

FOUNDRESS

Maria Antonia Paris, a woman, whose life and holiness helped enlighten the Church of the XIX century. Her spiritual legacy is vibrant today and has become a life giving message for many men and women who continue the work she began. Today too, the Claretian Missionary Sisters, keep alive in the Church her spirituality and mission.



Her Life

Maria Antonia was born, on the 28th day of June, 1813, in a small town called Vallmoll, near the northern Mediterranean coast of Spain. Her mother fled from Tarragona to Valmoll, trying to escape from the French invasion under the direction of Napoleon. The newborn baby was baptized there, the day after her birth, at Our Lady of the Assumption Parish. We do not know a lot about her childhood. Her father was a farmer and died three months before she was born. Her mother sought to provide her two daughters (Teresa and Antonia) a good education in Christian family setting, Antonia made her first communion when she was 9 years old.

In her writings, we find scarce references to her childhood and adolescence. At an early age, she felt drawn to prayer. She was 13 or 14 years of age when a franciscan mission was preached at her parish, and it had such an impact on her that she decided to dedicate her life to God. She begins to practice a life of penance and sacrifice, which begin to affect her health. Her goal in life is to please God and do always his will.

Called by God

In generous openness to God's plan for her, Maria Antonia feels that God is calling her to consecrate her whole life to his service. On October 23, 1841, she enters as a Postulant in the Company of Mary, a community dedicated to prayer and education. At this time the Church of Spain was under persecution by the government. In an attempt to diminish the strength of Religious Orders, the government issued a prohibition to admit Novices. For this reason, Antonia had to remain as Postulant for nine years. Finally on April 21 of 1850, she was able to begin her Novitiate. Yet, God seemed to have other plans for her.

Foundress of a New Order

Since 1842, while Antonia was still a Postulant, the Lord began to unveil that he had a special mission for her in the Church. She had constantly prayed for

the situation of persecution the Church was experiencing in Spain. To her surprise, God led her to understand that the ultimate cause of all these troubles did not lie in the governments, but in the Church's lack of faithfulness to the Gospel. God wanted the Church and religious orders within it, to return to the lifestyle of the apostles. Governments opposed the Church because they coveted the power and possessions the Church had accumulated over centuries.

After being confronted with this challenge, filled with the desire to live the Gospel with utmost radicalness, she asks God: "How will this be?... by any chance my Lord and my God, do you want something new?" The Lord responded: "A new order I want, not new in its doctrine, but in its practice." This question, she affirms, came from a Heart determined to do God's will at whatever cost with absolute trust in God's providential guidance. Faced with such difficult enterprise, Antonia comes to understand that God does not want her to go about it alone. Antonio Maria Claret, a missionary priest who is well known in northern Spain, will be the one to help her. They meet in 1850, and after listening to her, Claret agrees to support her in this project, which he sees as coming from God. He has just recently founded an order of missionary priests with a similar mission: the Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, known today as the Claretian Missionaries.

Months later, after a painful discernment, she decides to leave the Company of Mary in the midst of great confusion, since Claret has just been named Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba. From Cuba he invites her to start the new order there, in this new world with so many needs. On February 22, 1852, she leaves for Cuba with other young women that decided to join her in the adventure of crossing the Atlantic to begin a new order.

Claret's missionary insight coupled with Maria Antonia's desire for a life of radical faithfulness to the Gospel converge into a new form of religious life in the Church. Both founders see the need for renewal in all aspects of the Church, and they begin to design guidelines for this renewal. The new order will be an essential element in this work of renewal through their life and work of evangelization. Antonia goes as far as sending the Pope, Pius IX, a draft of her vision of renewal for the Church. She understands that the Church's renewal is rooted in a life of simplicity, joyful poverty, community, prayer and tireless proclamation of the Gospel. One hundred years later, the Second Vatican Council will speak in similar terms about the renewal of the Church.

On August 25, 1855 the new order is officially founded in Santiago de Cuba, and today is known as Religious of Mary Immaculate Claretian Missionary Sisters. Soon new communities spring up in Spain, and the order continues to spread until our days. It is present in AMERICA: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Salvador, Venezuela, USA. EUROPE: Belgium, Italy, Poland, Spain, Ukraine. AFRICA: Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Nigeria. In ASIA: India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Timor Leste.

Moved by the Spirit, the Claretian Missionary Sisters are dedicated to the evangelization of all peoples, as Claret would say seeking to respond “to the most urgent needs in the most efficient ways.” Claretian Sisters have been called to unite action and contemplation. Their missionary activity springs from a daily encounter with the Lord in prayer, and finds its support in a life of community, of which Antonia Paris spoke in terms of a family, after the example of the early Church: “Charity makes us a family with a single Heart:”

From the beginning of the Institute, Mary has been mother, friend and model to the Claretian Sisters. Mary, who lived in contemplative openness to Spirit, allowing the Word to become flesh in her to bring Jesus to us, inspires the Claretian Sister to live in continuous conversion as she shared the Word with others. As its patroness, the community takes Mary in the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. This mystery impels them to struggle against all forms of evil present in society.

Called to work tirelessly to spread the Good News of Jesus, Claretian Missionary Sisters concentrate their effort in

- >Christian education
- >Missionary work amongst the poorest
- >Pastoral ministry at diocesan and parish level with youth, families and children
- >Catechetical and liturgical ministry
- >Migrant ministry
- >Work with consecrated people and in the formation of priests

The life and message of Maria Antonia Paris is a gift for the Church, and a guide to every Christian who wants to follow Jesus more faithfully and continue his work, responding to the challenges of our time.

The Church solemnly proclaimed her heroic virtues on December 23, 1993. Her remains rest in the chapel crypt our house in Reus, Spain, where she died.