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One small step today, one giant leap tomorrow

Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri passed away fifty years ago, on 16 July 1975. On the anniversary of her death, we remember her life, which was full of adventure and service to others. Guadalupe was a woman who allowed herself to be surprised by God and responded with a joyful vocation, reflecting the greatness of God's love.

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What's the formula for a happy life? Achieving the dream of financial security? A career marked by growth and fulfilment? A welcoming, stable home? Some claim that ancient alchemists sought the philosopher's stone, a mythical substance said to turn ordinary metals into gold or, in other versions, an elixir of long life, capable of restoring youth and granting immortality.

At first glance, Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri's life has little to do with the search for the philosopher's stone, and by today's standards, it might not seem like a model of worldly success. Yet if we take a closer look at her daily life, we find the "molecules" of what amounts to a true formula for happiness: a woman who lived each day with the

confidence that she was being guided by the best Teacher, who transformed her life and the lives of many others, and continues to do so from Heaven.

When man first set foot on the moon, we heard the words: “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” Guadalupe’s life could be described similarly: small steps in the ordinary life of a working woman in the 20th century, and a giant leap for the many people whose lives were touched by hers. This is something that will keep happening throughout history.

An extraordinary kind of normal

Guadalupe was born on 12 December 1916, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of Latin America. She was the third child of Manuel Ortiz de Landázuri and Eulogia Fernández de Heredia, and the only daughter in the family. The

traits she inherited from her parents would help shape her character. Her mother, Eulogia, was generous, discreet, austere, determined, and devoted to her family, though not especially gifted in domestic tasks. Her father, Manuel (unusually for a military man of that era) looked after the children: he changed nappies, fed them, played with them, and served the meals so that his wife could rest. Together, they raised their children in an atmosphere of freedom.^[1]

Although theirs was an ordinary Spanish family of the early 20th century, Guadalupe's life was marked by events that were anything but conventional. Her father was transferred with the family to Tetouan, then the capital of the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco. There, Guadalupe began secondary school as the only girl in her class. The setting might have been daunting, but she quickly earned the

respect and admiration of her classmates, not only for her strong academic performance, but also for her courage in taking on risky and even outrageous dares, like the time she challenged her classmates to drink a cup of ink... and was the only one who actually did it.

Upon returning to Madrid, where her father had been posted to the Ministry of War, Guadalupe finished her secondary studies at the Miguel de Cervantes School and, in 1933, enrolled in a chemistry degree at the Central University. At 17, she was one of just five women among sixty students. At 20, she began dating a fellow chemistry student from Catalonia, but she was in no rush to marry... And, besides, the young man was something of a perfectionist. She would joke with her friends: “Such perfection, it’s just too much!”

A thirst for knowledge

One of scientists' true passions is a desire to uncover the truth hidden behind each element. Where some see a tree, biologists see a complex network of cells, each with its own function, and chemists are fascinated by the invisible reactions taking place within. Guadalupe had this passion, and not only for the world of science, but for her own life.

After the end of the Spanish Civil War, during which her father had been executed, Guadalupe completed her degree and began her first job, teaching at the French Lycée and the Irish Sisters' School. She was 23, living with her mother, and starting to enjoy a measure of independence. One Sunday in January 1944, she went to Mass like any other Catholic, though she admitted to being quite distracted during it. Still, she later said that something happened to her in that moment; she felt touched by God's grace. On her way out, she ran

into a family friend and told him she needed to speak to a priest, though she wasn't sure why. He gave her the phone number of Fr. Josemaría Escrivá. On 25 January, Guadalupe rang him, and a few days later she went to meet him at a house on Jorge Manrique Street.

She described their first encounter: “That meeting changed my life. It was in a small house in the Colonia del Viso, then on the outskirts of Madrid. (...) We sat down and he asked me, ‘What do you want from me?’ I replied, without knowing why, ‘I think I have a vocation.’ The Father looked at me... ‘That’s something I can’t tell you. If you like, I can be your spiritual director, hear your confession, get to know you, and so on.’ That was exactly what I was looking for. I had a clear sense that God was speaking to me through that priest.”^[2] —

She began a process of discernment and, at the end of a few days of spiritual retreat, found the answer she had been unconsciously seeking. She discovered the message of Opus Dei – the call to bring Christ into every place and profession through her own life – and felt completely identified with it. On 19 March, the feast of Saint Joseph, she decided to give her life to God in the Work as a numerary.

No instruction manual

Every scientist knows that any research involves many mistakes before yielding even a few breakthroughs, and there's often no manual to follow. But this is no reason for discouragement: rather, it is an opportunity to try new solutions and seek possible answers, even if progress is slow. Guadalupe experienced this repeatedly in her life, when she had to take on

unexpected tasks or move to new places where the Work needed helping hands.

From the very beginning, Guadalupe threw herself joyfully and wholeheartedly into all the needs of Opus Dei, whether formational or apostolic, including domestic tasks for which, like her mother, she had no natural talent. She was forgetful and found it difficult to keep things in order, whether they were her own things or those of the house. Even so, St. Josemaría asked her to take charge of running the house on Jorge Manrique Street, while also travelling to Bilbao to begin the apostolic work there with three other women.

Back in Madrid in 1947, the founder asked her to help in the governance of the Work in Spain and to direct the Zurbarán university residence for women. This didn't stop her,

however, from enrolling that same year in five doctoral courses in Chemistry. The following year, she completed the four required specialist modules and began her thesis.

The path, however, was about to take another unexpected turn. In October 1949, someone asked her, on behalf of St Josemaría, whether she would be willing to begin the apostolic work of Opus Dei in Mexico with two other women. It would be the first time the Work crossed the Atlantic and reached a non-European country, at a time when long-distance travel was rare. Trusting in God's grace, Guadalupe said yes, and wrote to the Father: ““They’ve told me about Mexico. Thank you. I would be just as happy if I didn’t go, as you know, but I’m delighted to go, though as a matter of fact I don’t think much about it. I just spend a short time on it in the prayer every day, and I say a

rosary or two to my Virgin, Our Lady of Guadalupe, praying to her for everything I don't yet know.”^[3]—

On 5 March 1950, she set out on this new adventure. Years later, she recalled: “I was the oldest, though I was still very young. But I felt like I had the 80 years of gravity the Father so often said we should ask God for, because we needed them. (...) That was how the Father had taught us to live trust in God and total poverty. We brought with us, as the Father kept saying while I was thinking, love for the Lord... and a desire to spread the divine madness of our vocation.”^[4]— On arriving in Mexico, she gave her all to fitting in and living as one of the locals: she sought to learn the culture, softened her Spanish accent – which could sound harsh to Mexican ears – adopted local expressions, and even changed the way she dressed, wearing

traditional *rebozos* and hand-painted full skirts.

Breaking new ground

A lack of financial resources didn't stop the launch of a university residence on Copenhagen Street in Mexico City, where Guadalupe served as director, just as she had at Zurbarán. While in Spain the presence of women in academic life was beginning to grow, in Mexico it was even rarer to find women in university circles.

Guadalupe enrolled in a few doctoral courses in chemistry to continue advancing her academic training, while devoting herself to the formation of the young women in the residence. The house became known for its vibrant cultural and educational life, as well as for the fun and light-hearted moments that gave balance to it all. Her sense of humour was ever-present, to the point that

the residents composed a *corrido* (a traditional Mexican ballad) in her honour, with a chorus that went: “Guadalupe’s laughter is more contagious than a serious illness. She’s always looking out for everyone and wants to call them all every day.”^[5] —

She lived in Mexico City for five years full of adventures: riding on a mule through rural areas (she had been offered a pistol for protection, but preferred to carry a dagger so as not to shoot unless absolutely necessary); getting stung by a spider or a scorpion while giving a formational talk; and much more. Though her time there was relatively brief, Guadalupe left a lasting impression, both on the women she worked with and on the country itself.

In October 1956, she set off for another new place (Rome) to assist

St. Josemaría in governing Opus Dei's apostolic work as it expanded into new countries like Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, Germany, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Switzerland. After blazing the trail in Mexico, it was now time to support others walking the path with what she had learned on the American continent.

A change of course

As in any research process, Guadalupe had to adapt when faced with an unexpected development. Less than a year after arriving in Rome, in March 1957, she suddenly began feeling unwell and struggled even with small physical efforts, like climbing a few stairs. She was diagnosed with severe mitral stenosis, the result of an underlying heart condition, and her health was so fragile that St. Josemaría prepared

for her to receive the Anointing of the Sick.

With proper care and medical attention, her condition began to stabilise, but an operation was urgently needed. At her brother Eduardo's request, she travelled to Madrid and underwent surgery at the Clínica de la Concepción on 19 July. The procedure – a high-risk operation at the time – involved replacing the mitral valve, and it was a success. The post-op recovery also went well, though she was left with atrial fibrillation that gradually improved. Guadalupe remained calm, trusting in God and in her doctors.^[6]

She returned to Rome in December, but on the 29th of that month, she fell ill again. In May 1958 she returned to Madrid for further tests and ended up staying there for good: the Eternal City's humid climate was

not favourable for her heart, and the Father judged it would be better for her to remain in the Spanish capital. For the next two and a half years, despite the ongoing fibrillation, she lived an active life and didn't make a fuss about her condition. "I'm doing really well, and even though I have a 'patata de cuore,' I'm more and more eager to work and get things done every day; that's just how I am," she wrote to the women in Rome. And to the ones in Mexico: "I'm not going to talk about my heart anymore, because it's behaving so well that we don't even need to remember it."^[7] —

This sudden change in her life's path could have felt like a setback, but Guadalupe embraced her new reality with the same joy and spirit of service that had always characterised her. By 1961 she was running a residence of the Work, actively accompanying young women in the Montelar School-

Home, and working on her doctoral thesis, which she resumed under the guidance of Piedad de la Cierva, a pioneer in artificial radiation studies in Spain and in the industrial production of optical glass, and the first woman to work at Spain's National Research Council.

Guadalupe often had to write while ill, with books spread across her bed.

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Forward without fear

Guadalupe defended her thesis (“Insulating refractories from rice husk ash”) on 8 June 1965, receiving the highest grade, an outstanding *cum laude*. The next day she wrote to St. Josemaría, enclosing a copy of her thesis and even a sample refractory brick. On the first page, she had handwritten: “Father, these pages contain the fruit of many hours of work. A short while ago, it was awarded *cum laude*, and I’m eager to

place it in your hands, together with all that I am and have, so that it may be of service.”^[9] —

She taught chemistry at the Ramiro de Maeztu Institute for two academic years (1960–62) and at the Women’s School of Industrial Training (*Escuela Femenina de Maestría Industrial*) for another eleven years (1964–75). She began as an assistant lecturer and later won the position of full professor through a competitive civil service exam. She was named deputy director of the school, having turned down the role of director due to health reasons, despite encouragement from 40 colleagues who recognised her merit and leadership.

Starting in 1965, she helped plan what would become, three years later, the Centre for the Study and Research of Domestic Sciences (*Centro de Estudios e Investigación de*

Ciencias Domésticas, CEICID), a long-standing wish of St. Josemaría to elevate the dignity of domestic work. Guadalupe served as its deputy director and as a lecturer in textile chemistry. She managed all this while also directing a centre of Opus Dei on Ortega y Gasset Street, caring for her ageing mother, advising educational initiatives like Senara, and supporting other social development projects.

Like a kaleidoscope

The final years of Guadalupe's life were characterized by courage and simplicity.

On 15 May 1974, she had her last encounter with St Josemaría in Madrid, which she described as follows: "It was an intimate time of conversation, a profound dialogue formed of words and deep mutual understanding, in which once again I felt that the boundaries between

what the Father said and what I thought were melting away. I felt, as I had on other occasions, that I was touching God through his tangible faith; a faith that stopped being just ‘faith’ and became reality, and he passed that on to me.”^[10] —

In October 1974, her mother fell ill and was admitted to the University of Navarra Clinic in Pamplona, where her son Eduardo, Guadalupe’s brother, was part of the medical team. The following year, Guadalupe’s own chronic heart condition worsened, and on 2 June 1975 she was admitted to the same clinic to undergo a complex operation due to severe pulmonary hypertension.^[11] —

On 24 June, the doctors decided to proceed with a highly complex surgery. Both her mitral and aortic valves would need to be replaced, and the tricuspid valve ring would

have to be widened. During those days, even while on bedrest, Guadalupe found time to visit her mother and other patients, take an interest in the nurses, welcome visitors whom she tried to bring closer to God, and even carry out small chemical experiments in the bathroom sink using scraps of fabric she had brought with her. One could say she transformed her illness into a kind of professional mission, facing it with serenity, refusing to complain or be a burden, always focused on others and making the most of every moment.^[12]

Two days later, on 26 June, she received the news of St Josemaría's death with great sorrow. The grief, shock, and pain of those around her were immense, but they tried to keep their emotions hidden so as not to upset her in such a delicate state. When she noticed the flag at half-mast on the science building of the

University of Navarra (of which the founder was Grand Chancellor), Guadalupe asked the reason, but no one dared tell her. It was her brother Eduardo who broke the news:

“Guadalupe, you know they’re about to perform a very serious operation, and you’re aware of the risks. It’s important that you’re prepared and at peace. But before that, I must tell you something that will be very hard to hear: yesterday, our Father passed away in Rome (...). Two things might happen: you might join him soon, and see him beside God and Our Lady; or the Father might ask God for you to stay here. Both paths are good.”^[13] —

On 1 July, she underwent another operation, which initially seemed to be a success. A few days later she left the intensive care unit and began to walk again. On 14 July, Guadalupe had breakfast and lunch as usual, and talk had already begun about

her imminent discharge from hospital. However, everything changed unexpectedly at 4:30 in the afternoon, when her health suddenly deteriorated. Eduardo was called right away.

Despite all efforts and attentive care, Guadalupe was in her final hours. Even then, she remained thoughtful toward those attending her. María Jesús, a nurse from the Cardiology Unit, remembered these words Guadalupe spoke to her in that difficult moment: “Do whatever you need to do. And don’t worry. Be at peace, because you’ve done all you could. I’ll remember you.”^[14] —

At 6:30 a.m. on 16 July, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Guadalupe passed away. One week later, her mother also died. The Church beatified Guadalupe in Madrid on 18 May 2019, at the Vistalegre Arena, in a ceremony

attended by thousands of people from all five continents, and followed by many more via live broadcast.

The result of many chemical processes is the formation of crystals, even diamonds, shaped over millions of years under precise conditions of heat and pressure. Guadalupe's life was a "chemical process" shaped by many small ingredients, seemingly of little worth, but which gained strength and brilliance in the warmth of God's love.

As one of her biographies notes, "Like a kaleidoscope, in their own way, every saint reflects something of Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. In her, too, we can see what women are called to be in today's Church and in society. This is the message the Holy Spirit offers us today. It is up to each person to discern their 'own path,

[to] bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts' (Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 11).”^[15]

A crystal needs an external light source to reflect all its brilliance. Throughout her life, Guadalupe showed how beauty can be found in small gestures, reflecting the greatness of God and bringing light into the lives of those who knew her.

^[1] Cf. *La libertad de amar*, Cristina Abad Cadenas, pg. 10.

^[2] *La libertad de amar*, pg.14

^[3] AGP, Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri (GOL) A00361, Letter to St. Josemaría Escrivá, 17 October 1949. English translation from *Letters to a Saint*, ed. María del Rincón and María Teresa Escobar.

[4] AGP, GOL E00204,
Autobiographical account with
memories of St. Josemaría Escrivá,
written between 7 and 12 July 1975,
after her last operation.

[5] Cf. *La libertad de amar*, pg. 25.

[6] Cf. *La libertad de amar*, pg. 31.

[7] AGP, GOL A00979, Letter to Rome,
12 August 1958.

[8] Cf. *La libertad de amar*, pg. 32.

[9] AGP, GOL A00038, Letter to St.
Josemaría Escrivá, 8 July 1965.

[10] AGP, GOL, Autobiographical
account with memories of St.
Josemaría Escrivá, written between 7
and 12 July 1975, after her last
operation.

[11] Cf. *La libertad de amar*, pg. 36.

[12] Cf. *La libertad de amar*, pg. 38.

^[13] AGP, GOL, Autobiographical account with memories of St. Josemaría Escrivá, written between 7 and 12 July 1975, after her last operation.

^[14] Cf. *La libertad de amar*, pg. 39

^[15] *La libertad de amar*, pg. 42.

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