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Encarnita Ortega: Her Life in 5 Broad Strokes

Encarnación Ortega was born on May 5, 1920, just over 100 years ago. Encarnita, as everyone called her, was one of the first women in Opus Dei; she met Saint Josemaría in 1941 and soon asked to be admitted as a numerary. The historian José Carlos Martín de la Hoz, vice-postulator of the cause for canonization, recounts in this podcast some events in Encarnita's life that help us to understand her human and spiritual worth.

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Encarnación Ortega Pardo, also known as Encarnita, was born in Ponte Candelas, Pontevedra, which is in Galicia, on 5 May 1920. That is the specific place. But later on, she would always think of herself as Aragonese. Her father had married in Ponte Candelas; he was the local telegraph chief, which at that time was like a small communications hub. It was there that she spent the first years of her childhood, together with her sister Teresa and her brother Gregorio. But soon the peaceful tranquillity of those Galician lands was replaced by Teruel, the Aragonese city to which her father was promoted as the city's telegraph chief.

It was evident that as Teruel was the capital of a province and of a

province with a great history in Aragon, he was highly regarded and the family came to be known as the family of an authority who had moved to live in that part of Aragon. It is quite moving how Encarnita started her whole life with that soft, delicate Galician spirit and united it marvellously, harmoniously, with that Aragonese integrity, with that Aragonese mettle that never left her.

Her mother died shortly after Encarnita and her sister Teresa had made their first communion. They were almost a year apart, and were very close. Their mother died during the birth of their fourth child, and this caused the three siblings to become very close to their father and their aunts on their father's side, who moved to live in the town of Teruel. They formed a very close-knit, a very Aragonese family. That is why, when they wanted to tease her, when they wanted to pick on Encarnita, her

friends — her people, people she knew — reminded her of her Galician ancestry. She always reacted with great love for Galicia, of course, but making it clear that she felt deeply Aragonese.

The Siege of Teruel and its Aftermath

She spent her summers in Daroca, her studies at the school of the Franciscan Conceptionists in Teruel, and then her piano and French studies. Then 18 July 1936 arrived.

The peaceful life of that close-knit family in that small town of Teruel was completely altered overnight, because Teruel became a national enclave (as it was then called) within the republican zone, so much so that the military authorities of the city had joined the uprising. They had therefore given their allegiance to the government that was instituted and established in Burgos. Naturally,

the authorities, who first had their headquarters in Madrid and later on in Valencia, were very diligent in the first months of the war to conquer the city of Teruel, which they subjected to a very tight siege.

Encarnita and her sister Teresa had gone from being girls of sixteen and seventeen, daughters of the telegraph chief, leading a life of friendships, comings and goings, and also studying, naturally, to suddenly becoming military nurses and needing to care for the sick and dying, because the tight siege soon turned into a real massacre. The last days of the siege of Teruel were especially hard, the first days of the year 1937, with temperatures close to minus 30, with many days of blizzard, of heavy snowfall, where the Republican troops were conquering house by house. It got to the point where the city's military

authorities decided to surrender the square.

Encarnita spent the following months, separated from her sister Teresa and her father, in a concentration camp. What happened during that time of imprisonment was rarely revealed because Encarnita was a very discreet woman when it came to talking about the things that had happened during that time.

Headaches and Stomachaches

We know that the Civil War and the stay in that concentration camp left her with two problems, two major after-effects that would last all her life.

The first was her stomach: it closed up and she found it very difficult to eat. Throughout her life, food was more a question of the head, of physiological need, to be strong and

well-fed in order to be able to perform, but without the slightest appetite.

And the second problem was the headaches. Normally, people who knew Encarnita well, who lived with her extensively, who knew of the strength of her will, of her human and spiritual maturity, could tell when a migraine was coming because she would squint her eyes a little and her smile would become tauter. She tried hard not to let the intense headache show on the outside.

In April 1941 the Civil War was over. Encarnita was with her family in Valencia, where her father was working in the telegraph service, before being promoted to head the telegraph office in Zaragoza, which would be her father's last posting, where he would die. In 1941, Encarnita was preparing for the

baccalaureate exam to be able to go to university and make up for the time lost during the war. Together with her sister Teresa, she was running the family home and helping her father with everything he needed. She led a normal life.

The two sisters also worked in the city's Catholic Action, and it was precisely the Women's Catholic Action of Valencia, whose councillor was Don Antonio Rodilla, a close friend of Saint Josemaría and vicar-general of the diocese of Valencia, who suggested to the Board of Directors of the Young Women's Catholic Action of the city that they invite Saint Josemaría Escrivá. He announced to them that he was the author of a book called *The Way*. Many of them had already read the book and were already experienced in the art of mental prayer with this little book of spirituality that had struck them deeply.

"Christ has done this for you. What are you doing for him?"

As a result of the invitation of those young women of Catholic Action, the first night of those spiritual exercises (days of retreat), that Saint Josemaría preached in Alacuás, Saint Josemaría first met Encarnita. That night, when Saint Josemaría arrived at the house in Alacuás, a group of young people came to greet him. Saint Josemaría arrived with Don Antonio Rodilla, his good friend, who introduced them to the group, and when the time came for Encarnita to be introduced, she came forward to tell him that she was the sister of Gregorio, who was attending the activities at the Opus Dei residence in Samaniego Street in Valencia. Saint Josemaría, with a big smile, greeted them all. But to Encarnita's cordial greeting, he responded in a very moving way. He said to her: "God needs a group of courageous women."

Those words struck Encarnita's soul and were like a leitmotiv, the starting point of her life of prayer during those days of spiritual retreat, while the thrill of being very close to Jesus Christ, of living a life of intimacy as Saint Josemaría was preaching and showing in those days of retreat, was being born in her. At the same time, fear, the fear of commitment, was growing in her. So, as she used to say with great humour, as each day passed during the retreat, she would move from one pew further and further back, until the last day, when she was already in the last pew of the chapel for the last meditation, and she had her suitcase in the hall. That is to say, as soon as the meditation and Mass were over, she could return to her ordinary activities.

But in that last meditation, Saint Josemaría, recalling the scene of our Lord's Passion and showing the participants what Christ had done

for them, for each one of us and always, because redemption continues in an eternal becoming, asked: "Christ has done *this* for you. What are you doing for him?" These words touched Encarnita deeply and were the trigger for a decision that would last forever. After the meditation and Mass, Encarnita not only did not leave, but asked St. Josemaria if she could join Opus Dei.

From then on she began a new life, transforming the activities she was involved in. Her studies, helping out at home, her friends, her activities with the other young women in Catholic Action, the charitable and solidarity activities she was involved in, all had a new meaning: holiness in the ordinary, converting the small, everyday chores and small obligations into constant acts of love.

Saint Josemaría began to travel to Valencia every month, firstly because

the residence on Samaniego Street was there, and also because, as a result of that spiritual retreat, Encarnita Ortega asked to be admitted to Opus Dei and, along with her, a few others. In one of those following months, Encarnita's light suddenly went out, as she used to say when she recalled that scene. She began to think that the whole ideal was marvellous: to turn the world into a divine path, to turn ordinary activities into moments of holiness. It was all very moving, very beautiful, it could be a wonderful ideal for life. But the lack of correspondence from some of the people she was inviting to follow Jesus Christ, together with her inconstancy, her moments of low spirits, led her to consider that although the ideal was moving, it was perhaps not for her.

On the next trip, it was not St. Josemaría who went to Valencia, but the Secretary General of Opus Dei at

the time, who was Álvaro del Portillo. She went to speak to Don Álvaro and said: "Tell Father Josemaría, Father, that I am deeply grateful, but I don't think this is the right path for me." Alvaro del Portillo had a light from God as he listened to Encarnita. She showed him the train ticket she had bought from Valencia to Santiago, with the intention of spending a few months there, to meet her Galician family on her mother's side, to get to know her roots in Ponte Candelas in Pontevedra, and also as a way of not hurting the other Opus Dei members in the city. Don Alvaro listened to her and at the end of the conversation said to her: "Well, and when you leave the virtue of fidelity, now that you have been left in the dark, now that your faith is being purified, now that your intention is being raised and trampled on, *now* is the time to show God your fidelity by relying on Him and not on human motives."

Encarnita stood still, had a moment of prayer, and burst into tears. She tore up the ticket and decided to start all over again. Throughout her life, her fidelity to God matured little by little, also, as we have just seen, through the trial of the cross, through the trial of darkness. It is worth noting that after a few years of collaboration in the work of establishing the first Opus Dei centres, both in Madrid and in other cities, in 1946 Encarnita travelled to Rome to live there and to collaborate at Opus Dei headquarters in the expansion of the Work throughout the world.

Encarnita returns to Spain

Over the years, despite medical advice, none of the after-effects of the Civil War had diminished. After all the failed attempts, her headaches continued to increase and the pace of life in that house in Rome was very

hard. So it was decided that Encarnita should have a different work schedule, a slightly calmer, more relaxed life plan, and it was decided — she decided — to return to Spain, first to live in Barcelona, where she would be the director of an academic institution that had been set up, called Llar, and then to live in Oviedo and Valladolid.

In actual fact, her headaches continued, as did her eating problems, but she died with the love of God, with her strength, with her good humour... She managed to carry out a great deal of activity, not only human and spiritual, but also cultural, social and educational, throughout the following years, from 1961, when she returned to Spain, until 1995, when she died. When one reviews the tasks and initiatives in which she collaborated or which she set in motion, which she promoted, it is truly vertiginous: the Llar school

we have already mentioned, Montealegre in Oviedo, the Alcázar school in Valladolid, youth clubs such as Trechel in Valladolid or the hall of residence Los Arces, that retreat house called El Rincón in Valladolid, and so many, many other things. At the same time, with the Chamber of Commerce of Gijón and later through the competent bodies of the Junta de Castilla y León during the time she lived in Valladolid, she also set up many activities in the field of fashion, from competitions, courses for young creators, training for boutiques, to children's fashion shops in which she was involved. Through these activities, she stimulated the hopes of many people in the field of fashion, not only to contribute to the dignity of the human person, of women, but also to promote employment, to promote work, to promote occupation.

In the early 1980s she was found to have cancer and both breasts had to be amputated. I remember when I met one of the doctors, then a young doctor, who had been commissioned by the department to tell her the reality of her cancer and therefore the extent of the resources that would have to be provided (the chemotherapy and radiotherapy sessions and the life expectancy, etc.), that doctor said that when he had finished explaining to Encarnita what was happening and her life expectancy, she simply asked him a question: "Well, then, will I be able to live a normal life?" The doctor told her: "Depending on the possible evolution, well... More or less... Not much." And then she graciously said: "Don't worry, you do your job and let's leave the future in God's hands." She would live for another 15 years after that very hard operation and after some relapses and some flare-ups of that cancer.

Encarnita's strength is not only shown in her person, but also in her helping and caring for the people she came into contact with. Encarnita was a woman with a big heart and at the same time a woman who knew how to love and love to the end.

Friend of Her Friends, Right to the End

One day a mother confided in Encarnita and spoke to her about a very serious problem that was troubling her and which had her very worried. Her 15 or 16 year old daughter had just been told that she had a tumour in her breast with a very difficult prognosis. Encarnita immediately offered to talk to this young woman, not only from the supernatural experience of having had to deal with the illness, the illness of cancer itself, but also from the human perspective of coping with this blow. She began to talk to

that young woman, heart to heart, soul to soul, putting herself with all understanding in that young woman's place. She helped her to rectify and to rebuild her spiritual life, and she also helped her to lead a life as normal as possible at that time, in terms of friendships and studies. So she accompanied her, because that is Encarnita's charity. It wasn't just a conversation. Encarnita was a friend to her friends, regardless of their age or social class or education. Friends were friends always and at all times, until the end.

So the story concludes: when the operation was over, the surgeon came out to greet the family with a smile from ear to ear. He explained that he had indeed been able to remove the lump, that not the slightest trace had been left, that he had been able to keep the breast intact and that the patient was recovering in the recovery room. He

added: "I have left her there, serene and happy with her grandmother and the nurse." At that moment, the grandmother, who was with the rest of the family listening to the surgeon's explanation, protested and said: "Wait a minute, *I* am her grandmother." At that point the doctor said, "It's just that there was an old lady there in the resuscitation room and I thought she was the grandmother. I'm sorry." It was indeed Encarnita, who even then looked like a grandmother, especially compared to the young woman. Encarnita had taken advantage of some friends in the hospital and in particular some people who worked in the medical team, who had authorised her to be there in the resuscitation room with the appropriate clothing and the necessary hygienic conditions. Encarnita thought she would be happy to see a familiar, smiling face

when she opened her eyes after the operation.

Encarnita died with a reputation for sanctity on 1 December 1995. Her process of canonisation took place between 2009 and 2013 and is now in its Roman phase. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints has in its possession the Positio on the life, virtues and reputation for holiness of the Servant of God Encarnita Ortega Pardo. Therefore, what remains for us now is to continue learning from her life, her virtues, to continue to take her example as a model of holiness in the midst of the world, and at the same time we can benefit from her and make friends with her. And like so many people all over the world, who have already obtained graces from heaven through her intercession, we too can turn to her and lean on her in the difficult moments of our lives, so that like her,

we can be strong and courageous
women at the feet of Jesus.

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