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"It takes a mother to understand a mother's heart"

A testimony to how our Lady of Torreciudad changed the heart of a strong mother.

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I am the third of a large family of thirteen children. My parents have always been deeply Christian; my father looks like holy Job – a bit like Father Christmas, too – and my mother like Judith, on account of her beauty and her strong character.

Mother was always profound in her thoughts and feelings, rebellious in a comfort-loving society and very courageous. But above all she was by definition a mother. She brought us up without any programmes or formulas, with family naturalness, celebrating everything that could be celebrated and being very much present in the home. She read a lot, talked and just enjoyed being with us. From time to time she scolded us – for which she had plenty of reasons. We all remember the day when she held up a cake to fling at the face of my father, and on seeing his shocked look, changed direction so that the cake hit the ceiling.

Despite the natural frictions, we always regarded ourselves as a very united and privileged family given all that we had received from God over the years – the greatest being the gift of faith. We had the opportunity to reaffirm our faith

together with John Paul II in the Mass he celebrated at the first *Meeting with Families* in 1994. Another great gift was the ability to enjoy life. We all relish human relations, meetings with relatives and friends... Life is a marvellous gift that we have always valued.

God's plans are not our plans.

When I was 19 years old I went to the sanctuary of Torreciudad with some friends. There my sister, Paula, who is a supernumerary, introduced me to a girl of Opus Dei, and through her I started attending some activities. I always thought that my life would be like that of my parents, as I greatly admired them and had a natural inclination to marriage and maternity. However, God's plans are not our plans, and after finishing my studies in Technical Architecture, I realized that God was calling me to a life of dedication to Him and to

others, as a numerary of Opus Dei. Not long before, my brother Arturo had taken the same decision.

When I told my mother, she reacted in a totally unexpected way. She said I did not have a true vocation, and literally flew into a rage. She said that if that was the life I wanted to choose, I could get out of the house there and then, and she sent me out with what I was wearing. Then she went straight to my brother Arturo and told him to pack his suitcase and go too. Our whole family was upset, but it takes a mother to understand a mother's heart.

My father also reacted badly at first, but after hearing my story he said: "This is from God. When your mother hears it, she'll be convinced too." But my mother didn't want to listen. My father always supported her; they have been one heart and head, and an example for us all. They

fulfilled to the letter the promises made on their wedding day: “I will love you in joy and in sorrow, in health and in sickness, in richness and in poverty...all the days of my life.”

We returned home two weeks later, but our family was not the same. The relations with my mother were strained; we argued a lot and there were constant misunderstandings. I suffered, thinking that what God was asking of me could separate my mother and my siblings from Him and from the Church. Then I would hear our Lord telling me in my heart: “Take courage, you look after my things, and I’ll look after yours.” Among “my things” was our family.

The years went by, and my mother continued without understanding our vocation, though our relations became smoother. The birth of my niece, Marina, drew us closer

together. My parents continued refusing to enter the Centres where we were living or to listen to anything concerning our life in Opus Dei. But they never ceased loving us, and they counted on us. We often went home, although not as often as they wanted, and they made that clear to us. Arturo joked with my father saying that he didn't have "the gift of bilocation." One Christmas Eve, my father presented him with the gift of a "bilocation ring," made of paper, but of course it didn't work. It was worse for me because I couldn't manage to joke with my mother. Over time she came to admit that we really did have a vocation; it wasn't just an "escapade." And she relied on our prayers for different intentions, almost always related to the family.

A huge family crisis

The family harmony seemed to have been restored, when fourteen years after the first “earthquake,” my sister, Paz, decided to give herself to God as a consecrated member of Regnum Christi. It happened on my birthday, 27 August 2012, and she thought that the coincidence was a clear sign that her response was a consequence of mine. We wondered how our parents would take it. We thought perhaps it would be all right, but this time the precarious equilibrium broke down, unleashing a huge crisis. After years of moral suffering and tired of being “the villain,” my mother broke down. The day she told her, Paz was also thrown out of the house. It was hard for us to accept her lack of acceptance, but my mother was the first one who couldn’t accept not accepting.

Faced with this new situation and her inability to assimilate it, my

mother went into a deep depression that led her to reject what she loved most. In January she decided to go away and live in our seaside flat and told my father she had “decided to separate from him.” At first we didn’t believe her; it seemed just the typical threat that soon passes. But days, weeks and months went by and she continued wanting nothing to do with my father. She was tired of taking the important family decisions; of watching out for each one of us, and she wanted just to stop suffering. So she was opting for “eyes that don’t see, a heart that doesn’t feel.”

Not knowing what to do, we turned to our Lady, begging her to return our mother to us. My father, Paz and I travelled one day to a Marian Shrine. The resignation of Benedict XVI and the election of Pope Francis took place around that time and,

together with other things, moved my mother.

Our Lady of Torreciudad changes hearts.

I suggested to my mother that after Holy Week she come to Torreciudad, where my brother Arturo was taking part in a seminar for young fellows and I was attending a Course in the nearby conference centre. To my surprise, she agreed.

On the first day, she came for lunch and get-together in La Solana. The administration prepared a Valencian *paella* and the people were very kind to her. At the end she was happy. When I heard she was coming, I spoke to the Rector of the Sanctuary and explained the situation to him. “You must speak to my mother, you have to be the one.” He answered with a big smile: “No, it has to be our Lady; you just pray.”

During those days we dined with my mother, went for excursions, and visited the sites of the Sanctuary. One afternoon we went for the Rosary and Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament. At the end I looked at my mother, who was very serious, and said: “Mama, I told the Rector that you are here; would you like to speak to him?” “Yes, right now,” she answered, without hesitation: Afterwards she told me about that conversation, and how she had said: “I see so many errors in my life...but I don’t want to change, I don’t want to return to my husband, so I can’t confess.” The priest told her: “Don’t worry about that, because God will give you purpose of amendment.” And that’s what happened. The following day she went for confession and became once again the mother I knew.

Those who receive visitors to Torreciudad have a gift of making

you feel as if you were the only person in the world. The Vice-rector showed us around the Chapel of the Holy Family. He told us how many wedding anniversaries are celebrated there. My mother told him that on 12th October they would have been married forty years, and it would be a good chance to take everyone there. He agreed, and said, laughing: "It might be risky to wait for fifty: first, because you never know if you'll get there, and second, you never knew how you'll be." A week later my mother returned to Valencia with Arturo, happy to come home. She was unsure of herself but sure of God.

An urgent call

On 24 September 2013 my father called me. He was very upset and said my mother was in the hospital ; she had suddenly found it difficult to speak. I went there as fast as I could.

The doctor told us that she clearly had a brain tumour. We decided to tell her at once because she always wanted to be told the truth and moreover she was expert at detecting any dissimulation or lie.

Heartbroken, my father, Paula and I accompanied the doctor to my mother's room. On hearing the news, my mother simply looked at the doctor and said: "Well, one has to die of something; some go sooner, others later." When we started sobbing, my mother told us "stop dramatizing and go for lunch."

In the cafeteria, my father, between tears and a nervous laugh, told me that he was amazed at my mother's fortitude. He thought it should have been the other way round; the doctor should have told my mother first and then asked "Now, Madam, when do you think we should tell your husband and children?"

I spent that night with mother in the hospital. At a certain moment she said anxiously: “How God will punish me in the next life, because I spent so many years opposing his will...”

“No,” I said, “think how much Pope Francis is talking about mercy, Mama. God will smile at you when you reach heaven and give you a big hug.” She tried to smile, but I realized she was not at peace. As I went to sleep in the hospital chair, I asked God to give my mother the peace she lacked. The following day I said to her: “I’m going to bring you some bread sticks this afternoon. Is there anything else you would like?” “Yes,” she said, “bring me a priest.”

“Said and done”

After a number of tests, the doctors decided to operate on 14 October. We called the Vice-rector of Torreciudad to cancel the celebration of my parents’ wedding anniversary we

had organized there. My mother was very sorry not to be able to go. On 11 October, at three in the morning she prayed: “You know, Lord, you could have delayed that tumour a bit, so that our family could have gone to Torreciudad.” She felt our Lord answering: “And who’s stopping you from going?” “It’s true!” she thought. “No one is stopping us!” And she told my father of her decision. By 8 o’clock that morning we had all been informed. She got permission to leave the hospital and in true Valencian style – *pensat i fet*, “said and done” – the following day thirty-six of us were in the bus going to Torreciudad, to return the same day.

It was a bittersweet day for me: sweet on account of the joy of all of us going to Torreciudad, but bitter because I thought it would be the last trip we would make together as a family. My mother’s operation brought with it a great risk, and she

was ready to go to heaven. Saint Josemaría used to say that God is not a furtive thief who seizes his prey at the most unexpected moment, but rather a gardener who cuts the roses at their best. That's how I saw my mother, like a beautiful flower ready to be cut.

“I want to give witness”

The operation went very well. The tumour was removed without damaging the brain. In the afternoon we visited my mother in the ICU. Arturo and I were the last to go in. We entered and she told us, beaming: “Today has been the happiest day of my life.” I asked if she had been afraid during the operation and she said no.

A few days later I went to spend the night with her in the hospital, and dared to ask her what had happened during the operation. She told me: “I don't know exactly. I only know that

God has given Himself to me as a kind of gift, and I don't want to lose it. I can't understand how he has given Himself to me in this way, when I have been so far away, opposing his will so many times, wanting to abandon everything last year." I agreed that it was a mystery, but she had always tried to live uprightly and God knew that. She said she felt like Dimas, the good thief, who at the last moment stole heaven from Jesus. Then I asked: "Mama, do you understand our vocation now?" She didn't let me finish: "Not only do I understand it, but I understand that it is the best thing that could have happened." Later, a sister of mine told me that on entering the ward after the operation my mother told several of my siblings: "I want you to know something: I have spent my whole life trusting a lot in God, but only up to a point. And that point was my pride, and it prevented my union

with God and understanding his things.” During those days she also had many words of reconciliation, tenderness and understanding for my sister Paz.

Days later she told us that she wanted to give the witness of a mother who had turned a blind eye to the vocation of her children, a mother who was mistaken.

Nevertheless, my mother wasn't mistaken, because she brought us up and taught us to be generous, making a reality of Saint Josemaría's words, that we owe ninety per cent of our vocation to our parents. In our case, I would say ninety-nine per cent.

After the tumour was analysed, we were given the bad news that mother had between six months and a year to live. They were months of treatment: radiotherapy, chemotherapy, etc., as well as the gift of life, because another two years

went by. She was able to live important events: weddings, baptisms, a pilgrimage to Holy Land, a visit to our Lady of Fatima, Torreciudad, etc. Not only that, every day she taught us new things. She had time to ask for pardon, to give thanks, to speak to each one, to tell us to be not only good, but holy.

In September 2014 my parents attended the Beatification of Alvaro del Portillo in Madrid. Those were unforgettable days, filled with a lot of grace from God and gratitude on our part.

The story of the conversion of my mother has been the story of the conversion of my father and of each one of us children. She said that she was going to heaven to prepare the house for us so that it would be comfortable. She died on 24 February 2016, surrounded by her children and grandchildren, with

great peace and joy. It is she who will tug at us from heaven until she gets us all there beside her, together with the Holy Family of Nazareth, in the Blessed Trinity. In heaven there will be no tears, no pain, no more misunderstandings... there will only be a great communion of love, where I hope we will meet all of you who are reading this story.

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