

**María del Refugio Aguilar**



***Apostle of the Eucharist  
for the New Millennium***

**Maria del Refugio Aguilar de Cancino**  
**Foundress of the Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament**

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## 1. The call to holiness

St. Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises are without doubt the method of spiritual improvement which has exerted the most influence on the modern history of Christianity. Based on reflections on the meaning of life, they have for more than four hundred and fifty years inspired millions of people to devote themselves to work in the service of God for the spiritual benefit of their fellow men.

In March 1896, Father Jose' Sanchez Primo, superior of the Friars Minor in San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, organized for the first time in the town a retreat for ladies consisting of a course of spiritual exercises. One of those who attended these was a young widow called Maria del Refugio Aguilar de Cancino, who a few months earlier had entered the Secular Franciscan Order. During those days of seclusion senora Cancino undertook an earnest examination of her inner self, going over the events in her life up to then.

Born in San Miguel de Allende on September 21st 1866, the eldest of eight children stayed at home to learn to read and write and acquire the attributes befitting a housekeeper of the day. In November 1886 she married Angel Cancino, a tax collector and man of liberal ideas, whose friendship with a number of prominent politicians augured well for a successful career in public service. They had a son Angel, and when they had been married for two years, they moved to Toluca, where they had a daughter, whom they called Refugio Teresa. Some weeks later in February 1889, Cancino died from a severe bout of pneumonia. At the tender age of twenty-two, Maria del Refugio was now a widow with the heavy responsibility of bringing up two small children.

Maria del Refugio, who in her youth had shown a normal enjoyment of the amusements and comforts of the world, had staked everything on her husband's promising future, so that when he died, her whole world fell down around her. She returned to her parents' home where she spent the days and months shut away in her room. In March 1891 she suffered further sorrow when her son fell ill and eventually died.

Now five years later, in the spiritual retreat, she experiences a profound renewal deep inside her. It is now that she realizes that man was created to

worship and serve God. She accepts her lot, expresses her gratitude to God for her life and resolves to take regular communion, to form the habit of conversing with the Lord and examining her conscience daily, to avoid quarrels within the family, to be circumspect in her dealings with the opposite sex, to have no affections for fashions or public entertainments, to purify her emotions and reject reckless love affairs, to occupy her time to good purpose, avoiding pursuits such as the reading of novels, to pray for her neighbors as well as for the dead, and to say the rosary. It is obvious that we are not speaking here of the conversion of an atheist, but of a believer who had, like many, languished in a state of unawareness, carrying out her religious activities purely out of habit.

## 2. Transformed by the Eucharist

One of the characteristic missions of the Franciscan tertiaries at that time was to teach the catechism in preparation for the First Holy Communion. As a catechist, Maria del Refugio realized that, in order to be able to instill effectively in children the truths of the Catholic faith, particularly those relating to the Eucharist, she should make these teachings her own if she wished to find a means of capturing something of the grandeur of the Mystery.

From that time on Maria del Refugio was to demonstrate an ardent love for Jesus Christ present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, with which she was destined to become uniquely identified. Her life henceforth offers clear evidence of the effect wrought by grace received in Communion. She acquired an exquisite sensitivity which fostered in her an admiration and respect for nature and an appreciation of art, music and literature, in all of which she was able to experience something of the beauty, glory and majesty of God through His creation and the human works reflected in it. A further fruit of this Eucharistic life was to be found in the extraordinary happiness which she exuded right up to the end of her days. Her hope and faith in the infinite love of God filled her with a joy which enabled her to surmount the troubles, trials and illnesses which afflicted her.

If the sacrament of the Eucharist is the sacrament of love, symbolizing the union of Christ with the Church, it was natural for Maria del Refugio, who was a truly Eucharistic person, to feel the desire, impetus and need to love and serve

others and devote herself to compassionate works. Her happiness was clouded by what she saw as the absence of God in society, by corruption, immorality, the failure to respect human life, children and young people deprived of education, men who were slaves to vices and addictions, displaced persons and those who were victims of persecution, wars, violence and misery in all its forms. All this was what motivated her to exercise evangelical charity, to liberate her fellow man and to preach the message of salvation to them.

As a result, she carried out an intense ministry on behalf of the neediest. She came to the aid of families and individuals who had fallen on hard times, bringing them food, coal and clothing: she paid weekly visits to the inmates of the municipal jail and to the sick in the hospital, seeing to it that the dying received Extreme Unction and the Holy Viaticum; she showed her concern for those couples who had not married in Church as well as for those who were properly married but not living in harmony; she always listened to those who came to her with their troubles and problems and offered them advice. She treated domestic servants as though they were members of her family and said the rosary with them daily. On her saint's day she would invite the destitute in and prepare breakfast for them herself.

Her concern for others was not limited to activities specifically aimed at alleviating the material or spiritual needs of the underprivileged. She became more sociable, cultivating the friendship of people from various classes and social circles: priests, nuns, politicians, people from the professions, literati, actors, housewives and students, and she treated them all respectfully, with no hint of exclusivity or egoism, seeking Christian perfection in interpersonal relationships.

She eventually became director and mistress of novices in the Secular Franciscan Order, heralding a period which for some people marked the great flourishing of the Third Order.

### **3. Housewife and mother**

Maria del Refugio was an attractive woman who was not short of suitors. She could have married again, but once she had made the commitment to a new life through the spiritual exercises, her overriding desire was to become a nun. Nevertheless, she did have a daughter and so had to seek perfection in her

maternal capacity, sacrificing her own pleasures, interests and preoccupations, or combining them with others which were appropriate to the upbringing of little Refugio Teresa.

As a mother she was strict, demanding and ever watchful. She saw to it that her daughter did not keep bad company; she forbade her to read books which offended against good taste or to listen in to some conversations between adults. Far from overprotecting her daughter, however, she was able to respect her vocation and to bring her up to respond freely to whatever destiny God intended for her, awakening in her ideals of saintliness and a desire to help in the salvation of souls. Showing great vision in foreseeing the role women were to play in the emerging industrialized society, in 1904 she enrolled her daughter in a boarding-school in Mexico City to complete her elementary studies. The following year she moved her to a teacher training college in Morelia, where she graduated as a schoolmistress in 1907.

In her experience both as a mother and in carrying out her apostolate, Maria del Refugio felt that Our Lord had entrusted her with the salvation of children and young people and therefore it was her duty to work for this salvation through example, exhortation and prayer. She also developed a conviction that she could transform the world by promoting Christian values and by educating citizens to fulfill their duties and respect the rights of others, while striving for better working conditions, being supportive to their fellows and making good use of the material benefits at their disposal.

With her growing awareness of Whom it is we receive in Holy Communion, she felt herself increasingly unworthy of receiving Him and deeply troubled that there should be some who take communion sacrilegiously or who deny the true presence of the Lord in the sacrament. As a result, she resolves to respond to God's inspiration with unconditional commitment.

#### **4. Foundress**

On one of her visits to Morelia to see her daughter, she went into the cathedral and while praying there before the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, she had the idea of founding a religious institute devoted to spreading love for the Blessed Sacrament and to make reparation for the sins of the world, as well as

acting as a vehicle which would allow her apostolic activity to exert more far-reaching influence. It would be an institute not aimed exclusively at serving any particular class, but one which would set up educational establishments, centers of religious teaching and libraries for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel and inspiring and disseminating love for the Blessed Sacrament by working from the basis of the true reality and culture of the people. She conveyed the idea to a priest she knew called Vincente Zaragoza, and together they began to examine how they could put it into practice.

In January 1908 Maria del Refugio entered the hostel run by the Company of Mary in Mexico City in order to finalize the details of the foundation and prepare herself inwardly for this momentous step. Her daughter went with her to lend her services to the nuns in the college and so gain experience in order to be able later to assist her mother as a lay teacher. Shortly afterwards they were joined by Gaudalupe Hernandez Barba who was also one of Father Zaragoza's charges.

On March 25th 1910, the Apostolate of the Blessed Sacrament was founded, and on April 16th of that year the Archbishop of Mexico, Jose Mora y del Rio formally opened the Colegio del Santisimo Sacramento. Maria del Refugio's whole life would thenceforth revolve around the community and the school, as she nourished her spirit through daily Communion and the worship of the Lord, and bestowed her charity on those around her, looking after the spiritual and moral well-being of the pupils and their families, giving free tuition to those who could not afford to pay, offering a welcome home to waifs and orphans, comforting the afflicted, giving shelter to the persecuted and feeding and clothing the poor.

## 5. Christ, font of all knowledge

The basis of her educational program was that at the center of all knowledge lay God and that truly Christian life was not possible without the presence of the Eucharist and the protection of Mary. In other words, we had to go beyond the purely academic and turn the learning process into a mystical experience which would help us to appreciate and enjoy the presence and majesty of God.

Her schools would offer a comprehensive, structured and practical education in accordance with the official curricula. The latest educational methods would be used at all times, instilling good habits in the pupils and teaching them to control

their passions by means of will-power and to lead orderly lives, following the path of righteousness with the help of the grace received at Holy Communion. They would train the intellect by encouraging the development of all the faculties and fostering in their pupils a liking for work. The teaching of morality would be based on seeking the remedy for everything in God's law, in prayer and in the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. In addition, they would teach pupils the social graces, the use of pure and elegant language and the social customs befitting educated people, thus facilitating their access to civilized society. As a break from academic work, they would do physical exercises, eat nutritious food, take frequent baths and go on walks and outings.

Precautionary vigilance was another feature the nuns and teachers being made aware that they were responsible before God for the children's purity and so should steer them away from any opportunities for sinning.

## 6. The Mexican Revolution

The foundation of the institute coincided with the fall of Porfirio Diaz's government. The authoritarianism of a ruler who refused to loosen his grip on power, together with the state of oppression and poverty in which the greater part of the population lived, combined to provide the trigger for a revolution which would not only leave hundreds of thousands dead, but also ruin the country's productive economy, thus aggravating the poverty of the masses. At the same time, the Church would be subjected to cruel persecution, its ministers imprisoned or exiled, its property confiscated and its charitable establishments closed down, while the whole country was awash with the blood of martyrs. General Diaz was forced to resign, setting sail for Europe on May 31st 1911. Francisco Leon de la Barra took charge of the provisional government and on November 6th of that year Francisco I. Madero began a presidential term which was to be characterized by agrarian struggles and clashes between power-hungry revolutionary leaders.

On February 9th 1913 there was a military rising, unleashing ten days of intense and bloody fighting in Mexico City which came to an end on Tuesday the 18th when General Victoriano Huerta, refusing to recognize the Government, ordered President Madero and Vice-President Pino Suarez to be detained and



shot. The final toll was over two thousand dead and sixth thousand wounded. During the period of the fighting Maria del Refugio set up an improvised first-aid post from which, assisted by her companions and two doctor friends, she treated the wounded. As a result of the uprising and civil war there was scarcity of food, so Maria del Refugio organized collections of foodstuffs and clothing to distribute among poor families. By 1915 more than four hundred people were coming daily to the doors of the college, all of whom were given food. Years later the Asociacion Mexicana de la Cruz Blanca Neutral was to give her an honorable mention for these services.

The year 1917 began with the declaration of a new Constitution, denying the Church a legal status and stripping priests of their civic rights, withdrawing recognition of religious communities and vows, outlawing denominational education and banning public worship outside the churches, as well as decreeing that all ecclesiastical property should pass into the ownership of the state. However, President Carranza did consent to the return of exiled bishops as well as allowing priests to exercise their ministry and religious orders to continue assisting in schools and hospitals.

At that time the Colegio del Santisimo Sacramento moved to a villa in the Chapultepec neighborhood, which was really too small and also in a very run-down condition, so they immediately embarked on work to extend and improve it. The Sisters were destined to spend several years surrounded by bricklayers, plumbers and carpenters, with the recurring weekly problem of how to pay the wages, for there were days when they did not have a cent and had to trust in Providence alone to see them through. When the builders finished work each evening, Maria del Refugio would say the rosary with them, lead them in offering flowers to Our Lady and in Lent would arrange spiritual exercises for them. She would attempt to motivate unmarried couples living together to marry in Church by offering them preparation for the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist. She would also teach the illiterate to read in order to further their personal development.

## 7. The strengthening of the Institute

Mario del Refugio was friendly with some bishops, including the Bishop of Tulancingo, Jose Juan de Jesus Herrera y Pina, who had been taking an interest in the community since 1914, visiting it and offering it advice. It was possibly he who suggested they asked Archbishop Mora y del Rio to appoint a director to give them canonical framework and offer them guidance. Towards the end of 1918 the Mercedarian Father Alfredo Scotti turned up with instructions to check up on how the community was being run.

Until then the life of the community had been organized on an informal basis, regulated by a simple set of rules for fixing daily timetables and defining the responsibilities of the various offices and positions. The day began at 4:30 a.m. and ended at 9:00 p.m., the time being taken up with Mass, Eucharistic worship, communal prayers, meditation, spiritual reading, examination, teaching as well as other work such as cleaning and preparation of meals, and recreation. What was still needed was the constitutions. Maria del Refugio drew up some rough drafts in which she defined her ideas on religious life. This Eucharistic community was for her a family which, as in any home, required order and respect to be preserved by means of rules and timetables as well as by adopting a friendly and courteous approach to their dealings with one another which was so essential if they were to live together on a filial or fraternal basis, for this would foster happiness and harmony amongst the members. She emphasized goodness, politeness, patience and humility as necessary elements if relationships within any family were to be positive and fraternal, but above all she stressed the need for love and forgiveness.

The Apostolate of the Blessed Sacrament had only three members when it was founded; by January 1919 there were fifteen and one year later twenty-seven. Among the young girls who entered the community at that time was Refugio Cancino, who until then had led an ordinary life as a laywoman. In August 1920 she decided to enter the Institute founded by her mother, and on October 12th she took the habit, assuming the religious name of Maria Teresa.

The increase in personnel was the signal for the community to start to expand. The first sister house was in Popotla where a school was opened on February 2nd 1919. Five months later a second one opened in San Luis de la Paz,

and in December another in Real del Monte. Others followed in Xalapa, Sayula, San Luis Potosi, Monterrey, Saltillo, Toluca and Tacubaya. Some of these foundations suffered extreme poverty and even food shortages. However, Maria del Refugio was happy to put up with the precarious conditions, reminding herself of St. Teresa's maxim that "all principles are painful," and remaining true to her conviction that once one had started something, one should persevere with it no matter what difficulties might arise, if it was the will of God and the Superiors.

## 8. Under the patronage of Our Lady of Mercy

In the view of the numbers of houses and members and the fact that everything seemed to be on a well-organized footing, Archbishop Mora y del Rio put the Apostolate's application for diocesan approval in the hands of Father Scotti, together with letters of recommendation from several bishops for him to take personally to Rome.

On June 15th 1922 the Congregation of Religious, finding that all was in order, granted permission for the canonical foundation. Its constitutions underwent some modifications which, while not changing the Institute's essential character, did broaden its spiritual compass. They would still be motivated by the same aim which had brought them together and on the basis of which they had been approved and founded: the sanctification of their members by means of evangelical counsels and the reaching out of the kingdom of Jesus in the Eucharist to all social classes, using the Christian education of children and young people to spread the word that the Blessed Sacrament lies at the heart of all knowledge. New patron saints were adopted: the community was dedicated to Our Lady of Ransom (also known as Our Lady of Mercy) in addition to the Virgin of Gaudalupe, while the patron saints St. Joseph, St. Michael the Archangel, St. Pascual Baylon and St. Teresa of Jesus were joined by St. Raymond Nonnatus, the Mercedarian saint of the Eucharist.

The community was gradually taking on a Mercedarian character. Out of gratitude to Our Lady of Ransom, Maria del Refugio requested the latter's incorporation into the Order of Mercy, this being granted on June 11th 1925, so that they were thenceforth known as Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. As a result of this devotion, the Sisters were summoned to participate

in Mary's maternal pain, which was bound up with the redeeming mystery of Jesus, and also to assist in rescuing man from his modern bondage through heroic acts of love and charity, by means of which they would save their souls.

## 9. Religious persecution

The Government's attacks on the Church became increasingly frequent. On November 30th 1924 Plutarco Elias Calles was sworn in as President of the Republic, and in February 1925 he provoked a schism with the aim of establishing a religion which was answerable to the civil authorities.

In February 1926 Monsignor Mora y del Rio was reported in the press to have made statements against the Constitution, and these were used as a pretext for unleashing the brutal religious persecution which followed. That same week most Catholic schools were closed down. As a condition of their reopening, the government demanded compliance with Article 3 of the Constitution which stipulates:

*Religious corporations, ministers of religion, societies which exclusively or mainly carry out educational activities, and associations or societies concerned with the dissemination of any religious creed, will not involve themselves in any way in establishments which provide primary or secondary education, teacher training, or classes for workers or peasants.*

The bishops ordered headmasters of Catholic schools to sign declarations in which they undertook to observe Article 3 of the Constitution to the letter. They all signed except Father Carranza and the Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Maria del Refugio could not in all conscience comply with a law which constituted an attack on God and the freedom of man. She consulted Monsignor Crespi, Secretary to the Apostolic Delegation, who was of the opinion that the Holy See would prefer them to abandon the schools rather than yield to the demands of civil authorities. However, the Vicar General of the Archbishopric Maximino Ruiz y Flores, advised her that she should not rebel against orders from above. This helped to dispel her doubts so she reluctantly gave way, though she did arrange for a laywoman to sign on her behalf.

Classes resumed on Tuesday April 27th, but the crucifix and religious images remained on the walls of the classrooms in the Colegio del Santisimo Sacramento, for Maria del Refugio regarded the symbols of the faith as an essential part of the ambience which should prevail in her establishments.

A few weeks later two agents from the Ministry of the Interior turned up at the Colegio del Santisimo Sacramento with orders to search the premises. They found the Sisters wearing their habits. Pistols in hand they went over the whole house, even looking under the beds, saying that they had orders to shoot "any priests they found there." In order to avoid any desecration, Maria del Refugio carried the Blessed Sacrament under her cloak as she accompanied them round the house talking to them forcefully and with considerable courage, and replying to their questions in the following vein: "I am not afraid of you closing my oratories, as you say you could, because you will never be able to close the oratory which I carry in my heart." Similar scenes were to be constantly repeated over the coming years.

On July 2nd 1926, the President of the Republic promulgated a law to regulate the practicing of religion, placing all spiritual ministry under the control of the civil authorities. The so-called "Calles Law" included provisions for the expulsion of foreign priests, the outlawing of the Catholic press and the censorship of correspondence, and even made the practicing of religion in private punishable by law. It also provided for the closure of denominational schools, diocesan seminaries and charitable institutions run by nuns. The Episcopate's response was to send out a collective letter announcing their decision to suspend public worship in all churches in the country from July 30th. The closure of all the Blessed Sacrament Schools was now inevitable. The last day of classes in Chapultepec was July 15th, although some of the Sisters continued to teach groups of girls clandestinely in family homes.

## **10. Spreading the love of the Blessed Sacrament**

Seeing the religious question in Mexico becoming ever more difficult, Maria del Refugio had been intending for some time to establish houses in Spain and Italy as a means of preserving the vocational calling of her nuns and keeping the life of the Institute going. The first steps towards this end was the opening of a

foundation in Placetas, Cuba, in September 1925, which was intended to act as a stopping-off place for those Sisters on their way to establishments overseas. She then negotiated for a foundation to be opened in El Salvador and for the transfer of the novitiate to Oklahoma in the United States. On September 6th 1926 she opened another Blessed Sacrament School in Havana, while it was suggested to her from Spain that she opened a house in the Basque Provinces, a project which she managed to carry out after commending it to St. Joseph and communally offering him the Seven Sundays. The Superior General and her councillors would remain in Mexico City, but would leave their convent for the time being to take refuge in the cellars of a neighbor from which they would continue running the Institute.

Sometime during the early months of this religious persecution, Maria del Refugio had received a letter from the Master General of the Mercedarians in which he offered her encouragement and sympathy on account of the critical situation facing the Church in Mexico. Fray Luis Marquez Eyzaguirre used the same channels to write offering his services in setting up a foundation in his native Chile, an offer which Maria del Refugio had no hesitation in accepting.

Father Marquez's contacts with Mexicans in Louvain and the United States prompted him to travel to Mexico in 1928 in order to see for himself the predicament in which Catholics found themselves there. He set sail in the "Alfonso XIII," reaching Veracruz on March 11th. During the voyage he struck up a friendship with a young North American and seeing the latter's company as a useful means of throwing the police off his trail, he proposed that they travel together as far as the capital. Marquez described his meeting with Maria del Refugio as the most striking experience he had ever had. Lodging in Chapultepec, he stayed in Mexico City for a month, taking advantage of his visit to propose the setting-up of new foundations in Cartagena, Colombia, and Caltanissetta, Italy, which were destined to come to fruition, though not without a number of setbacks, along the way.

Because of the religious persecution, the Congregation had set about expanding abroad. The year 1929 saw the novitiate in Oklahoma in operation, as well as two schools in Cuba, one in El Salvador, one in Chile, one in Spain, one in Colombia and another in Italy, although all of them labored under difficulties and

hardship. In Mexico the general headquarters remained, together with the schools in Colonia Roma and Coyoacan in Mexico City, and another in San Luis Potosi.

The house in Chapultepec had been denounced to the authorities as a Catholic school as early as 1924, records showing the existence of a chapel in the house to have been the incriminating factor. It had not been operating as a school since 1926 and was now occupied only by the General Council and a few girls, while other parts of the premises were either inhabited by families or lay unoccupied. However, even the closing down of the establishment and the renting out of its apartments did not put an end to the frequent raids by government agents, whose inspections finally confirmed the existence of a religious community. Fearing the worst, Maria del Refugio had the chapel demolished so that it would not be desecrated if it were expropriated. With the cause already lost, she rented a house in Coyoacan into which they moved on September 8th 1930, having been dispossessed of the only property they owned, and which they had acquired by virtue of so much effort and sacrifice. Maria del Refugio never complained or spoke ill of those who had appropriated the rightful assets of the Congregation. She conveyed the news to the Sisters in the following words:

*Recently the Lord has seen fit to let us be dispossessed of our headquarters which we had acquired at the cost of so many sacrifices and in which we had invested so many hopes. Blessed be the Lord in His gifts and may His divine will be done!*

Maria del Refugio was happy, serene and generally in good spirits when she arrived in Coyoacan, but she knew that she would have to move their home on a number of occasions on account of landlords' fears that they might lose their property if caught renting to a religious community.

## **11. A children's project**

The Government's policy was aimed at manipulating all teaching with a view to indoctrinating the new generations. President Abelardo Rodriguez reformed the Constitution in order to make socialist education compulsory throughout the country, a measure which his successor General Lazaro Cardenas was clearly

determined to enforce. Teachers in state and private schools would be obliged, not only to support the aims of socialist education and introduce it into the schools, but to disseminate the very tenets and principles of socialism as promoted by the national government, with the commitment to combat Catholicism figuring prominently amongst these.

Of course Maria del Refugio was deeply upset by the atheism and immoral content of the compulsory syllabuses laid down by the government, but she found the acquiescent attitude of the Catholic educators to the government's demands equally repugnant. She tried to make amends to God by offering education and a family life to seven orphan girls, one for each of the seven sorrows of Our Lady. She wrote to the various houses to tell them of her idea and, as a result, two girls were sent from Cuba, two from Spain and another from Mexico. She would not live long enough to reach the full complement of seven, but she acted as a true mother to these five.

The last house she lived in was at Marti 256 in the Escandon district in Mexico City. Even as she moved in during September 1936 she had a foreboding that she had not long to live, and she arranged for a handrail to be fitted on the steps leading to the door for the pallbearers to have something to hold on to as they took her coffin out.

A few weeks later while she was fervently praying in the room which she had converted into a chapel, a draft brought on a bout of pneumonia. By early 1937 she was extremely debilitated by typhoid from which she had suffered for several months, accompanied by fever and constant malaise. In mid-February she was diagnosed as having bronchopneumonia, followed shortly afterwards by nephritis, which caused her whole body to swell up. Her condition deteriorated as a result of kidney failure, low body temperature and saturation of her tissues, causing her legs to give off over thirty liters of liquid. She was in a state of total debilitation, unable to move and in great pain, which became agonizing when attempts were made to move her, but she bore her suffering with supreme patience and resignation.

She wrote to all the nuns to inform them of the gravity of her condition, commending herself to their prayers and exhorting them to do a number of things. She asked the Sisters who were with her to show sisterly harmony and



charity, urging them to keep up their custodianship of the Blessed Sacrament, to continue to pray for the dead and not to leave her in purgatory by expressing sentiments such as "she was so good!" She made all the necessary arrangements for her death and prepared the sheets for her shroud.

On the morning of April 23rd her condition was very grave. She was given a blood transfusion which produced a strong reaction in her. She was attended by Father Zaragoza, of whom she asked absolution. When the priest could see that Maria del Refugio's life was drawing to its close, he took her right hand and said to her "Bless your daughters." She opened her eyes for the last time, uttering the words "To Heaven, to Heaven," and then died quite peacefully. The time was twenty minutes to one in the early hours of April 24th 1937.

The memory of a woman of exemplary virtue who was devoted to the Blessed Sacrament and anxious to share that devotion wherever she went, and indeed with the whole world, was a source of comfort to her religious daughters, friends and acquaintances and filled them with hope. It was not long before they were to begin to experience the fruits of her intercessions on their behalf in heaven.

During the course of the following years, the Institute of Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament was to undergo a remarkable development. Within ten years the number of houses and personnel had doubled, and on July 22nd 1948 Pope Pius XII granted it a laudatory decree.

The Foundress' saintly reputation would continue to grow as more and more people witnessed a change in their way of life after becoming acquainted with the life and works of Maria del Refugio Aguilar y Torres, and there were more reports of graces and favors obtained through her intercession.

She is regarded by many as a model Christian because, having acknowledged her human weakness in the spiritual exercises of 1896, she sought ways of redemption through the Eucharist; as a model mother because she encouraged her children to aspire to saintly ideals; as a model Franciscan tertiary because she saw the value of that form of organized apostolate and did everything possible to further its development; as a model catechist because her catechizing was aimed at teaching people to love and respond to the Eucharist; as a model teacher because she sought to turn her teaching into an experience which would lead to the discovery of God; as an exemplary sister because she was faithful and

magnanimous living according to her vows and because she was punctilious in observing the rules; an exemplary Mercedarian because she made her life and her apostolate into a work of redemption. On account of all these attributes it was proposed that she be elevated to the honor of the altars, and the cause for her canonization was formerly opened in 1982. Maria del Refugio, far from being forgotten, stands out as a model of Eucharistic living for the new millennium.

## PRAYER

*Oh heavenly Father! Please grant us the considerable favor of raising to the honor of the altars your servant Maria del Refugio who, responding to the yearnings of her heart, founded a Congregation which was destined to spread the love of the Blessed Sacrament through the Christian education of children and young people. Grant us through her intercession the favor which we ask of you... [here make your petition]. We beg of you through your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.*

***Should by the grace of God any favor be granted to you through the intercession of Maria del Refugio, we should be grateful if you would inform:***

[causa\\_refugio@hotmail.com](mailto:causa_refugio@hotmail.com)

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