

Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Poor

by Clara Estela Sánchez Olivás

Servant of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Poor

“Let us speak about Saints to forge Saints”.

SAN JOSÉ MARÍA DE YERMO Y PARRES



St Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres

San Jose Maria Yermo Parres knew how to live his life. He understood that Holiness is a life long task. The saints teach us that it is possible to live the Gospel fully, and that the message of Jesus is current and demanding today. Father Yermo, a Mexican priest, forged his holiness in the service of the poor under the charism of St. Vincent De Paul.

The spirit of Vincent entered Jose Maria's soul as a young child. The priests of the Congregation of the Mission, known as "paules" served in the parish of St. John of God, near the house where Jose Maria was born. Fr. Vincent

Andrade was a good friend of Jose Maria's family. Fr. Andrade writes: "I remember quite well around the year 1860 when many times I saw Dr. Manuel de Yermo, Jose Marias's father, his aunt Carmen, and little Jose attend daily the early Eucharist which was celebrated in St. John of God parish."¹

¹ Testimony of Canon Vicente de P. Andrade, Mexico, November 30, 1904, APY, Doc. 4848/61, cit. in *Posito Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, p. 118.

Jose Maria probably learned about St. Vincent from these good priests. Undoubtedly very early on in his life he saw the image of Vincent with a tender and compassionate heart, who not only was moved by the poor, but also saw in them the face of Christ. That image penetrated his heart and, as soft rain, grew in him a love for the poor and a desire to become a priest.

St. Vincent was there, the foundation of everything that Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres did in his service to the poor during his whole life. When Fr. Jose Maria died Fr. Javier de Irazabal said about him in a letter: "Tomorrow we come to the end of nine days of mourning for all of us who knew the distinguished gentleman, wise and heroic present-day Vincent de Paul, the presbyter Don Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres."²

Who is Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres?

He was born November 1, 1851 in Jalmolonga, the State of Mexico, the son of Dr. Manuel de Yermo y Parres, and Mrs. Josefa Parres de Yermo. The Yermos trace their roots to the Mountains of Burgos in Spain. They came to the new world in the 17th Century preserving their noble lineage.

Josefa, his mother, died just fifty days after he was born. His father returned to Mexico City and asked his sister Carmen to take care of little Jose Maria. Despite being an orphan, he received all the tenderness and discipline which characterized the Yermo family.

Jose Maria learned from his aunt Carmen, from his father, and from his grandmother what it means to be a committed Christian without fanaticism. It was in the family where those two great loves of his were grounded and which would last his whole life: his great love for God, and the service of the poor.

His first education came from private teachers and later on in private schools. In 1864 he received from Emperor Maximilian a medal of honor as a distinguished alumni. During these early educational years he became a friend of Juan de Dios Peza, the distinguished Mexican poet. They were friends all their lives. When Jose Maria died, Peza wrote: "We were intimate friends since we were twelve years old and our friendship lasted for forty years without any interruption."

He entered the Congregation of the Mission when he was fifteen years old. His contemporaries in the community speak about his virtues.

² Letter of Javier de Irazabal, Atlixco, September 28, 1940, APY, Doc. 2858/33, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. II, p. 1599.

One of them, Carlos Jesus de Mejia, Bishop of Tehuantepec, says about him "The time we lived in the house of La Valenciana, Guanajuato, Yermo was the youngest of the novices, and despite his physical weakness he was very observant of the rule. He would get up every day at four o'clock in the morning for morning prayers and the Eucharist, always prayerful and devoted. Besides his natural talents, he had a great dedication to the study of the Scriptures. All the teachers loved him, because in him one could see those virtues and education which he received from his parents. His demeanor was elegant, but at the same time simple and kind which always inspired trust and love.... He was a friend to everybody and always ready to serve all....

There was always somebody who would try to mortify him as often happens with those who stand up. On one occasion he gave us a great example of humility and obedience. There was a novice who had a very bad character. He was given the task by the Master of Novices to assign jobs to the other novices. One day he asked Jose Maria to carry several heavy water jars for a number of hours. When he thought he had finished his job, Jose Maria let it be known that he was tired. The novice in charge, knowing that Yermo had a weak constitution and could not do much physical work, ordered him to carry the water jars all over again saying: 'Now you will get your body used to mortification.' All of us who witnessed that felt angry and we wanted to help Yermo, but he would not allow it saying: 'No, I am glad, because this is what the Lord is asking me to do, and I want to do His will no matter how much it costs.'³

Yermo came to the Congregation of the Mission in 1867, the same year that Maximilian ordered the execution of Benito Juarez on Las Campanas hill, in Queretaro. These were hard days for Mexico. The Reform Laws were strictly implemented. These circumstances were not favorable to any religious congregation. The Vincentians, as many other religious orders, suffered persecutions, expropriations, and exile of many of its members.

Yermo professed vows in the chapel of the Our Lady of Carmel in Toluca, November 10, 1869 at eighteen years of age.

After his profession, the superiors, knowing that he had qualities for further study, sent him to the Mother House in Paris where he would continue his studies. In the little time he was there, all saw in him a virtuous, pious, religious and very studious person. When he returned to Mexico in 1870 he participated with great enthusiasm in the Vincentian missions of the province. Father Vicente Andrade says

³ Testimony of Bishop Carlos de Jesus Mejía, APY, Doc. 4807/61, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, p. 116.

of him: "I was privileged to go on missions with young Yermo, then in Minor Orders. We all admired his great work in catechesis and preaching. We knew that his health was not good, to the point that many of us thought that he would not live long."⁴

Added to his poor health, he suffered at that time a vocational crisis. He decided to return to his family home, when he realized that this was not his vocation. It was with great pain he decided to leave the Congregation of the Mission. Undoubtedly, the difficult situation in Mexico at that time influenced his decision. Yermo separated himself from the Congregation of the Mission, but he was never separated from the spirit of Vincent. In his heart the flame of being a priest in the service of the poor burned constantly.

With the advice of a good friend, Father Miguel Arizmendi, and with the approval of the Bishop, Jose Maria Diez de Sollano y Dávalos who was his uncle, he entered the seminary of Leon, Guanajuato. There he continued his priestly formation and was ordained a priest in the Guanajuato cathedral in August 1879.

He was given several important positions in the Chancery. He was seen by many with a very promising ecclesiastical career.

After Bishop Diez de Sollano died, the new Bishop showed a certain animosity towards the chancery work of Yermo, and asked him to serve as chaplain to a couple of chapels nearby. At the beginning Yermo resisted this sudden and unjust change in his ministry; but in prayer soon discovered God's will and a new pathway in the service of the poor.

One day, crossing the river on his way to the El Calvario chapel, he saw several pigs eating the remains of two little babies.

He was shocked and deeply affected. Before his eyes he saw clearly the terrible situation which Mexico was going through: illiteracy, misery, marginalization, ignorance, the exploitation of women. He felt in his heart that he needed to do something.

The Birth of the Congregation of the Servants of the Sacred Heart and of the Poor

Near the chapel of El Calvario a retreat house was being constructed. Yermo, knowing that God was calling him to do something special to serve the poor, asked that this retreat house be converted into an asylum for the poor. And so, on December 13, 1885, with the help of four enthusiastic young women, the asylum

⁴ Testimony of Canon Vicente de P. Andrade, Mexico City, November 30, 1904, APY, Doc. 4848/61, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, p. 118.

was opened. The first poor to come presented a difficult situation since they were men and women, young and old. The building was very simple, but Father Yermo did his best to make of the building a dignified place for the poor.

These four women, and other women who later joined them, desired to be called sisters, and to wear a habit. Little by little Father Yermo realized that a new religious congregation was emerging.

In 1888 they asked him to found another asylum for seniors in Puebla. Then he realized that this new emerging religious community needed structures. He named Mother Conception G. Quevedo, Superior General, and he thought about giving the community a name. Everybody agreed on *Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Poor*. This name would define the mission of the congregation.

The same year the city of Guanajuato suffered a great flood which reached even to the lands of Bajío. Father Yermo was present there helping people. In the words of the local newspaper: "Last night, during the height of the flood, and with water to his waist, Father Yermo went to all the places where there was danger. It looked as if he were multiplying himself.... He and others tried to sandbag the Garita river, but because of the force of the water, they had to abandon their work."⁵ On this occasion Yermo showed his love and courage for all those who suffered so much during the flood. Because of it, the Governor of the State of Guanajuato, General Manuel Gonzalez, praised him as "Giant of Charity." After his death, somebody said that Father Yermo was a giant in all the aspects of his life.

Puebla the Home of his Work

In 1889, due to the religious persecutions which were going on in Leon, he decided to move the seat of the congregation to Puebla, to the asylum where the seniors and other sisters lived. In 1891 he asked permission to be incardinated in the diocese of Puebla. His work grew with other foundations, not only in the State of Puebla but also in other parts of Mexico.

Father Yermo's objective was the evangelization and promotion of the poor, especially women. He knew that a well formed woman was the foundation of a just and Christian society. For this reason he required that in the schools and orphanages there should be an

⁵ Chronicle Letter of Leon, *El Tiempo*, Mexico, July 1, 1888, APY, Doc. 4973/87D, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, p. 374.

integral education which would cover the whole person in all its aspects, from its transcendent aspects to its most rudimentary and material, such things as domestic labor. He had a special love for the arts, and he enjoyed listening to the young girls play their musical instruments.

He did not neglect other sectors of society which were not protected:

“Charity will make you find in the poor the brother who has cried and suffered much, and you must know that those tears which you dried up with love, Christ Himself keeps as precious pearls of your crown. The Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Poor shall not seek any recompense on this earth, but their treasure will be in heaven. For this reason they will find joy in the scorns, ingratitude, and reproaches they will receive from the poor seniors, because if everything you do will be pleasant, one may fear that your recompense will remain here on earth.”⁶

Father Yermo lived well the teachings of Vincent: “We must not judge the poor for their physical appearance, the way they dress, nor because of their personal qualities, because frequently they are rude and uneducated.... if you see the poor with the eyes of faith, you will realize that they represent the Son of God who also wanted to be poor.”

In 1894 in Puebla he opened the center, Christian Mercy, to house women who were falling into prostitution. In this house he built schools and workshops for orphan girls. He was able to accomplish all this because of his trust in God, and his wonderful disposition which attracted the generosity of many people in Puebla.

His apostolic zeal also included work with his brother priests. In 1886 he established a newspaper dedicated to the priests. He says: “I am glad to communicate to you that because of a lot of people who know me, I have already one thousand subscribers to the paper. I am the only writer and founder of the paper, *The Ecclesiastic Mexican Review*, which the Bishop entrusted to my care.”⁷

In July of the same year, he inaugurated in the house of Christian Mercy a printing press that he brought from Europe. He

⁶ JOSÉ MARÍA DE YERMO Y PARRES, *Conference on Charity for the Seniors*, Puebla (1890), APY, Doc. 4369, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. I, pp. 490-492.

⁷ Letter of Father Yermo to Father José María Bueno Pando, Puebla, August 10, 1896, APY, Doc. 211/30, cit. in *Positio Super Virtutibus*, Vol. II, p. 902.

published a magazine dedicated to various topics. His objective with the printing press was to get young people acquainted with technology so that they could become productive members of society and also help the institution.

His missionary spirit brought him to team up with the Jesuits. When they took up the Tarahumara missions, he wanted his own religious daughters to be engaged in this work. He entrusted this work to the intercession of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to St. Joseph. In January 1904, with great humility and trust, he was able to establish the first mission in the village of Carichi, in the State of Chihuahua. He himself went there with the sisters for the first mission.

Having given his whole life to God and to the building of his kingdom on this earth, on the morning of September 20, 1904, after he asked the sisters to sing the Ave Maris Stella, he died. Many people in Puebla mourned his death since all recognized him as the Giant of The Poor. José María de Yermo y Parres never left us. His presence continues today in the works he left behind which have transcended time and space: That mustard seed, that I do not know how it came to my hands, was born and grew, and today it holds in its branches a great number of poor people.

This congregation is a work of God put in the hands of Father Yermo for the purpose of giving the love and mercy of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to all, but with a preferential option for the poor. It was born December 13, 1888 in the city of Leon, Mexico. From there it moved to Puebla and, strengthened by the love of its founder, it has extended to several places in Mexico. Before Father Yermo's death, there were several foundations in Merida, Yucatan; Teziutlan, Puebla; Tulancingo, Hidalgo, Cordoba, Veracruz; Ocotlan, Tlaxcala; Guadalajara, Jalisco; Irapuato, Guanajuato; Chihuahua, Chihuahua, and the first mission house in Tarahumara. After Father Yermo's death it continues to grow in other places in Mexico and other countries: United States, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Venezuela, Chile, Italy and Kenya.

In all these places its members strive to live the charism of the Sacred Heart of Jesus through the intercession of Saint Jose Maria de Yermo y Parres. The mission of the Servants is to show the love and mercy of Christ in all their works: schools, orphanages, hospitals, mission fields and all their other ministries. In some places this service to the poor is especially visible in parish work. Father Yermo left the congregation the following motto: "God will Provide," and the experience of the Providence of God is constant in all its works.

Father Yermo is buried in Puebla de Los Angeles in the Central House of the congregation. There is also a museum in this house.

The Superior General is: **Sister Magdalena Sofia Juarez Nieto**

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(Translation: PRUDENCIO RODRIGUEZ DE YURRE, C.M.)