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## **Four Pioneers in the Fortunate Islands**

Fifty years after the arrival of the first women of the Work in Las Palmas of Gran Canaria, here are the stories of four of them, who express their gratitude for all the fruit they have seen over the years.

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Fifty years ago, when the apostolic work of Opus Dei began in Las Palmas of Gran Canaria, the May 1968 student protests in France were still a recent memory and

universities everywhere were a beehive of protests and posters.

Some men, including priests of Opus Dei, were the first to arrive, and they quickly became acquainted with the land and its people. They settled in, found work, and started making friends. They explained the message of the Work to those who wished to listen, and prepared the way for the arrival of the first women of Opus Dei as soon as possible.

Sisi Perez-Sierra was the first numerary who moved permanently to Gran Canaria in 1971, although Esperanza Castañer had been making intermittent trips there. Sisi recalls that there were already “three women supernumeraries living there, because their husbands were in the Navy and they had been assigned to the Islands. They were the women who received us, the ones who organized everything, who

helped things go forward with an affection that made us feel at home right from the beginning.”

## **One child more**

Lolina is 91 and has two children. She asked for admission to Opus Dei before the Work arrived in Gran Canaria, almost at the same time her husband Cesar Llorens did, who was a member of the Navy’s general staff. He had met Opus Dei through a commander in the Navy.

When Sisi landed at the airport in Gran Canaria in 1971, Lolina was there to welcome her and to put a nice house at her disposal “with the refrigerator full,” as well as offering her help, her time, and whatever else was needed.

Right away they set about seeking a place for spiritual retreats and found a hotel in Tafira that was called *The Friars*. “We told the priest about it,”

Lolina recalls. “It was Fr. Antonio Fuentes, who was very affectionate, very much a Canarian already, but he grew quite angry. He said that he hadn’t stopped explaining that the Work was not a religious order, so how could we to hold a retreat in a place named *The Friars*.” So she offered her own home, which became the meeting place for days of recollection and workshops for 15 years.

Lolina has spent half her life sowing... and sewing! She set up a sewing shop that continues in operation. She is now sewing a special chasuble as a gift for Fr. Alberto, the former pastor of the church of Todoque in the island of La Palma. The church was destroyed in the volcanic eruption that covered the island with lava in September 2021. Lolina herself is like a small volcano. All that she is and has, she has put at the disposal of the Work. It

was she, for example, who provided the contacts that facilitated the construction of Orobai, a center for the women of the Work that for 35 years now has been the site of a fruitful apostolate. From the time she became a widow, she has lived in the apartment right above the tabernacle of this center.

Sisi recalls with gratitude their first steps in the Canary Islands: “I have very pleasant memories of my arrival in Las Palmas of Gran Canaria. They welcomed us with tremendous affection and I felt the prayers of everyone in the Work. This can never be repaid. The Canarians are wonderful and welcoming people. If you make a good impression they don’t call you a ‘goda’ [liter. ‘a goth’ – a Spaniard who comes to the Islands for a vacation].” She laughs. She recalls those first university women, those families who were discovering the spirit of

Opus Dei, the talks on Christian doctrine, the handiwork classes and the guitar classes, “which a sister of the singer Juan Pardo, who was very popular back then, used to give.”

The young women continued sowing eagerly in the Fortunate Islands. They began making trips to Tenerife, the largest of the Canary Islands. After being away for some years, Sisi went back to Gran Canaria in 2002: “I encountered again many of the first women. Many of the first cooperators were now supernumeraries. It was a privilege to see firsthand how the fruit had matured. What a great joy to be able to return to these Fortunate Islands!”

### **Carmen’s golden anniversary**

Sisi remembers clearly that in the first year of Opus Dei’s “official” life in Gran Canaria two numeraries asked for admission to the Work: Carmen Espino and Marisa Medina.

“After many years apart, it was a great joy to be with the two of them again.” Carmen met the Work through a friend who had studied at the University of Navarra, back in 1970. She attended the first retreat organized in Las Palmas of Gran Canaria in April 1971, “and I became a numerary. Very happy. Very content. During these years, between lights and shadows, like in anyone’s life, I have kept discovering so many good things.”

More than 50 years have gone by, but Carmen will never forget what first drew her to Opus Dei: “the great love for our Lady.”

Carmen was a public school teacher for many years. Every Christmas she encouraged her students to send greetings to the Pope, who was John Paul II at that time. The Holy Father replied with a personal letter thanking them and assuring them of

his prayers. At the death of the Polish Pope, Carmen's classroom turned into a unanimous parliament to petition the city council to dedicate a park to the Pope who revolutionized the world with his smile, his faith, his boldness, his hope in young people, his priestly zeal, and his love for our Lady. And the students obtained their objective. (Click [here](#) to see photos of the John Paul II Park.)

When the park was already a reality, Carmen thought it would be much better if it had an image of Our Lady of the Pine, principal patroness of the diocese. Here too she was successful, and a mosaic of our Lady was placed in the new park, with the name of each municipality of the Fortunate Islands adorning the mantle of Mary. And in front of the image a bench was placed so that people could look at our Lady, pray to her, sing to her, tell her their concerns, show her their affection.

Decades have gone by, but Carmen still recalls, as if it were yesterday, her first meeting with Saint Josemaria in a family gathering in Valencia, in which the founder spoke about our Lady as “the mother in a family home.” She also remembers asking him a question and how “he winked at me.” Carmen has spent her life moving from place to place in order to carry out Opus Dei as she first learned in these islands: Madrid, Valencia, Seville, Cadiz, Croatia...

## **Juani and all the first ones**

The other pioneer we want to mention is Juani Garcia. The first time she heard the words “Opus Dei” was on Spanish television when Saint Josemaria died on June 26th, 1975. The first time she set foot in a center of the Work was in 1978. Her math teacher was the one who invited her, when she was studying at the institute. She asked for admission to

Opus Dei in Rome when spending Holy Week there with the new Pope John Paul II. She is the first Associate from the Islands.

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Lolina, Sisi, Carmen and Juani are the pioneers of the history of Opus Dei in Gran Canaria who are still living there. Thanks to their prayers and efforts vocations have come from a great variety of personal backgrounds, women who are now better prepared for the challenges of their professions and their Christian lives, young people who today are happier and more mature adults, families where a bracing Christian spirit reigns.

On February 4, 1975, Saint Josemaria passed through the archipelago four months before he went to heaven. The airplane in which he was traveling to South American made a stopover in the airport of Gando, in

Gran Canaria. His first two successors at the head of Opus Dei were accompanying him: Blessed Alvaro del Portillo and Javier Echevarria. As he was accustomed to do everywhere that he went, the founder of Opus Dei prayed for the people of the Islands, for the Church and the future apostolic work of Opus Dei there. Those prayers, like the work of the pioneers, will certainly continue bearing fruit.

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