Dei – simply, joyfully, and affectionately. Her testimony gave fresh encouragement to those who heard her. She attended nearly every such workshop in Caracas until 2002, when her health began to decline.

In 2015, she suffered a stroke that affected her speech. In a way, it fulfilled something she had said 15 years earlier: “I believe that as we grow older, God gradually takes away our senses so that we can focus more on Him and center ourselves on what really matters.”

## **A long life and constant self-giving**

Throughout this period – and indeed, all her life – Elena was surrounded by members of her family and of Opus Dei, who were attentive to her needs, especially in light of her health.

In 2016, she suffered another stroke. Two days later, on October 10, 2016, she passed away in Caracas, accompanied by her niece Irene, a doctor.

Two defining traits stand out across Elena's long life, evident from the earliest days of her vocation until her final moments. The first was her apostolic zeal, which inspired everything from the early gatherings with her friends at a chocolate shop in Valencia to the natural and supernatural care she took of the nurse who looked after her in her later years.

The second was her remarkable social sensitivity and deep commitment to justice. Elena suffered deeply over the situation in her country and gave herself tirelessly to help those in need, going into their neighborhoods, teaching classes, and responding to their

concrete needs with great affection and dedication.

But lastly, I can't fail to mention another enduring trait: her serene joy, rooted in faith, which uplifted and encouraged all her relatives, colleagues, and many friends who continue to treasure her example and the lessons she left behind.

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