

Divine Love Fills a Whole Life
Autobiography: Rosa Maria Icaza y Salazar

I was born in Mexico City on April 24, 1925. My parents, Angel and Agustina, like my aunts and uncles, were joyfully waiting my birth, as one of my mother's brother, Romualdo, wrote in a post-card he sent to my mother from Paris when she was expecting me: "let it be a girl!" (Nov. 8/1924). I was baptized two days after birth and received the name of Maria Guadalupe. My parents placed me under the protection of our Mother Mary. My brother, Jose Ramon, although he was only six years old, took good care of me. My first prayer was: "Pan, Papa Dios" ("Cookie, Daddy God") and with it my parents put in my heart the seed of love for a God that is loving, provident, and near. As is customary in Mexico, my parents "presented me to the Temple" when I was forty days old and again dedicated me to God under the care of the Blessed Mother. I grew up surrounded with love and attention. Nevertheless, four years later, my loving mother, after giving birth to my sister, Maria del Carmen, went to heaven.

God continued taking care of me. First my godmother, who was also my father's sister, took me to her home for a few weeks. Her house was across from the church of St. Clare on Tacuba Street and before putting me to bed, she would take me to the church to receive a blessing from the priest, who some years later administered to me my First Communion. Then, a few months after, Jose Ramon and Guadalupe, my uncle and aunt on both sides since he was my father's brother and she was my mother's sister, took all three of us to their home and educated us with great vigilance and love. My sister and I called them "Papipo" and "Mamita." We were always conscious of our personal history and we never confused "papacito" and "mamacita," from whom my brother, myself, and my sister were born, with "papipo" and "mamita" who educated all three of us. "Papacito" visited us regularly several times a week and lavished his love on us, particularly on me as his oldest girl.

When I was six years old, I received my First Communion and mamita told me later that on that day I promised Jesus to be His all my life. I went to school since I was three years old, but when I was in the third grade, the persecutors of the Catholic Church confiscated our school building and the convent of the Passionist Sisters who were our teachers. For this reason, all the statues in their chapel came to my home and frequently we had Mass at home and we kept the Blessed Sacrament there with great reverence. During the month of May, we celebrated the Rosary at home offering flowers to Mary after each decade and in December, we celebrated the "Posadas." All of the neighbors and friends participated with great joy. Each Lent we participated in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, in the parish 7, according to our age and state in life.

At home, we developed a special devotion to our Blessed Mother, calling her with great love: "Mama Virgen." Every night the family prayed the Rosary together before the life-statue of "Mater Castísimas," and every time we arrived or left home we went to see her. When we arrived from school with our report card, before looking at it, my father would ask us: "Did you show it to Mama Virgen? Both papacito and papipo went to Mass daily and frequently I joined them, particularly during Holy Week Celebrations. During the Holy Year of the Redemption (1933), we went to Rome in a pilgrimage. We also visited other cities in Italy and France. During the voyage I felt an attraction for a boy who was traveling on the same ship, but it was a passing spark. I had the happiness to see Pope Pius XI who caressed me and blessed my parents for taking me and my sister with them. My brother had stayed home with papacito. When I was ten years old, I went with my sister to a day's retreat before her First Communion; it was then that I felt more clearly my call to the religious life.

Since the government had confiscated our school building, each of the Passionist Sisters went to a different home of a family whose daughter was attending their school and there, in the dining room, she would teach a small group of girls who were in the same grade. They taught us without chalk-board, without recreation yard, without library, etc., but with a lot of personal attention. Also, due to the persecution there were no catechism classes in the parishes. For this reason, some lay ladies went around some homes where there were several children and taught us catechism including basic ideas on the liturgy and apologetics. At home we lived daily what the sisters and the catechists taught us.

The following years were difficult for my family, since, again due to the religious persecution, my papipo was removed from his position at the Treasury Department for not accepting the socialist norms that were imposed on all government employees. As a consequence of that, he was not able to practice his profession as a lawyer and all the savings were quickly exhausted. We lived frugally. Mamita unfolded the hem of our dresses and used the cinctures to make the skirt longer. Both of them, Papipo and Mamita, showed us their love, but we knew that there was no money for small things. How many times I wished I could ask my father to buy me a popsicle, but I could not ask for it, because I knew that my father would feel bad if he had to deny it to me. The beautiful things that we had inherited began to disappear from home, because my parents had to sell them to pay their taxes and food. However, I never heard a complaint from them.

When I finished grade school, the Sisters taught us some business courses for one year. Then, at fourteen I enrolled as student at the Gregg Academy to pursue an Accountant career. The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word of San Antonio, Texas, had opened that institute as an American school. My great-aunt, Lucia, was a member of that Congregation and arranged for me to receive a scholarship. I studied there for two and a half years and got to know her religious Congregation. At sixteen, I entered their Convent, but not before my parents (the three of them), both of my siblings and I went to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe to ask for a special blessing as we took this new step in our lives. Before that, my fifteenth birthday was a truly special day for me. All of my uncles and aunts and their families joined my parents, brother, sister and me very early to go to Mass so that Jesus could be the first one to wish me a happy "Quinceañera" birthday when I'd receive Him in Holy Communion. Then everyone congratulated me as we came out of church. On arriving home, there was a group of musicians who played while we enjoyed a good breakfast. On that day I wore everything new: my dress was peach color with light blue decorations and I received as presents a ring, earrings, necklace, etc. Many of my relatives came to celebrate a Solemn Mass with me in a chapel dedicated to our Blessed Mother, in the church of "La Profesa." At the end of Mass we sang the Te Deum, a hymn of thanksgiving. It was then that, in the secret of my heart, I made a serious promise to God that I would be a religious and serve Him and His people the rest of my life. After Mass only the immediate family gathered for a delicious meal. Each dish was named with part of my own name: Cocktail Maria, Soup Guadalupe, Rice Icaza, and so forth. Later in the afternoon many of my girlfriends came to my home and we played, chatted, sang, and cut the cake. We had a great time. My Heart spilled over with gratitude and joy.

On August 15th, ten months after I entered the Convent, I received the habit of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word and the religious name: Rosa Maria of the Blessed Sacrament. Papacito commented that since they had included the name of Mary in my new name, everything was fine. After two years of novitiate I made my first vows in Mexico City. God continued directing my life and filling me with surprises. By a mistake of the secretary in San Antonio (but God does not make mistakes) who wrote "Rosa Maria" instead of "Rosa Teresa," I was sent to San Antonio, Texas, to learn English and after two years I went to teach it for six months in San

Luis Potosi, then in Mexico City at the Instituto Miguel Angel for two years. Before making perpetual vows, I was sent to our school in Chihuahua for six months. Several of my students from those years entered the convent afterwards, most of them got married and continued their careers as bilingual persons with great success.

When I was studying in San Antonio for the first time, papacito came to see me after Christmas and spent a few days with me. Our relationship grew stronger and I realized how hard it had been for him to give his consent to my joining the convent, because he longed for a peaceful home and thought he would enjoy it when I'd get married. Nevertheless, he blessed me and felt proud to have a daughter as a Sister. Two of his sisters had also joined another Congregation many years before. Papipo and Mamita had to sell the house where I grew up in order to pay for my dowry and my novitiate. They moved to a small duplex with my brother and sister. During the years that I was teaching in Mexico City, papacito went to be in God's loving arms. It was a deep sorrow for me and for my family. Papipo was sick and eleven months after, to the day, he also died. Mamita had to take the last penny from the bank to bury him. As the strong woman in the Gospel, she began to cook meals and delivered them to various homes in order to make some money. It was hard work and my siblings helped her with shopping, washing pots, etc. always trusting in the Divine Providence. At the end of each year we always had the "Divine Providence Candles." Twelve small candles were lit at midnight between December 31st and January 1st while the whole family prayed together the Apostles' Creed three times. Then, all candles were blown out. But on the first day of each month, one of those candles would be lit until it finished. Thus, it is a simple ritual to remind the family that everything comes to us from the kindness and mercy of God.

I have been in San Antonio, Texas, since 1949. After a few years of being in the United States, I received the news that God had called my brother to His kingdom. Not much later, my sister got sick and died in spite of Mamita's loving care. Neither of them had married. Mamita continued struggling and finally she went to receive her eternal crown in heaven when she was 87 years old. But God did not abandon me. One of my cousins welcomed me in her home every time I visited in Mexico City, but she was diagnosed with cancer and died. Her children have embraced me with love and I enjoy very much being with them as with my immediate family.

During the last fifty years I have received many surprises. My major Superiors decided to change me to the San Antonio Province and to prepare me to teach at our university here. I studied at the Catholic (Pontifical) University of America in Washington, D.C. and earned the B.A., (Magna cum Laude and initiation in Phi, Beta, Kappa), M.A., and Ph.D. (1957). My doctoral thesis was a stylistic study of the great Spanish poet and theologian St. John of the Cross. I compared how he expressed the same ideas in poetry and in prose. God was preparing me, unknown to us, for my ministry these present days as translator and editor. At the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas, I taught Spanish and Latin language and literature. Later, I received a second M.A. in Religious Studies from Incarnate Word College.

During those years, they offered me a scholarship to study at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, Spain. There, I realized how limited my knowledge was, since I had not studied anything about the great painters, sculptors, musicians, architects, etc. of Spain and Latin America. Neither had I paid any attention to the history of the peoples that shaped those countries or their struggles to lead a life with dignity themselves and their families. So, as professor of the University of the

Incarinate Word, I organized and guided three field trips to Europe, particularly to Spain and two to Mexico City. I introduced a required course that dealt with an overview of the political and artistic achievements of Spanish speaking countries.

During my term as professor I belonged to several professional associations, such as: American Association of Spanish and Portuguese Teachers (where I served for a term of six years as the President of the South-West Region), Association of Classical Languages in the Midwest and South, International Association of Educators, International Institute for Latin American Literature, Association of Latin American Studies, Association of Modern Languages in the South-central, Southwest Conference for Language Teachers. I held different positions in different committees in those associations and at the university. I was chairperson for the Language Department for several years and introduced courses at the undergraduate and master's levels that enriched our programs. The students not only learned about the Spanish language and literatures, but also became acquainted with the history, art and culture of Spanish speaking countries. Many of my students have thanked me for these classes and continue with their eyes open to admire the beauty around them and to thank God for the artistic gifts of so many persons.

I was mentioned in several publications and was selected as "Moody Professor" for the school year 1975-76 and was also nominated as "Piper Professor" in 1976. I gave several conferences at the meetings and conventions of different associations in several parts of the United States. I published an article, "Linguistics: A Bridge to Understand Bilingual Children" as a chapter in a book.

Also, during those same years, I participated in the "Cursillo Movement" and joined its leaders' school and board. I was the president of the Movement in the archdiocese of San Antonio for three years and I even served as a simultaneous translator for a Men's Cursillo directed by our dear Archbishop Patrick F. Flores. Within the structure of my religious Congregation, I was asked to be local superior for one year and then I was elected to our provincial team as a Councilor for the San Antonio Province. I served a complete term. But my more constant and long ministry within my Congregation has been as a translator, both simultaneously and in writing.

Several of the students who attended my classes at the University of the Incarnate Word finished their career as Spanish teachers and obtained a Master's degree under my direction. They became Spanish teachers at the high school and university levels. Many of them, as well as their own students, continue to be in touch with me to clarify some points of grammar and literature and to share with me their adventures and achievements.

Although I was a "tenured professor" at the University of the Incarnate Word, I decided in 1978 to leave the university and continue my ministry as member of the pastoral team at the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC), an international institute for multicultural studies and Spanish/English languages. At this Center we offer classes and workshops on several pastoral and cultural topics. I have had many opportunities to meet numerous persons in the United States and in other countries, to travel to many places within and outside the United States, to translate and edit several books and to write books, chapters for some books as well as articles and book reviews.

Among my students at MACC I have had bishops, priests, deacons, religious, lay persons with leadership skills and many "grass-root" men and women. Thanks be to God, I have helped many Hispanics to grow more deeply in their faith and to learn the theological and biblical basis for most of our beloved popular expressions of faith as well as the norms and reasons for the official liturgy in the Catholic Church.

During the last 30 years I have taken several courses on specific pastoral topics and have been an active member of several groups, like the Federation of Pastoral Institutes, the National Hispanic Institute for Liturgy (where I was National President for six years and ex-officio Member of the U.S. Bishops' Committee for the Liturgy), the Archdiocesan Commission for Liturgy, the Sub-Committee for Liturgy in Spanish of the Bishops' Committee for the Liturgy in the United States, and the Board of Trustees of the University of the Incarnate Word. All this has given me the opportunity to do the basic translation of several official rituals for liturgical celebrations in this country. In 1988, I obtained a scholarship for one semester sabbatical at the Center for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota, where I also attended some liturgy classes at St. John's University.

God continues to bless my ministry and several persons and institutions have recognized my work: at the University of the Incarnate Word I was named "Professor Emerita" and "Board Member Emerita" and their language lab bears my name, as also at the Mexican American Cultural Center one of the buildings is identified by my name. What a surprise! I have received several awards from: the National Hispanic Institute for Liturgy and the LA PRENSA Foundation Inc. The National Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops granted me the "Patricio Flores" medal for my contributions to liturgical celebrations among Spanish speaking people. Several authors have quoted me in their books (Arturo Perez-Rodriguez: *Primero Dios* and Kenneth Davis: *Misa, Mesa, Musa: Liturgy in the U.S. Hispanic Church*. Recently (December 2006), two Jesuit priests, Frs. James Empeureur and Eduardo Fernandez, dedicated their book to me: *La Vida Sacra: Contemporary Hispanic Sacramental Theology*.

My ministry at MACC includes giving lectures, teaching classes, organizing and implementing workshops together with the other members of the pastoral team, writing articles and book reviews, translating and editing books, articles, conferences, materials for the Center and for our classes, and being a respondent to others' conference. Within the last ten years I have contributed one or two chapters for six books, I have written twelve articles published in different magazines and newspapers; I have reviewed three books and have written at least ten short reflections on biblical passages. The topics I write about are Popular Religiosity, Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Liturgical Year, Multiculturalism in schools, etc. Only God could have given me the strength and the ideas for all this. Blessed be His holy name!

Really, it is beautiful and gratifying to see the joy in the faces of the participants in our workshops and courses, when we help them to discover the richness of their own cultural roots. They feel affirmed, because even though all cultures have their lights and shadows, they realize that there are many good gifts which make them worthy sons and daughters of God, good citizens of their own country, and that they have something special to contribute to the community where they live and work. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that moves their hearts and helps them believe in themselves. Many of them go then to serve within economically poor communities, particularly among Hispanics.

As a translator I have had the privilege of meeting different authors and their works, of helping international groups to communicate among themselves, or simply to render a service to a person who desires to buy something in a store or to receive some help at the doctor's office or the

hospital, but they do not know how to say it in the other language. Also, as I translate, my mind is widened since I have been asked to translate books, manuals, commentaries and articles on religious and liturgical topics but also I have been asked to translate Birth Certificates, Constitutions of Religious Orders, Articles for hospital and parish bulletins, Manuals for the Formation of Migrant Leaders, and for the Development of Leadership Skills Among Hispanic Youth, for organizations that help other organizations to draw their plan of action as well as short paragraphs like Policies for Employees in the Archdiocese, Announcements for several companies that sell microwave ovens, trucks to gather trash, a special brand of tequila, etc. This ministry has also led me to ask for help from my colleagues and to keep my mind open to learn every day.

During my life as a religious, I have had the joy of celebrating my Silver Jubilee (25 years of profession of the three religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience) in 1969 when the astronauts landed in the moon and my Congregation celebrated 100 years since its foundation; my Golden (1994) and Diamond (2004) Jubilees, surrounded by family, friends, colleagues and alumni. Some had to travel long distances to be present at the Mass and Banquet. God continues to show me His love through them, and my gratitude and love grow deeper for them and for God. I am ever more eager to serve my brothers and sisters, but I continue to receive more and more from them. The mission entrusted to my Congregation, "To make tangible the love of the Incarnate Word in today's world," continues to inspire and direct all my life. I give thanks daily for the gift of perseverance in my religious vocation and I ask the grace of being Jesus, the Incarnate Word, for all who cross my path. This is indeed a great challenge that constantly invites me to pray and to live deeply every moment of my life as a cancer survivor since 1990.

As I reviewed the events of my 82 years of life, the love of God is so clearly seducing and leading me even in the most unexpected ways. Who would have thought when I began to learn typewriting when I was thirteen years old that now that skill would help me in the use of computers and of power-point for my conferences! God directs our lives in ordinary ways and with a loving hand takes us gently to fulfill the mission that has been entrusted to each of us. Indeed, looking at all that God has done in me and through me, I can only exclaim with Mary: "My soul glorifies the Lord ... because the Almighty has done great things in my life."

Now, I want, first of all, to give thanks to God for His tenderness and wisdom in placing all this in my life, to thank my parents (four of them) and my siblings who already enjoy together the vision of God but from whom I received the foundation for a deep faith and a great love for Our Lady of Guadalupe, to thank my religious Congregation who have molded me with patience and generosity to take the Incarnate Word in me to all those whom I meet and to discover Jesus in each of my brothers and sisters, particularly the most vulnerable and needy.

Finally, I want to invite all those who read this autobiography to review their own lives and to discover how God has guided them through joys and sorrows, successes and failures, to be what they are today and to praise God for His infinite tenderness and mercy in loving each of us as we are and for what we may become until the day when we will be able to see God face to face in heaven for all eternity.

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