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# **Ramona Sanjurjo, the First Supernumerary Woman from Vigo**

In this episode, historian Francisca Colomer shares Ramona Sanjurjo's life story. Ramona was one of the first supernumeraries of Opus Dei, born on 20 January 1916, in Santiago de Compostela (Galicia, Spain). Colomer shares some highlights from the life of this dynamic and generous woman, whose enthusiasm and selflessness made her a notable figure in early 20th-century Vigo.

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Francisca Colomer holds a PhD in History from the University of Murcia. She has researched the new historiographical paradigm, the role of the historian, and biography as a historical method.

Currently, she focuses on contemporary history in Spain, concentrating on reconstructing the circumstances of specific individuals and groups. Among her studies is a published research article in the journal *Studia et Documenta*, in which she analyses Ramona Sanjurjo's life.

Ramona Sanjurjo Aranaz was born into a well-known family in Vigo (Galicia, Spain) and became a supernumerary of Opus Dei in 1948. She lived her entire life in Vigo,

where she cared for her family and participated in the development of the apostolic work of Opus Dei in Galicia and Portugal.

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On 11 August 1898, Antonio Sanjurjo submerged himself in the dark sea of Vigo aboard a small submarine he had just built. The purpose of this new invention was to defend the Vigo estuary in the event of an attack by an American warship, should the Cuban War extend to the mainland. There was no need to use it, however, since Spain and the United States signed a peace treaty declaring Cuba's independence the day after the trial. Cuba was the very place to which Sanjurjo had emigrated and built his fortune.

Antonio was the son of a watchmaker from Sada in La Coruña.

He was already working in his father's workshop at the age of nine. He emigrated to Cuba at seventeen, and with great effort, he earned enough money to return to Vigo and start a foundry. Over time, he founded more companies, in which he implemented many technical innovations. But the most original aspect of his business was his concern for the workers' well-being: at that time, they worked from Monday to Saturday, and went to the factories to clean and receive their weekly pay on Sunday. Antonio started paying wages on Saturdays so that the workers could have Sundays free. He also organised a small social security system that covered payments for the sick and provided lifelong pensions for retirees. He participated in the local government of Vigo, working to develop and install street lighting, trams, and water supply. On the day he died, the city came to a standstill to pay tribute

to an entrepreneurial, creative, and good man who had left a deep mark on everyone.

Antonio was Ramona Sanjurjo's grandfather, and Ramona was one of the first supernumerary women of Opus Dei. Ramona was born on 20 January 1916, in Santiago de Compostela, where her father, Manuel, managed a bus company. She was Manuel Sanjurjo and María Aranaz's fifth daughter. In 1918, the family had to return to Vigo so that Manuel could take over his father's businesses, and the rest of the couple's thirteen children were born there. Ramona grew up in the dynamic atmosphere of early 20th-century Vigo, in a family of exceptional character, in which professional aspirations were encouraged and supported. She was an enthusiastic, sincere, occasionally overwhelming woman, generous,

ready to sacrifice herself for others, and full of joyful energy.

## **Her vocation**

When she was old enough, Ramona joined Catholic Action in Vigo. In this association, she dedicated part of her time to training young female workers, a task that fit perfectly with the social conscience she'd learned from her family. She loved football and often went to cheer on her team, Celta de Vigo, at the Balaídos stadium, inaugurated in December 1928, when she was twelve years old. She also enjoyed music and frequently went to concerts and ballets.

Ramona Sanjurjo was twenty when the Spanish Civil War broke out. During the conflict, she served as a volunteer nurse at the hospital set up in a former high school in Vigo. Training courses were provided for these volunteers, and eventually she

received official qualification as a nurse.

The war ended, time passed, and on 2 February 1945, Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer and Álvaro del Portillo visited their good friend, the Bishop of Tuy-Vigo, José López Ortiz, who invited them to accompany him on a pastoral visit to the San José de Cluny School. Ramona Sanjurjo attended this visit as a representative of her parish's Catholic Action. It was her first encounter with the founder of Opus Dei.

Shortly afterward, at the end of March 1945, Blessed Álvaro del Portillo preached a retreat at another school in Vigo, organised by Catholic Action. Ramona and her sister Milagros attended, as they did every year. Nearly fifty years later, Ramona wrote:

"The approach to the meditation topics struck me as fresh and new. I

was moved, because, although I had done spiritual exercises many times before, I had never heard anyone speak about God's Love like that. It was a great discovery for me: an encounter with God as a Father, as a friend, and it made a huge impact on me. On the second day, I went to speak with him [Álvaro del Portillo], and he explained what Opus Dei was. I don't remember his exact words, but it was clear to me that it was a path to holiness in the middle of the world. That was exactly what I had been looking for."

After thinking about it for a few days, on 3 April 1945, Ramona wrote a letter to Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, requesting to be received into Opus Dei. She also wrote to Encarnita Ortega, the director of the first women's centre of Opus Dei in Madrid, introducing herself and saying she could visit her at the end of the month. On 22 April, she

travelled to Madrid and met Encarnita, Nisa, and the other women living at that first centre on Jorge Manrique Street. During this trip, Ramona reaffirmed her decision and considered moving permanently to Madrid a month later.

During that month, May 1945, Ramona shared her decision with her parents and siblings and got ready to move to the capital. She spoke enthusiastically about "The Way," St. Josemaría's book, with her family and at Catholic Action meetings, and they all responded warmly. Her mother read passages from "The Way" during family gatherings. Her sister Milagros asked the bookstore to order copies, and they sold out within 24 hours.

The only thing that troubled her was what people would say. Vigo was a small city where her family was well-known, and her rapid departure to

such a new and budding institution would be a topic of conversation for a long time. In a letter to Encarnita, she wrote candidly: "What I fear most is what people will say and being the target of everyone's gossip [...]. When I leave, let them say what they want to. I have offered the part that bothers me to God so He can do what He wants with my 'annoyance'!"

Finally, on 29 May 1945, she arrived in Madrid, accompanied by her mother. They met Saint Josemaría the next day, and he welcomed them warmly. They discussed what Ramona's life in Madrid would be like; she was going to work in the domestic service of the Moncloa University Residence, initiated in 1943 by St. Josemaría himself. Feeling reassured after seeing where and with whom her daughter would live in Madrid, María Aranaz returned to Vigo, believing that it

would be several months before she would see Ramona again.

## **Change of plans**

But God had other plans. Ramona, who was something of a whirlwind, a worthy granddaughter of her inexhaustible grandfather, left Vigo forever without waiting for the results of medical tests she had undergone due to a lingering feeling of unusual fatigue. A month after arriving in Madrid, the test results arrived: she had tuberculosis and needed to begin treatment immediately.

The test results probably didn't surprise her. Her uncle Fernando, her father's brother, had died of tuberculosis. The same illness had taken her sister María Antonina. María Antonina was a very active and athletic woman, playing field hockey, and in 1932 she founded the Atlántida Hockey Club in Vigo. She

also studied as a commercial technician and worked at the Professional School of Commerce. Later, she enrolled in Law at the Central University and in the School of High Commercial Studies, both in Madrid, and stayed at the women's residence. She received a scholarship to study at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, for the 1934-35 academic year, and studied Geography at nearby Clark University the following year. She fell ill with tuberculosis there and returned to Vigo, where she died in 1939 at the age of twenty-nine.

That same year, Ramona recalled that she too had "some lung issues," as she put it, and acknowledged that despite having lost her sister, she hadn't taken care of herself. Now, in June 1945, the disease reemerged in her, as well as in her sister Dolores, and by September, it was affecting her brother Fernando as well.

Ramona had to stop working, leave the bustling city of Madrid, and focus on overcoming her illness. Her mother, María, returned to the capital to collect her. Before leaving, they went to say goodbye to Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer.

Ramona wrote in her memories: "I went with my mother to say goodbye to the Father at Lagasca, and he told me that God was asking something difficult of me, as no one would believe I hadn't persevered due to being ill. He advised my mother to take me to a sanatorium, which she did." On the journey back, Ramona thought again about facing "what people would say," the comments from others that she found so hard to accept. She offered this up to God once more.

## **Finding God in illness**

On 17 July 1945, Ramona entered the Nuestra Señora del Carmen

sanatorium in La Estrada, Pontevedra. The sanatorium had been inaugurated a year earlier by doctors Saturio and Manuel de la Calle Sáenz. It had twenty-eight beds and was run by Franciscan tertiary sisters. The chaplain at that time was Father Adolfo Camba. The doctors advised Ramona that she could read and sew without exhausting herself, but it was essential for her to rest, follow a special diet, and take her medication.

The days felt very long for the normally energetic Ramona, who seized every opportunity to fill her time with tasks that did not require much effort. She read and sewed, and she made tablecloths for her family and the Opus Dei centres opening across Spain, as well as vestments for oratories. She studied English; although she never became proficient, she was eager to learn. She wrote letters, writing almost

daily to Encarnita, Guadalupe, or Nisa, the women of Opus Dei she had met in Madrid, and to Blessed Álvaro del Portillo and Saint Josemaría from time to time as well, and she followed the norms of piety she had incorporated into her life upon joining Opus Dei.

In one of those letters to Blessed Álvaro del Portillo, she described her daily life at the sanatorium: "At 8:00, they bring me Communion; I give thanks and pray until 9:15, when I have breakfast. I don't get up until 10:30; I spend some time in spiritual reading. At 1:30, I eat, and afterward, I have two hours of absolute rest, which I use to pray two parts of the Rosary, one at the beginning and another at the end. Before tea, I study English for an hour and a half. From 6:15 to 7:15, I pray, then sew until dinner, pray a third part of the Rosary, and make an examination of

conscience. I finish everything by 11:15."

In moments of discouragement, as the test results weren't coming out well, she cheered herself up by reading letters that arrived with news about the growth of Opus Dei across Spain: the opening of centres in Bilbao, Seville, and Santiago de Compostela, the people approaching the apostolates, small anecdotes about daily life in the Jorge Manrique centre and in the administration of the Moncloa residence... She maintained contact with everyone and kept abreast of all that occurred during her months at the sanatorium. She had no doubt that she would return to Madrid in a few weeks.

## **Return to Vigo**

At the end of October 1945, she was discharged and returned to Vigo, since she was on bedrest with strict

instructions to rest, which would prevent her from living normally for a year or two. This was not part of her plans. In a letter to Encarnita, she wrote: "It is something that can only be explained by the fact that God wants it! And blessed be His Will! But I don't know how to take advantage of it very well." She struggled to accept the quiet life of a chronic illness. At the end of April 1946, she received a relic of Isidoro Zorzano, one of the first members of Opus Dei, who had died with a reputation for holiness three years prior, to pray for her healing.

Months passed, and Ramona did not improve. She began to accept that God wanted her in Vigo, and that she had to participate in Opus Dei from Vigo and for Vigo. Despite her limitations, she started to focus on bringing God closer to her friends and acquaintances; she thought of people who could stay at the student

residences that Opus Dei was opening in various cities in Spain, or who could work in the domestic service of those residences; she remembered to send birthday and saint's day wishes, sent and received gifts for the Epiphany, sewed and sought fabrics and designs, and even recipes for the cooks in Opus Dei centres to innovate. She followed Opus Dei's growth closely, and often explained the new institution in the Church to different people, some of whom did not fully understand it. Letters with news and messages travelled back and forth from Vigo to Madrid.

In these letters, she also wrote about the continuous growth of her large family, weddings, jobs, travels, and family gatherings, as well as unexpected illnesses and deaths. When her health allowed, she travelled to Madrid and spent a few days at the Zurbarán University

Residence. Even though Ramona had not made any legal incorporation into Opus Dei, she never questioned her vocation. She believed she had a commitment that was forever, as she wrote in a letter to Encarnita: "Today marks one year since I was there. I've been thinking about it all day. Please pray for me a lot so that I will always remember it and can fulfil what I promised that day."

## **Incorporation into the Work as a supernumerary**

This brings us to March 1948. On the 18th of the month, the Holy See approved the statute that allowed for the legal incorporation into the Work of single or married people who "use their own family occupations and professions as means of sanctification and apostolate." On 3 April, exactly three years after she wrote her first letter to St. Josemaría, he gave Ramona the news of the legal

change that allowed her to ask for admission as a supernumerary of Opus Dei. The following day, Ramona wrote what she called "the second letter" of request for admission, ending with: "If I was united to you before this moment, from now on I will be even more, ready to work in the place and manner you want."

Ramona's life went on as it had before, with one change: a centre of Opus Dei opened in Santiago de Compostela, called La Estila. She started to go there instead of to Madrid, to receive the Christian formation provided by Opus Dei and to assist with the various tasks of the domestic administration of the residence, as her health permitted.

Another consequence of the opening of La Estila was that Ramona was no longer alone in introducing Opus Dei and doing apostolic work in Vigo. The women of Opus Dei working in

the administration of the residence began to travel regularly to Vigo to give talks on Christian formation and speak with those interested in learning more about what was, at the time, a new institution of the Church. A priest, Father Federico Suárez, also began to visit once a month to preach a recollection.

The number of women receiving Christian formation through Opus Dei's apostolic activities grew, and several of them requested admission. By 1951, there were nine, some of them numeraries, who soon moved to other cities with Opus Dei centres. In 1958, the first group of cooperators was formed, and the following year there were already thirteen supernumeraries in Vigo. The formational activities were usually held at a hotel or in one of their homes. But they needed to find a suitable place, and Ramona began to ask her acquaintances if any of

them could rent them an apartment for this purpose.

They soon found one, where they set up a small oratory, and the first Mass was celebrated in October 1959. They gave it a very literal name: "The Apartment." There they had circles, talks, conferences, Christian doctrine classes, meditations, recollections, and confessions. But their goal was to buy a good house that could also be used for some social project for Vigo. In their discussions, they thought that a training school for women would be best, and in 1967 the school that would become the Aloya Secretary School was born. Ramona recounted to Álvaro del Portillo, with a touch of humour, that her group of supernumeraries, all over fifty years old, had built a residence for girls learning at Aloya with their own hands: they set up the whole place, with forty beds, in eighteen days. Not bad for the

granddaughter of a man who had built a submarine in two months!

Ramona was also interested in initiatives of Opus Dei in other places. She encouraged many young women moving to Madrid to stay at the Zurbarán University Residence. She helped prepare Nisa González Guzmán's trip to the United States, thanks to her family's contacts with English-speaking countries due to their business. In 1954, she handled all the arrangements for the voyage of the women who were to begin the apostolic work of Opus Dei in Colombia, who went by ship from Vigo. She regularly corresponded with Encarnación Ortega in Rome, Nisa González Guzmán in Chicago, and several contacts in London, sending gifts and sweets at Christmas.

But she was especially involved in the beginnings of Opus Dei in

Portugal. She helped in every way: making logistical arrangements, buying clothing and supplies for the houses, and being available for whatever the families who had gone to Portugal needed, including helping them through difficulties when no one was able to travel.

## **Service and love**

In 1953, the Red Cross inaugurated a modern hospital in Vigo. The authorities suggested that Ramona take charge of the training courses to be offered to the nurses. She accepted the task because it opened a field of professional and human formation for many people.

She never failed to help those in need. "I would like to do some knitting for the poor in my 'free time,'" she wrote in 1954, referring, by "free time," to the time she spent with her parents, just talking and keeping them company. She found

inactivity very hard to bear. She also arranged for undernourished children from poor families to receive check-ups at the hospital, or secured places for them in an orphanage.

One of her great dreams was to travel to Rome. After overcoming many obstacles, including financial difficulties and the passport requirements, on 28 April 1951, she visited the Eternal City. She stayed at Villa Sacchetti, the headquarters of Opus Dei, the whole month of May. During this time, she was able to speak with St. Josemaría several times.

She balanced all this with supporting her large family. As the only unmarried sister, she lived with her parents and took care of them, dedicating all her time to them in the last years of their lives. She also routinely took care of her nieces and

nephews, and she visited her sisters to help when they gave birth. She was a solid support for everyone, especially when there were premature deaths or serious illnesses. She ensured that everyone received good human and Christian formation. All this activity was driven by love — her love for God, her love for souls, her love for her family — with only her poor health as a brake: she constantly had low-grade fever, and if she didn't rest, she would relapse and end up bedridden for several days.

## **Final years**

In the early 1980s, she began to suffer coronary crises and had to reduce her activity outside the home. But, unsurprisingly, she found ways to continue doing something useful and began sewing to earn money for apostolic initiatives. Additionally, she felt responsible for sharing all she

had experienced since the beginnings of Opus Dei with the younger generations, as a way to inspire them to love their vocation.

Despite her health condition, she fulfilled another wish in 1991, travelling to Rome for Álvaro del Portillo's episcopal ordination. She later wrote to him to recount the trip and to thank him: "Everything started in that retreat, 46 years ago in March, when you introduced me to Opus Dei, which has filled my life so much and made me so happy."

Ramona Sanjurjo passed away on 23 February 2001, due to a cerebral haemorrhage. In her final months, she spoke little, but she was always seen praying with her rosary in hand. Both her family and the members of Opus Dei cared for her with great dedication and affection until her last moments. The end of her life was filled with constant

gratitude, as she saw the fruits of her dedicated life. In one of her letters, a few years before her death, she wrote: "That morning when I thought about the get together in Santiago, I remembered that in 1948 or 1949, during the retreat at the administration of La Estila, the priest, Father Federico Suárez, told me: 'Ramona, do not be overwhelmed, but Vigo depends on you.' And then to see so many people there... I have so much gratitude to express! I can't help remembering what our Father told us: 'Dream, and your dreams will fall short.'"

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