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Nanny and “The Way”

She came from Lastres, a fishing-village in Asturias, Spain. Her name was Azucena Olivar Sanchez, but for us kids she was always “Nanny”.

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She'd been our nanny and was an enormous help to our Mom, who had her hands full with nine children, running the house in Madrid and looking after my Dad's business when he was away in Mexico for business.

Nanny was an extraordinarily joyful person. My earliest memories of her are of a woman in her 30s, well-built, with very black hair and a pleasant, smiling face. She was always concerned for the smallest children in the house, and had a very witty way of speaking. She knew countless stories, proverbs and fairy-tales, which she told us little by little, and which I consider part of the core of the tradition in which I grew up.

Years later, when my brother Nacho invited me to join some outings organized by a Center of Opus Dei, I resisted because I didn't fancy getting cold and hungry scrambling up the Guadarrama mountain range. The real reason was that I was scared someone would start talking to me about a possible vocation to Opus Dei, something I had no intention of discussing. Nanny always took my part and told my brother to leave me in peace. Nacho yielded before her,

since we all respected and loved her to the point of veneration. And I was deeply grateful to her for throwing her cloak of protection over me.

I soon had a chance to repay her kindness, because around that time she decided to learn to read. And she chose me as her teacher. She had never learned to read or write; she had never needed to. She managed perfectly without it, and I never heard anyone succeed in tricking or cheating her. But all of a sudden she decided she just had to be able to read. I really teased her about it, telling her that although she was so clever she would remain ignorant all her life.

She herself had told me, laughing, that when she was a child she hardly ever got to go to school because her family was very poor and she had to work to bring in a bit of money. The few times she did go to school, the

teacher, seeing how bright she was, would send her on errands, which she enjoyed much more than being shut up in a classroom.

But this time she didn't mention her previous indifference to every kind of book-learning. The first chance she had, she brought out the book she wanted me to use to teach her to read. It was "The Way" by Josemaría Escrivá. I wasn't surprised because Nanny was a naturally devout person. Besides, "The Way" had always been around our house and some used it for meditation, although personally I didn't know much about it.

She could remember a bit about the alphabet and syllables. We went rapidly through the basics and started reading the first point: "May your life not be sterile..." She had never read anything before. But once we'd worked our way through that

first text, she turned to me and explained what it meant.

She spoke very naturally about how we have to be useful to others in order to lead a fruitful life, and explained what apostolate was, more clearly than I'd ever heard it before. I was absolutely astounded, but that was just the start. It wasn't long before she could read fairly fluently, and she gave me a running commentary on each of the remaining 998 points of "The Way" without missing a single one.

Nearly every day we would set aside some time for her reading class. Without any apology on her part or surprise on mine, those minutes became a class on asceticism and mysticism given by Nanny as though she were a Doctor of the Church. She spoke about life in God, not like someone handing on a lesson they've learned, but in a way a person talks

about something they know from experience and that comes naturally to them. I occasionally teased her about her wisdom, or argued, jokingly, against something that she said. The fact was that it made a very deep impression on me, as though I was present at something extraordinary; there was no human explanation, even though it was all taking place in Nanny's little room in our flat on Castello Street, Madrid. Those master classes changed me completely. Thanks to Nanny, I began to have a real interior life. I began to pray seriously, though I found it hard work. And Jesus became a living person for me, someone I could talk to and listen to throughout my everyday activities.

I no longer refused to go to the Center of the Work where my brother went. When they talked to me about a vocation, I accepted straight away. I felt certain I had

arrived at a safe harbour that was somehow my final destination. Nor was I in any doubt as to who would be the first to hear of my decision.

That January 12, Nanny was in the kitchen. There weren't any more little kids for her to look after and she'd turned into a terrific cook instead. When I told her the news, instead of being surprised like I'd expected, she smiled and, like the Asturian fisher folk she came from, she said, "You fell like a gannet!" The gannet is a bird like a seagull, which hovers over the sea from high up and when it sees a fish, dives straight down to catch it.

And that was the moment when we both put our cards on the table. The reason she wanted to learn to read was that she'd been recommended to do some spiritual reading every day. She had come to know Opus Dei through my brothers and sisters,

and had asked to be admitted to it shortly before I had.

Nanny died years later, in a very holy way, being a help to everyone in our family with her deep spiritual life and keen sense of humour. She brought many people to God, and they were astonished at the depth of Christian wisdom that she possessed, which was revealed to me for the first time when we read “The Way” together.

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