

**CHRISTOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE
Of
The Venerable M. María Antonia Paris
and
Saint Anthony Maria Claret
Founders of the
Religious of Mary Immaculate
Claretian Sisters**

**A BRIEF PRESENTATION
OF THE ORIGINAL PAPER**

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This paper is a summary presentation of the paper introducing the Christological experience of our founders, the Venerable M. Maria Antonia Paris, and Saint Anthony Maria Claret. This paper was presented at the workshop held in Barcelona on December 28, 2009 till January 6, 2010.

It is very important to have from the very beginning an attitude of wonder and reverence in order to be able to have a glimpse into the intimate relationship between Christ and our Founders. We are entering a sacred space, the in depth relationship held between Christ and Mother Maria Antonia and Fr. Claret. Let us allow ourselves to be amazed by the intimacy they had with Christ and how this intimate relationship was an ongoing reality until the time the Lord called them home.

I also would like to underline that our Founders did not write any Christological treatise, yet in their autobiographies they opened their hearts letting us know how their lives were centered in Christ, they did it in a very candid way, with honesty and in truth. They lived in Christ to such an extent that they truly could say with Saint Paul: *It is not I who lives, it is Christ who lives in me.* (Gal. 2:20)

The first part of this paper deals with the vocation of Mother Maria Antonia y Fr. Claret. Here it is summarily mentioned how they grew in awareness of their being call to follow Christ.

Mother Maria Antonia Paris and Fr. Claret were open to hear the call of the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus. They listen to Jesus calling them to be with Him, and to be sent to announce the Good News of God's Kingdom, like He did with the first disciples (Mk 3:14). Our Founders understood their lives within the perspective of God's love, they experienced God's love being poured out in their hearts, and they understood themselves as consecrated by God to carry out a mission in the Church and in the world. They understood themselves as being consecrated by God's love from the very beginning, even before they were in their mothers' womb. God had consecrated them, separated them to be apostles-missionaries (Eph 1:3ff). Their being apostles-missionaries was not an accident but the expression of who they were, of their identity: they were apostles-missionaries sent by the Spirit of Christ to renew the Church and preach the Good News to every creature.

Part II is the center of the paper. It aims to be a reflection-contemplation on how Christ became the center of Mother Maria Antonia's and Fr. Claret's life. Their hearts were in fire for the love of Christ. They felt gifted by the Spirit with a unique experience of the Incarnated Word; Christ was for them the *raison d'être* for their life; once they accepted the friendship offered to them by Christ, they knew they could only live for Him and with Him, looking forward to live in Him.

The gospels' narratives witnessed to our Founders Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God; they were given the insight of His loving care and self-giving for humankind. In the gospels they discovered:

- Jesus giving of himself unconditionally in the service to God's Kingdom; His love for the Father guided his words and his actions.
- Jesus did not marry, he was a teacher, a rabbi, gathering into his company a group of companions who would live with him and who He would send to share what they had seen and experienced being with Him.
- Jesus devoted himself unreservedly to the mission the Father entrusted Him. His only desire was to bring about God's love and mercifulness to the people
- Jesus had friends, Martha, Mary, Lazarus; he enjoyed friendships, he entered the houses of poor and rich, Matthew, Zaccheus, and he sat at table with them, he did not make any difference, he looked for the outcasts, the sick, the sinners... He was sensitive to their causes.
- Jesus' heart was compassionate, he felt for the poor, the women, the outcasts, the sinners, he reach out to all those the official religion rejected.
- Jesus felt the pain of the mother who had lost his only son (Lk 7:11-17); Jesus cried at Lazarus tomb (Jo 11), he was moved at the sight of the impenitent city, Jerusalem (Lk 19:42).

"Come follow Me." They heard the call of Jesus to follow Him, to walk in his footsteps; their hearts were expanded enabling them to love unreservedly, with no boundaries, they gave themselves without setting any pre-conditions. They experienced fully their being children of God, they responded to God's mercifulness with total and unconditional generosity; there was no obstacle capable of deterring them from loving God and doing His will. They follow Christ lovingly and unreservedly; their only goal was to live up to the call they had received serving the Church and humanity wholeheartly. They freely embraced Jesus lifestyle, in His being totally for-the-Father and for-others. They lived their lives in Christ and for Christ. And in Christ they live also for-others, as He Himself did. Their heart was rooted in Christ, and as they journey towards a full identification with Christ they became in turn Christ for their fellow men and women. The Spirit that possessed Christ, the same Spirit of love who unites in love the Father and the Son, was poured out in the heart of Mother Maria Antonia Paris and Fr. Claret; they

unconditionally received God's love, and this divine love moved them to share this same love with others.

In the writings of Mother Maria Antonia we can recognize a loving heart that does not keep anything to her but empties out totally to serve others. Her love was virginal love, chaste love, a generous surrendering of her being; this love burned in her heart since she was a little child; her indisputable desire to consecrate herself to the Lord, to be a religious sister, emerged from a loving heart whose only desire was to be only for the beloved. It is in this burning heart full of love that the Crucified Lord made His presence known, establishing with her a unique friendly intimate relationship while teaching her the mission He wanted her to fulfill in the Church. The Crucified Lord is Mother Maria Antonia's Teacher, who guides her to understand that love has no boundaries, that is given unconditionally, and that the person who is in love is to empty oneself without expecting any reward. The Crucified Lord teaches her that she has to give of herself emptying herself into Him, trusting that God will guide her, and will help her to accomplish the mission He entrusts her. She is asked to live as a poor, in simplicity, trusting that the Lord will guide her life, and she does not hesitate to trust Him. In her writings she tells that there is nothing she cannot endure if she knows it is God's will; she will always surrender to God's will: *The love to your will, of Lord, makes me surrender to whatever sacrifice I may have to endure.* (*El amor a Vuestra Santísima Voluntad Señor, me rinde a todo sacrificio.*¹ She lives each moment in God's presence, Christ's centered; such is the intensity of God's love that she feels her heart is shattering into pieces, her heart does not have the capacity for keeping so much love inside her.

From that moment on (the experience of the origin) the Lord has given me the grace to experience him always present, and in an intimate relationship with Him, especially in the Holy Humanity of Christ Jesus our Lord and in the Blessed Sacrament. There have been too many and such sweetness of love that the Lord has poured out in this poor sinner that I have been compelled to exclaim: Enough, my Lord, enough. Please expand my heart or do not give me any more of such sweetness. (*Desde entonces (la visión inicial) me ha hecho la gracia Nuestro Señor de tenerlo siempre presente, y una muy íntima comunicación con Su Divina Majestad especialmente en la Humanidad Santísima de Cristo Señor Nuestro, y en el Santísimo Sacramento. Han sido tantas y tales las finezas de amor que ha obrado Dios nuestro Señor en esta miserable pecadora, que muchas veces me he visto obligada a exclamation: Basta, Señor mío, basta; o ensanchad mi corazón o suspended tales finezas*)²

Fr. Claret's missionary activity drew from a loving heart, a heart that was willing to give everything for the love of God and for the love of his brethren. He wanted even to seal this love

¹ Aut. MP # 107, p. 108.

² Aut. MP # 12, p. 61.

with martyrdom. He carried in his heart the desire to save souls; Christ's love and the love for his fellow men and women were united, they were just only two faces of the same coin; it was an undivided love, giving of himself to the Lord, in preaching, confessing, establishing cooperatives, etc. etc., those were the means he used to introduce God's love in the hearts of all those he was sent to care for. *Poor of me if I would not preach the gospel!*. (1Cor 9,15)

Christ is the only model to be followed by those who want to live God's kingdom here and now. To follow Jesus requires to walk behind Him, not at his side or ahead of Him, but to walk behind Him (as he taught Peter, Mth 16:23), looking at Him, appropriating for oneself His fundamental attitudes of unconditional self-giving, capturing His foundational poverty, His self-denial, emptying of himself in love for the benefit of all. (Flp 2:5-11)

To follow Jesus it is not a question of doing the same works he did, but to enter into His dynamism of unconditional self-denial for the well being of others, and all because of His love to the Father. Fr. Claret understood it very well:

*To imitate Jesus Christ, the apostolic missionary has to start by doing and practicing what he is going to teach later. Coepit facere et docere. So that with his works he can say with the Apostle: Imitate me, like I imitate Christ. Imitatores mei estote, sicut et ego Christi.*³

Mother Maria Antonia, whose heart was in love with the beauty of Jesus Christ, teacher and Crucified Lord, said too:

*As soon as I knew God, He taught me what perfection is all about. What a perfect mortification! What wonderful self-denial! What perfect love to the Crucified Lord! All I desired was the Holy Cross and to live and die crucified with Christ. Me enseñó Dios lo más acendrado de la perfección tan pronto como le conocí; ¡qué mortificación tan perfecta! ¡qué abnegación tan cabal! ... ¡qué amor más puro e intenso a Cristo crucificado!. Todos mis deseos eran la Santa cruz y el vivir y morir crucificada con Cristo.*⁴

Mother Maria Antonia was opened to let Christ's love for His church to take root in her heart; she accepted to suffer with Christ for His body, the Church. She received from Christ the invitation to share in His own self-giving for the Church.

³ Aut. PC # 340.

⁴ "Recuerdos y Notas" # 1, *Escritos*, p. 189. De aquí en adelante RN

September 3 of the same year (1859), while in prayer, the Lord told me that he wanted to espouse me with the Church. I answered: Lord I am already espoused to You through the religious vows. Then he made me understand that He wanted it to be a singular betrothal. 3 de septiembre del mismo año (1859) estando en oración díjome su Divina Majestad aún quiero desposarte con mi Iglesia, dije yo “Señor yo estoy desposada con Vos por los votos religiosos” entonces me hizo entender que quería un desposorio singular.⁵

The love to Christ permeates Mother Maria Antonia being, *to follow Christ our highest good* is the motivation of her whole life, it directs all her aims and endeavors.⁶

To try to be like Christ requires adhering to Him through an unconditional following; our Founders lived and recommended the virtues they themselves practiced confident those virtues were the best way to work their configuration with the Lord. The work for acquiring virtues is not because of the value per se of the virtue but the desire to become configured with Christ. Mother Maria Antonia configuration with Christ was made gradually, as she entered in a deeper relational experience with Christ, her being and her doing became more and more the manner of responding to the graces she received while sharing with others what she was becoming. Whatever experiences and situations come into her life became an opportunity to be more Christ like. Her spirituality was nurtured by the strength and consolation received from the Spirit.

... I always felt encouraged to suffer, because God has given me such a love for my Holy Mother the Church, that even if it would cost my life (and though I might have one thousand lives) if I could return peace to her, with great love I would suffer the most painful torments, even if I would suffer them until the end of the world. ...me animaba mucho a padecer, porque Dios nuestro Señor me ha dado un amor tan grande a mi Santa Madre Iglesia, que si a costa de mi vida (y aunque tuviera mil) pudiera yo restituírle la paz, con grandísimo amor sufriría los más crueles tormentos, aunque fuera hasta el fin del mundo.⁷

The intimacy held between Mother Maria Antonia and Christ was of such density that she would say: *It seems to me it is impossible for a creature to live in this life such an intimacy with God. Me parece imposible poder vivir una criatura en esta miserable vida tan íntima comunicación con Dios.*⁸

⁵ “Diario” # 41. *Escritos* p. 240. Leer la nota no. 135 sobre este punto que explica la espiritualidad eminentemente eclesial de M. María Antonia.

⁶ Constituciones Misioneras Claretianas, *Blanco y Fin*, 3. De aquí en adelante Const.

⁷ *Aut. MP* # 35, *Escritos*, p. 72-73.

⁸ *Aut. MP* # 48. *Escritos*, p. 243.

There was a time in Mother Maria Antonia life when she lived this intimacy in a very particular way. She felt the relationship she maintained with Christ was such as the relationship existing between two friends, they both look for opportunities and times to be alone to share their inner thoughts, feelings, desires, worries, plans, and projects. Those were the times when Christ opened her eyes to see the situation lived by the Church, and how much she needed reformation/renewal.⁹

In their ongoing configuration with Christ our founders realized that the Beatitudes proclaimed by Christ in the mountain sermon (Mt 5:1-7,29) were the program they were asked to appropriate in their life.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, the Kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Blessed at the gentle, they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who mourn, they shall be comforted.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, that shall have their fill.

Blessed are the merciful, they shall have mercy shown to them.

Blessed are the pure of heart, they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called sons and daughters of God.

Blessed are those are persecuted in the cause of justice, the Kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Blessed are you when you people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. (Mth 5:3-11)

The beatitudes are an expression of who Jesus is. Jesus proclaims the beatitudes as the “constitution” of the New People of God; He introduces them as the lifestyle to be followed by anyone who would like to enter and be a part of the Kingdom. Jesus lived them first, He is the meek, the humble, the poor, the persecuted, and He is entitled to ask His followers to adopt them if they want to be His disciples. Our Founders, Mother Maria Antonia y Fr. Claret took the beatitudes as the road to be walked in their progressive configuration with Christ. They made of the beatitudes their personal life project.

It was the Spirit who guided Mother Maria Antonia and Fr. Claret to discover and be in love with Christ, poor, dispossessed of everything and of any one. They understood existentially that Christ’s poverty had its roots in His divine sonship. He left the Father to bring about the salvation of humankind; Jesus did it because of his unconditional obediential-love to the Father (Flp 2:6-8). It is precisely His being totally and absolutely for the Father what makes Christ be

⁹ Aut. MP # 48. *Escritos*, p. 243

the man-for-others, He is the Beloved Son who gives himself in unreserved love for the salvation of all, a love that ends giving his life, and in giving His life, He gives the Spirit that unites Him to the Father in perennial communion of love. It is this same Spirit that is poured into the hearts of all who welcome in faith and in love Christ's self-giving. Jesus, the Beloved Son of the Father, has always his eyes fixed on the Father, Jesus nourishes himself from the words that come from the Father, he does what he sees the Father do, He loves with the Father's love (Jo 5:19-20). In this loving dynamism centered in the Father Jesus loves humanity as brothers and sisters. Jesus, the Incarnated Word, became one of us to bring us the Father's loving kindness, mercifulness, and faithfulness. Our Founders discovered their own sonship in Christ; they experienced God's love for them to the extent that in many occasions they felt the Lord was calling them: (Antonio) my beloved son, (Antonia) my beloved daughter. As they experienced their being the daughter/son of God, they came across with the reality that they had many brothers and sisters; they all were beloved children in God's family.

Mother Maria Antonia and Fr. Claret experienced Christ as being the poor par excellence, and if for Christ poverty was an expression of his total dependence on the Father, and of his being-for-others, than our Founders came to realize that their being daughter and son of God meant to be poor like Christ, and like him be servants-for-others. Poverty was the virtue they embraced and put into practice inviting their followers to do the same.

In a letter Fr. Claret addressed to Mother Maria Antonia, he tells her that what God wants of them is to give a public witness of poverty by living it fully.

*In reference to holy poverty I know very well what the Church canons say and what is mandated by the laws of the King, but this for what is common and ordinary. What happens with us is an exceptional case that God wants ... God wants a public witness be given in favor of holy poverty ... poverty has to be all in all, it is the virtue most loved by Jesus and Mary. Respecto a la santa pobreza sé muy bien lo que está dispuesto por los sagrados cánones de la Iglesia y lo que está mandado por las leyes del reino, pero esto por lo común y ordinario. Más lo que pasa en nosotros es un caso excepcional que Dios quiere... Dios quiere que se dé un público testimonio en favor de la pobreza. ... que reine en todo y por todo la santa pobreza, que es la virtud más amada de Jesús y de María.*¹⁰

Why the virtue of poverty and not any other virtue? The answer is very simple: Because Jesus Nazareth was poor and they wanted to be like him. Jesus lived dispossessed of anything that was not God's will; his personal identity was to live depending unconditionally from the Father, in a wholehearted self-giving of His divine sonship, in total kenosis, and this only to

¹⁰ CO 213, 30 de enero de 1862.

show us with his own life, and not only with words, that the only thing that is important is to accept unreservedly the poverty of depending for everything and in anything from the Father who has given us life. Only accepting this poverty of being creatures of God, created in his own image, all the possessions of the earth will be given to us. The treasure we are called to encounter is that we are sons and daughters of God, and for this sonship to put down everything else.

For our founders poverty was a way of their ongoing configuration with Christ, the man-for-others, deprived of all things and of all, in doing so, Christ gave witness that he was only for the Father and that His family was humankind. In Christ's footsteps our Founders took upon them to let it go of everything and of their own self, they freely chose to live in a radical dependency from the Father, giving themselves to the task and mission they were entrusted with, trusting the Spirit would work on them the same way he had worked on Christ. Material poverty was not an end in itself, it was the translation of their fundamental attitude of self-giving in service to the Kingdom. They lived poverty as Christ did, having their trust in the Father (Lk 12:22-34). The gospels tell the story of an itinerant Jesus, teaching about the Kingdom of God, a man who had nothing, no possessions whatsoever. The son of man has nowhere to place his head. (Mth 8:20)

Poverty in Mother Maria Antonia is the core of his ongoing christification, configuration with Christ. Just at the start point of her call to found a New Order, the Lord showed her the value of poverty as an essential element for the reformation of the Church. To be poor, living in poverty was something connatural to Mother Maria Antonia's being. She drinks from the Crucified Lord the radical and absolute poverty of the Son who hangs from the tree, in a complete loneliness, abandoned by the Father and the disciples. Gazing at the poverty of the Crucified is something that makes us to shiver (Mc 14:50), Peter had denied him (Lk 22:54-62), all have abandoned Him. Though the gospel of John presents the mother and the beloved disciple at the feet of the Crucified, He asks of his mother, the woman, to take the beloved disciple as her own son (Jo 19:25-27). He disposes himself of any human love and attachments, and all because Christ loves us, with a real love, a love that is shown in the giving of himself, it is a love whose outcome in the salvation of humankind. The Crucified is the Christ-Teacher, poor, suffering, lover, who seats at the throne of the cross and teaches Mother Maria Antonia how to live and be effective from the cross, even to her, through suffering, persecution and misunderstanding.

Mother Maria Antonia considers poverty as her only possession. *My only possession is poverty. Mis bienes son la pobreza.*¹¹ The reason for her living in such total self-emptiness is to become identified with Christ. *The virtue of poverty has to be set as a seal in our hearts; it is the first lesson and last testament of our Redeemer and also of His beloved Mother. Esta virtud de la*

¹¹ M. Antonia to Fr. Currius, letter November 18, 1875.

*pobreza debe estar grabada en nuestros corazones como primera lección y último testamento de nuestro Redentor y de su Santísima Madre.*¹²

Living in poverty for Mother Maria Antonia is not just a lack of possessions. She lives poverty from the very center of her being, she sees herself as nothing, as one who has received everything, her whole being hangs upon the Lord, she had a lived experience of the beatitude proclaimed by Jesus *Blessed are the poor*, those who acknowledge themselves as in total dependence of God's will, those who put themselves under God's protection and expect everything from Him.¹³

Poverty in Mother Maria Antonia's thought and spirituality is basic for the Gospel to be announced and received. *Poverty is the key that opens the hearts of the people. La pobreza es la llave maestra que abre los corazones.*¹⁴ She ends the account of the initial vision with an annotation on poverty. *From the moment of this vision, I have a great love for evangelical poverty (I already loved it before), because Our Lord told me that Holy Poverty would have to be the foundation of His new apostles, and that because this virtue was not observed, religion had plummeted. Desde esta visión tengo mucho amor a la pobreza evangélica (ya la amaba mucho antes), porque me dijo Nuestro Señor que la Santa Pobreza había de ser el fundamento de sus nuevos Apóstoles, y que por la falta de esta santa virtud ha venido a tierra toda la Religión.*¹⁵

On his part, Fr. Claret, from the very beginning of accepting the call to be a priest, he freely chose to live poor as Jesus himself lived in poverty.

*I always remembered that Jesus had become poor Himself; he chose to be born, to live and to die in the utmost poverty. I thought of how Mary, too, had always wanted to be poor. And I thought, too, of how the Apostles left everything to follow Jesus Christ. Sometimes the Lord made me feel the pinch of poverty but only for a short time. Then He would console me with whatever I needed, and the joy I experienced in feeling poverty was so great that the rich could never enjoy all their riches as much as I enjoyed my beloved poverty.*¹⁶

The zeal for the salvation of his contemporaries takes Fr. Claret to study the situation of the society of his time. He clearly sees that the possessions, honors, desire of having each time more and more, have hardened and dried the heart of the persons; they have forgotten the

¹² Constitutions 1870, cap. XL, 11.

¹³ M. Maria Antonia in the Constitutions of 1862 says that to live in poverty has as only goal to imitate Christ. *Great has to be this virtue when the Lord set it as the first in his sermon at the mountain when he said: Blesses are the poor in spirit, theirs is God's Kingdom* (Const. de 1862, Capítulo 2, 1).

¹⁴ Cf. Const. 1869, Trat. I, cap. 2, n. 84.

¹⁵ Aut. MP # 11. *Escritos*, p. 61.

¹⁶ Aut.PC # 363.

teachings of the gospel. He sees poverty as the only answer to this situation; one has to live poor, with no desire to have any possessions, just dispossessed of everything and of all. One has to have the heart in the Father, just as Jesus did.¹⁷ Fr. Claret did not have anything: *I had nothing, wanted nothing, and refused everything.*¹⁸ His contemplation and study of the gospels ingrained in him a desire to live like Jesus, letting the Spirit work in him his gradual configuration with Christ.

*I knew that people were deeply impressed by this detachment, and for that reason I was determined to maintain the position I had taken. To encourage myself, I would recall Christ's teaching on the matter and meditate on it constantly, especially those words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.... If you would be perfect, go, sell what you have, give it to the poor and come, follow me.... No one can be my disciple unless he renounces all things."*¹⁹ To live with simplicity, as a poor, is an essential instrument for those who are to proclaim the gospel if the gospel is to be accepted.

Our founders lived poverty in an obediential attitude to the Father, as Jesus himself did (Heb 5,7-8). The Instruction of the Congregation for the Consecrated Life, "The serviced of authority and obedience,"²⁰ speaks of Jesus on these terms, and so does the gospel according to St. John (cf. Jn 8:28-29); "Jesus of Nazareth did what the Word did from the beginning of creation. Jesus embraced unconditionally the Father's love and did always the Father's will. His food was to do his Father's will (Jn 4:34), in so doing Jesus obtained for us resurrection, abundance of life, and to live in the heart of the Father (cf. Jn 1:12). Jesus obedience obtains justification for all (Rm 5:19)."²¹ Obedience is not humiliation but the truth upon which the very being of men and women is accomplished. The believer desires to do the Father's will, in the footsteps of Jesus, the believer wants to live from this will. Imitating Christ and learning from Him, the consecrated person freely and trustingly gives oneself into the hands of the Father, offering a perfect sacrifice (cf. Rom 12:1). Our founders understood it perfectly. Their apostolic spirituality can only be understood as obediential spirituality, an obedience that brought them freedom; it is in their being obedient to the Father that they found their joy.

In Mother Maria Antonia we discover that she lived obedience as a concrete form of following Jesus Christ. She learned obedience at the feet of the Crucified Lord, in living an intimate relationship with Him; like Jesus, her unique desire was to do the Father's will. Once she knew the Father's will, she gave herself unreservedly to accomplish it.

¹⁷ Ibid., # 356. (en los números 357-364).

¹⁸ Ibid., # 357.

¹⁹ Ibid., # 362.

²⁰ *El Servicio de la autoridad y obediencia*, Instrucción de la Congregación para los Institutos de Vida Consagrada y las Sociedades de Vida Apostólica, dada en Roma el 11 de Mayo del 2008.

²¹ Ibid., # 8

God has given me this determination, in knowing what is God's will there is not obstacle that I cannot surmount.²² From the very beginning of my serving the Lord, I have had in front of my eyes my Lord, I always was sure that He was by side sustaining me.²³

We have already said that the Crucified Lord was Mother Maria Antonia's teacher, at the feet of the Crucified Lord she learned, as a loving disciple, to obey and to follow God's plan for her. As Jesus, she learned what obedience was all about in the midst of suffering, trusting always that she was being guided by the Spirit guiding the Lord in the cross. She refused to write the graces received from the Lord, and she finally did it in obedience to the mandate of her confessor.

It is not easy to obey to God. We know by Mother Maria Antonia writings that she always wanted to consecrate her life to God as a religious with solemn vows, and we know that when her desire was about to be accomplished, she had to face a hard decision: to leave the convent in order to be free to start the New Order the Lord had told her to begin. She had to decide and take action, to stay in the convent, or to forget about God's plan. Risking everything, obeying the Spirit, she abandoned the convent, Mother Maria Antonia had to die to her inner desires of consecrating herself to the Lord and move on, with no warranty whatsoever, just trusting that the Lord would carry out His will in due time. She lived a blind obedience, a crucifying obedience, a dark obedience, hoping against hope that what the Lord wanted and had told her would be accomplished in due time. Her role in the matter was to obey, to trust, to find support in the God who gave her the strength to follow a path she did not know, a path she had to walk in total darkness. And her obedience was fruitful. God was writing our own story through the sonship obedience of Mother Maria Antonia. At this moment of her life she found herself alone, her confessor did not dare to give her a word of advice; they seek advice from a wise priest, who did not dare to give any advice on the matter. They wrote to Fr. Claret to Cuba, and no answer is given to her. She received Word from the Lord neither. What to do? Mother Maria Antonia in her Writings says: *the Lord wanted to test me to the fullest of my affliction.*²⁴ Mother Antonia interpreted God's silence as been put to test by Him. She accepted His silence: *Lord, be done to me according to your will.*²⁵

If we move now to see Fr. Claret, we come to know that he always wanted to obey his immediate superiors. The fire of the gospel was burning in his heart with the same strength that burned in the heart of the prophets (Jer 15:16c, 20:9; Am 3:8), and yet, he did not go to

²² Aut. MP # 7. *Escritos*, p. 59.

²³ Aut. MP # 135. *Escritos*, pp. 118-119,

²⁴ Aut. MP # 100. *Escritos*, p. 104.

²⁵ Aut. MP # 106. *Escritos*, p. 107.

any place if his Bishop did not bless and send him in mission. As Jesus, the Word existing in the Trinity, offered himself to be sent in mission for the salvation of humanity, so, the missionary has to offered himself and wait to be sent.

This need for being sent to a particular place by a bishop was something that God himself helped me understand from the very beginning. Thus, no matter how evil and demoralized the towns I was sent to, great fruits were always obtained, because it was God who sent me to them and prepared them and predisposed them for me. Missionaries may rest assured, then, that they should go to no town, however good, unless they go under obedience; but that under obedience they should not hesitate to go to any town, however bad. As far as any possible difficulties or persecutions are concerned, let have no fear: God has sent them through obedience and He will take care of them. .²⁶

Their communion with Christ was progressive. The communion Mother Maria Antonia and Fr. Claret enjoyed with Christ, they wanted to be a reality for all those who would follow their charisma. They were given the charisma to be founders of religious families who would witness with their lifestyle a life of communion, poverty, and obedience, so they could freely proclaim the good news of the gospel. Mother Maria Antonia understood it clearly when she expressed her deep desire: *Charity makes us to be a family, with one heart, as the Lord wants from us.*²⁷ In the Constitutions of 1869 she wrote that *the Institute had to have as only foundation a perfect charity and harmony living as members of the same one body.*²⁸

Fr. Claret had the same understanding of the Lord wishes; he sought men with the same ideal and same charisma he had received from the Spirit. He looked for and engrained in other diocesan priests to give themselves to preaching in villages and places where they would be sent. In so doing, Fr. Claret gave birth to the Congregation of the Sons of the Heart of Mary (CMF). When named Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, though he did not want to accept this nomination, he did in obedience to his superiors, Fr. Claret had to abandon the project trusting the Divine Providence would take care of the incipient community. In Cuba, Fr. Claret established with his coworkers a family; all of them had the same ideal: the evangelization of

²⁶ Aut. PC # 198.

²⁷ Carta de M. Antonia al Obispo de Cuba el 30-9-1877. Esta afirmación también se encuentra en el Testamento espiritual de M. Antonia. (*Escritos*, pp717-718).

²⁸ En las Constituciones de 1869, Tratado Primero, capítulo 1, n. 1, M. Antonia pone a la base de esta Orden Nueva el principio de la comunión entre todos sus miembros.

the island and the reformation of the local church. Fr. Lozano says that Fr. Claret thought it was necessary to live in community in order to be able to become brothers with the same spirit.²⁹

Finally, the paper guides us to enter into a contemplative and reflective mode on who was the Christ who subjugated the hearts of our Founders. It is Christ, the Crucified, the persecuted, the slandered, the one whose love was so powerful that prompted Him to give his life unconditionally. It is the Christ who gave of himself completely and unconditionally, and who continues to give of himself in the Eucharist, in the Bread and the Wine, for our nourishment, to be our food, food for the salvation of humanity. Both of our Founders, Mother Maria Antonia and Fr. Claret received the extraordinary grace to have in their heart the eucharistized Lord for days, in Mother Maria Antonia, and indefinitely in Fr. Claret.

Conclusion. At the end of this unassuming presentation on the Christological experience of Mother Maria Antonia Paris and Fr. Claret, we come to affirm that the center of their spirituality is their undivided love of being rooted in Christ; a love with which they were gifted, a love they encounter in their heart, a love they accepted unreservedly. They received the revelation of who Christ was, as it happen with Saint Paul, it was a freely given revelation, rooted in their heart before they were conceived in their mothers' womb, even before they were born, they had been chosen to be bearers of the gospel, heralds of the Word made flesh in them.

In our Founders there is an intrinsic union between their being and their doing. When Mother Maria Antonia requires her daughters (us) to unite work and contemplation, she does it not because she might have been influenced by the charisma of St. Ignatius of Loyola, but because this recommendation comes forth from the bottom of her whole being, it comes from who she is. In her contemplating the Crucified Lord, the expression of the unconditional and mysterious love of the Father for humankind, Mother Maria Antonia received and was nurtured into a love for the Church and humanity. The heart of Jesus Christ made his tent in the heart of Mother Maria Antonia, and in her, He continued to suffer for his body, the Church.

The apostolic dimension in our Founders, Mother Maria Antonia and Fr. Claret is a consequence of their living in Christ. It is not possible to separate in Mother Maria Antonia what identifies her as a person, and her being called by the Lord to establish in the Church a new Order, new not in theory but in practice, that is, an Order distinguished by living fully the radicalism the gospel. Her work comes from her being, and her being nurtures her work.

²⁹J. M. Lozano. *Una Vida al Servicio del Evangelio. Antonio María Claret*. Barcelona: Editorial Claret, 1985p p. 224-229.

Mother Maria Antonia suffers with Christ and in Christ for his body the Church. She answers the call she receives from the Lord by giving of herself unconditionally, she risks her life, and let aside her dreams. She abandons herself in an obediencial faith to the will of the Father revealed to her in the Crucified Lord. Her love for the Church is a sharing in the love of Christ for his Church; it is this love for the Church that constitutes her being apostle, her being Foundress of a new Order whose only aim will be expressed in the living and experiencing Christ, the one whose life is-being-for-others.

The love Mother Maria Antonia has for poverty is just an expression of her love to Jesus, the Crucified. Her only possession is the poverty of her Lord, and it is from within this experience of radical and unconditional poverty that she lived in total abandonment, trusting in He who called her day by day to live in His footsteps. To be poor is to live life in self-giving, holding to nothing or to anybody. Mother Maria Antonia became day by day poor, obedient, by contemplating the Crucified Lord. She was the disciple seating at the feet of the Teacher, opening her heart to His teaching, to His corrections, to His love, ... Knowing the will of the Lord there is not obstacle that she could not overcome. She kept in her humble heart the graces she received from the Lord. Her intimacy with Jesus Christ was something so sacred to her that when her confessor asked her to put them in writing, she resisted. She overcame her natural repugnance to do so when the confessor asked her to do it in obedience to his mandate.

Her love to the Lord was nurtured contemplating the Crucified Lord, the Teacher that teaches His disciple from the cross; and continued to be nurtured by the Lord through His presence in the Eucharist. The Eucharist was for Mother Maria Antonia the sacrament of love, in the Eucharist the Lord continues to journey with His Church, accompanying his disciples in the road. In the Eucharist Mother Maria Antonia received the strength needed to follow the road walked by Christ. It was in the Cross and in the Eucharist that she learned and lived the gentleness and lowliness lived and taught by Christ.

Mother Maria Antonia is a woman who lives the beatitudes proclaimed by Jesus in the mount (Mth 5,1ff). She lives them because they have been impressed in her heart when in a vision the Lord gave her the knowledge of the Scriptures. She lives the New and Eternal Covenant; she does not need anybody to teach about God's covenant because God himself has sealed it in her heart.

The sisterly fraternity Mother Maria Antonia wanted all her daughters to live, was the outcome of her living in Christ. As Christ lives in the Father in communion with the Holy Spirit, so Mother Maria Antonia glimpsed that love would be the knot knitting together those who

were going to be called to live in this family. Fraternal communion expressed not only in the sharing of common goods, but in the sharing of personal talents, possibilities, joys, sorrows, health, sickness, ... The sisters' life in communion would be the sign of the Church's communion.

A final Word. We have come to the end of this summary. Now we introduce some questions that may help the reading and the personal reflection of what we have been sharing until this moment.

- Our Founders lives deeply-rooted in Christ Jesus, where do I have the foundation/center of my life?
- To live configured with Christ is to live in fraternal communion, how do I live communion in my community?
- Christ was always the center of our Founders heart/desire, who is in the center of my heart? What dwells in my heart: discouragement, frustration, resentment, emptiness?
- Is it my deepest-desire to be configured with Christ? Do I let the Spirit to work on me such configuration?
- Take time to make a memorial of my personal encounter with Christ, and how have I been growing in intimacy with him all my life long until the present moment.

To the Glory of God and His Blessed Mother