

## **BLESSED MARIA OF ST. JOSEPH**

Mother MARIA OF ST. JOSEPH (LAURA ALVARADO CARDOZO), was born in the picturesque little seaport village of Choroní, Aragua, Venezuela, on April 25, 1875, the oldest of four children.

Her parents, Clemente and Margarita, in order to provide a good education for their children, moved to Maracay, where Laura completed her studies. Gifted with exceptional intelligence and moral character, she was held up as a model for other students. Recalling her student days, she later wrote in her diary, "Those happy days are very fresh in my memory, and I recall them as free of sin".

### **Consecrated to the Lord**

Laura wanted to consecrate herself to God in a cloistered convent. Prevented by circumstances from fulfilling her dream, at the age of seventeen, with the permission of her confessor, she made a vow of perpetual virginity on December 8, 1892. From that time on, she made a spiritual retreat every year on the day of her consecration and on October 13, the anniversary of her baptism. Her only desire was for holiness: "I want to be a saint, but a real saint.... My Jesus, you and only you are the goal of all my striving".

The arrival of Fr. Vicente Lopez Aveledo in Maracay as pastor in 1892 was providential. A terrible epidemic had broken out in the city, leaving families in mourning and desolation. The pastor invited young Laura to help in the little hospital that had just been opened to attend to the victims of the epidemic. Laura responded enthusiastically, took up residence in the hospital, and dedicated her whole being to the care of the sick. Her labor was so efficacious that she was appointed administrator. She formed a little group of young women volunteers known as Samaritans.

### **Foundress of the Augustinian Recollect Sisters of the Heart of Jesus**

Laura was not content with the good that she was doing in the hospital. She wanted to found an institute dedicated to the aged and to orphans, and her Samaritans were willing to follow her. With the permission of the Vicar General of Caracas, Msgr. Juan Castro, the little group of Samaritans were vested with the Augustinian habit on February 11, 1901, and assumed the name Sisters of the Poor of St.

Augustine, which they would later change to Augustinian Recollect Sisters of the Heart of Jesus. Laura was appointed superior of the new institute, an office which she held until 1960.

On January 22, 1902, Laura ratified her vow of virginity, and on September 13 of the following year she pronounced her perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In her profession she changed her name to Maria of St. Joseph.

### **Those whom no one wants are ours**

Mother Maria founded the first house for orphan girls in Maracay in 1905. Other foundations followed in rapid succession. Like St. Teresa of Jesus, Mother Maria was on the move for God, eagerly setting out for wherever a need arose. Caracas, Barquisimeto, La Victoria, Valencia, Coro, Maracaibo, Puerto Cabello, and many other cities and towns became witnesses of the self-sacrifice of this frail nun, with an ascetical-mystical face, apparently weak and sickly, but brimming with courage and charity that knew no limits. In a few years, without financial means, she managed to establish over thirty foundations. They are poor, simple houses in which the most helpless find a warm welcome. "Those rejected by everyone are ours; those whom no one wants are ours," she would say to her religious. And her daughters have faithfully lived out her motto.

### **Martha and Mary**

Mother Maria was able to combine in her personality the qualities of the gospel figures Martha and Mary, harmoniously integrating work and prayer in her life. During the day she was always at the side of the poor and of the orphans, but at night she would spend long hours before the Tabernacle in intimate conversation with Jesus. From these hours of contemplation she mustered the energy that she would generously expend in serving the needy.

Her love for the Eucharist moved her to make altar breads with her own hands for all the Masses in Maracay and in the neighboring parishes. At the end of her life she was making thousands and thousands of hosts to distribute free of charge to the priests. She recommended to her daughters that they continue offering this service without charge, and they have done so to the present.

## **Her Final Years**

Mother Maria resigned from her office of superior general in 1960 and retired to her beloved "Home" in Maracay to dedicate the final years of her life to prayer, to her orphans, and to helping with the housework.

After a long illness she breathed forth her spirit with great peace and serenity on April 2, 1967. Venezuela, and especially the city of Maracay, had lost one of its most illustrious daughters.

The city of Maracay declared official mourning. Thousands of devotees came from all over Venezuela to pay their respects. During the funeral cortege, a squadron of airplanes dropped rose petals over the crowd. Mother Maria was buried at the foot of the altar at the home, and her tomb has become a shrine attracting endless lines of pilgrims, increasing as news has spread of the great number of favors granted through her intercession.

Blessed Maria, who dedicated her long life to the care of the aged and of homeless children, in whom she saw the figure of Christ, has left to all of us the ever-timely challenge to welcome the poor, the marginalized, and the helpless with the same love with which she received them.

She was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 7th May 1995 becoming the first Venezuelan to be beatified. The Augustinian family celebrates her memory on 7th May.