



M. Domenica Grassiano

FOR LOVE OF MY MOTHER

Laura Carmen Vicuña

“You are the light of the world... No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub. They put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven.” (Mt. 5,14-16)

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Laura Carmen

The aristocracy of Santiago had a particular devotion to Our Lady of Carmen. Even the army considered her its patron. Possibly because of this, on that 24th May 1891, Fr. Bernardo Aranguiz, when christening the child, added the symbolic name of "Carmen" to her first name "Laura". The tender bud now open to the life of grace, was in this way entrusted to the maternal care of the Queen of Saints. The baptismal register records that Laura Carmen was the daughter of Joseph Dominic Vicuña and Mercedes Pino.

He was an officer in the army. He belonged to a distinguished family, perhaps to one of the lesser branches, but he was always proud of his famous name of Spanish origin. His wife, Mercedes, was Chilean, high-spirited and very beautiful. There was a touch of nobility about her. Although the daughter of ordinary farming people, she had a knowledge of music and sewing. Here begins the tragic history of this family. In fact at the Baptism only the god-father, Wenceslaus Calderon, and the god-mother Rosaria Rojas were present, no one else. The Vicuña family had disowned Joseph because he had married beneath him.

As far as they were concerned, Mercedes Pino did not exist. Notwithstanding this, her joy was very great as she held in her arms the little one to whom the priest had said: "Receive the white garment and carry it without stain to the tribunal of God, to gain eternal life...". Indeed, in spite of her unfortunate destiny, Mercedes guarded her child's 'stole of innocence' as if it were a most precious coat of arms.

Chile was going through days of dramatic change.

The President of the Republic, Joseph Emanuel Balmaceda, who was supported by the Vicuñas of the conservative party, had to abdicate because he was unable to break with the rigid position of the old regime. In a desperate effort to avoid civil war, he proposed as candidate for the Presidency a Vicuña, Claudio, but it was already too late. The revolution broke out because of the action taken by the navy.

Santiago was experiencing days of martyrdom, through steel, fire and bloodshed. Joseph and Mercedes, living in the city centre near the Church frequented by the nobility, quickly became aware of the danger.

Laura, born on the 5th of April, could be baptised only fifty days after her birth, on account of the war which raged relentlessly. With the fall of President Balmaceda, there erupted a violent reaction against his supporters, among the first of whom were the Vicuñas.

On August 28th the rebels entered Santiago and, mowing down hundreds of victims, they seized power.

One witness who remembers those days says: "It was sufficient to be called a Vicuña or a Balmaceda to be persecuted to the death." Having first been disowned by his family, Joseph is now on the run, rejected by the fatherland which he had passionately and loyally served.

Mercedes follows him into exile. Laura rests close to her heart and would never know the desolation of those frightening days.

What am I saying? Days!... Months and months, fleeing from one countryside to another with few belongings, just the bare essentials.

Nights in the open, endless days on horseback over impossible roads, always searching for a way to the south, as far as Temuco, over 500 kilometers beyond Santiago. As the road lengthened under the footsteps of the refugees, Joseph, a loving and tender husband and father, lost the will to soldier on. But a spark of the old

hope was rekindled as he entered the provincial town of Cautin, Temuco.

It consisted of little hovels, and was the haven of those persecuted for their politics, of those condemned by the civil courts, of those exiled, as they waited for a turn of the tide which might relaunch them to power...

Laura Carmen, already eighteen months old, became seriously ill at Temuco. The anxiety of Mercedes and Joseph grew. Life was hard and poor and the climate was severe.

1893 dawned and saw the birth of a little sister for Laura: Julia Amanda. The joy experienced for this gift of life was short-lived. In Santiago the new government — non-conciliatory in approach — had got to power and the leader of the insurrection, George Montt, was nominated President of the Republic.

Joseph, cut off from the life and happenings in the capital, alone and hopeless, felt like dying. He was a good, gentle type of man, dignified in bearing, rather small in stature and had blue eyes and fair hair.

This was how Mercedes later described him to Laura. He died of pneumonia within a few days.

Mercedes

Emanuel Urrutia López, still alive in 1955 and a witness during the process for the beatification of little Laura, gives us this description of Mercedes Pino: "She was born like myself in Collipullí, in the province of Bio-Bío, so I knew her from her infancy. She was a self-possessed young lady who knew how to get on in life." But now, on account of this recent misfortune, her life again began to show the signs of tragedy. For love of Laura and Julia, the young widow — barely twenty-eight years old — began to spend long hours sewing. She took up dressmaking again. Then with the savings, she bought a small shop, a haberdashery store, like those generally found in centres scattered in the deserts and out-of-the-way places. She was courageous and strong. She took in hand the tiller of her tattered boat and steered it through very difficult waters, careful of her two little ones, whom she tenderly protected. Laura reminded her, each time more clearly, of the features and gentle character of her lost husband. Julia instead reflected the liveliness of her own temperament. To go back to Santiago was out of the question. She did not search out either the Vicuña family or her own relatives. She worked and smiled for her customers, but in her heart she wept. Temuco was for her a terribly sad place, a land of exile, full of violent memories.

One night — we are already in 1899 — unknown thieves broke into the store and cleared everything...

Who would claim justice for a widow in that country of outlaws? No one! Mercedes, defenceless, saw snares and threats increasing all around her. So she decided to leave for ever that land which had increased her sorrow and had placed her in the way of such dangers.

During the fine season, caravans of emigrants passed from Temuco towards the Neuquén in Argentinian territory. Like one who has closed a door and thrown away the key, Mercedes set off with her two children towards a new future. She was full of hopeful optimism but without any definite goal, without anyone to lean on. Was it inexperience on her part which made her do such a thing?

It was being said that the Neuquén offered great wealth in the newly growing centres. These spread out along the valleys, where ranches (estancias) were being marked out, with lands stretching away as far as the eye could see. All she needed to do was cross the Cordillera of the Andes... And Mercedes set out in the southern summer of 1899, joining up with a caravan of business people. A few weeks previously, along those very same mountain roads there had passed another caravan, and Mercedes knew about it. Fr. Milanesio, a courageous Salesian, had then reached Temuco in 1898 with two Sisters and a young aspirant. They had intended reaching Junin de los Andes by crossing the Cordillera, but the early and long drawn-out winter prevented them.

They remained for nine months at Temuco, where they zealously sowed the seed of the Gospel. They left in January 1899. The whole town had watched that departure... horses, guides, mountaineering equipment, and a conquest for the Lord in the person of a young girl of Temuco, Frances Mendoza, who had followed the Sisters, attracted by their ideal.

Perhaps Laura Carmen, already eight years old, had seen and got to know the Sisters. One was Italian, Sr. Angela Piai, and she was in charge. The other was Chilean with the lovely name of Rose Azócar. The aspirant was Carmel Opazo. Mercedes was going right into the very heart of the mountains in search of a more tranquil life and an easier one, but the storm-clouds were already closing in on top of her.

The good God was preparing a haven for Laura, but

for her mother a 'lightning conductor'! The haven was to be the Salesian College of Junin de los Andes, and the lightning conductor was none other than Laura herself.

However, while Fr. Milanesio's caravan was heading south west towards the lakes, Mercedes went north west. She crossed the Andes, made a first stop at Norquin, one of the few cities of the Neuquén area, also called 'the strange land of the Triangle'. It was territory only recently opened up, and to it came those seeking adventure, speculators of every kind, traders avid for a quick haul of money, evaders and deserters of every race and nation.

The missionaries used to say: "Were it not for some women and girls who had a christian education in Chilean schools, and served as a beacon in the middle of such moral darkness, Norquin would be a place of perdition..." The christian sense of the family had been lost and when this happens, everything collapses.

The undaunted Mercedes immediately senses the gamble, the risk of finding herself alone in this strange, unknown land, and without anyone to support her.

She set off again, in search of better fortune at Las Lajas, towards the south. It seems that there she made friends with some people who were reputed to be more trustworthy and honest in their dealings, and whom Laura, later on, recalls with affection.

However, the hard, uncertain life forced Mercedes to move a third time. Towards the end of 1899 we find her near Junin de los Andes.

Understandably, from the human point of view, after so much effort, after such journeys, after pain and loneliness, Mercedes felt the need of support, of a shoulder to lean on...

The falcon's haunt

The winter of 1899 was a severe one for southern Patagonia and the Neuquén area. Las Lajas was situated on the banks of the forceful waters of the Neuquén from which, in fact, the region gets its name. Torrential rains and heavy snows along the whole chain of the Andes resulted in swollen rivers whose angry waters left destruction in their wake.

This deluge of water from above and below is a vivid image of Mercedes' own state. In a desperate effort to get on top of misfortune, she clung to a man, who in her eyes seemed to be a raft in the swirling vortex of her own insecure life. How did she get to know him? We do not know. He was a certain Manuel Mora, a South American cowboy (gaucho) of ill repute.

He came from Chos-Malal where he had served prison sentences for crimes unknown. He frequently had recourse to the dagger and the revolver. He stopped off at Las Lajas and 'swooped down' like a condor, a bird of prey, on the victim. He had belonged to a well-off family of Buenos Aires and had obtained from the Governor a permit to work a fine stretch of land along the folds of Chapeloo — the chain of mountains which encloses the panorama towards the Andes.

He was a perverse individual, but capable and ruthless. He had built up two ranches (estancias) for raising cattle in a short time. Then he invited his two brothers to join him, to share his wealth and to accumulate more.

When Mercedes came to know him he was about forty; a good-looking, handsome man. On horseback,

elegantly dressed, armed with a long dagger which had a silver hilt, he appeared superior to everyone else.

He treated the natives like slaves, as he did the servants, horsemen and shepherds, and used the whip on men and dogs alike.

This self-made lord knew how to be chivalrous and charming when he wanted to. Mercedes clung to him as though he were her anchor of salvation. He would be the protector for herself and the children... So she followed him.

Perhaps she thought she could rebuild a home life. She dreamed of wedding bells. But she was deluding herself. In those out-of-the-way places, unfortunately similiar cases were not infrequent at the time. Manuel Mora, in fact, had no intention of marrying her.

Another woman, Tomasa Catala, had been his mistress at the Quilquihué ranch and she had been subjected to outrageous treatment. When Mora was tired of her, he tied her to one of the horses' posts. Then branding her flesh with the red hot iron used to mark his herds, he drove her away! These were the hands into which Mercedes was about to fall.

The wealthy ranchowner smiled in the direction of the widow as he crossed the threshold of the ranch... Finding again a home, perhaps Mercedes smiled too.

Did Laura smile? No, it seems unlikely. Julia yes, for she was still very small...

Anyone witnessing this step would pity the woman's fate and would fear for the two little girls, still so innocent.

All over the Neuquén area the word had spread that the F.M.A. were opening a College at Junín de los Andes, to provide for the education of young girls. Certainly Mercedes remembered the Sisters she had seen at Temuco. She would have known something about them. She wanted to put Laura and Julia into their care. Manuel Mora was willing to pay the monthly fee. He also paid for their clothes which were even elegant;

they lacked nothing. For a short while the two children stayed at the Quilquihué ranch, 'Quilquihué' meaning the 'home of the falcon'... Only a few days, yes, but already the alarm sounded for Laura. She was nine years old but was a precocious child. She was fair-skinned, with dark eyes and chestnut wavy hair.

Her deportment was that of a well-educated child. The ups and downs of her early years had brought Laura to a maturity extraordinary for her age. Innocent as the angels, she sensed, as though by an innate perception, that her mother's situation was anything but healthy. Mora, the 'condor' was already meditating how one day he would 'sink his claws' into that innocence too. In the meantime he willingly paid the fees for the college...

Junín de los Andes

The renowned Salesian missionary of South America, Monsignor Cagliari, having considered the location of Junín de los Andes from his vantage point on horseback, drew up a plan of action. He proposed to Fr. Milanesio that they open colleges there to meet the needs of both boys and girls.

Junin was a border town, 780 metres above sea level in the folds of the Cordillera. This town had continued to expand through many difficulties and changes of climate from 1879 onwards. The following extract from the Salesian Bulletin of September 1899 gives a vivid description: "The building of these two Colleges cost us much fatigue and heartache, more easily imagined than described. The great distances, the means of transport which consisted solely of beasts of burden, the roadways which were almost impassible, the extreme poverty of the place and the hardships of the times, all these of themselves speak of the huge difficulties we had to overcome."

The river Chimehuin added a picturesque touch to the little city, and its abundant waters fertilized the surroundings. However, it also presented a danger, because its sudden floods made it treacherous.

That little centre, then, assumed great importance in the missionary's eyes as he directed his thoughts towards the many inhabitants scattered on the high plains and in the surrounding valleys: natives and settlers, without schools or church, without help of any kind. And this area covered a radius of more than 100 km.

Monsignor Cagliari planned to make Junín de los Andes a base from which to transmit civil and christian

values, a base much more important for Argentina than the military one set up there to guard the last outpost of the Aracauni who had fled into the mountains...

Within the radius of those 100 km were the two ranches of Manuel Mora. Mercedes travelled on horseback the 20 km separating Quilquihué from Junín, she introduced herself to Sr. Angela Piai and asked for two places for her daughters. She spoke little, and the Superior, Sr. Angela, did not ask questions. The lady had on an elegant silk cape and looked young and full of life. She gave the particulars necessary for the register as follows: Julia Amanda, six years; Laura Carmen, nine years, both Chilean; Parents: Dominic and Mercedes Pino, Chileans.

At that time almost all the houses in Junín were made of wood and rough bricks and the College of Mary Help of Christians was no different. It was among the poorest of mountain dwellings with a zinc roof, narrow doors and low windows. It was in the form of a right-angle and had a garden and well in the centre and an uncultivated vegetable garden facing the open country. In the house everything was primitive. The sofa on which Mercedes sat was none other than the trunk they brought from Chile covered with a cloth. In the whole house there was only one table which served every possible need and this meant that it was continually being moved about. They also had a chair and some benches, and that was the sum total of the furniture they possessed.

A 'College' with a difference one could say! From this 'border refuge', as someone called it, a transformation was taking place. It was becoming a 'center of virtue' because the Sisters who had come from far away, lived solely to love and serve God in their neighbour. Junín de los Andes with its solitude, silently draped in the virgin-green of the conifers, with the magic spectacle of its white, snow-covered peaks, seemed to be given added splendour and importance by that poor and

somewhat drab building which was the college — a splendour and glory far superior to that of the marble constructions and enchanting squares of the grandest metropolis. Young Sr. Azócar wrote: "I began to consider myself as in an earthly paradise in that solitude, because of the peace and tranquillity I enjoyed there."

And she reveals the source of her peace as she adds: "Spiritual help was more available than in the College in Chile. They lacked nothing a religious needed to be faithful to her sacred commitment." The Salesians had the boys' college; it was beside the girls' one, and so spiritual assistance was not lacking. The F.M.A. arrived in Junín carrying with them their priceless possessions — the Crucifix and Don Bosco's motto: 'Give me souls'.

Laura sensed this charity, rooted in the Gospel, from the moment she first entered the College. At Junín there were plenty of opportunities to practise a spirit of sacrifice. For example, the washing was done in the waters of the Chimehuin; the bread was kneaded and baked at home once a week; the vegetables often consisted of wild grass taken from the fields.

Poverty, extreme poverty! However, as Sr. Azócar shrewdly noted: "The rooms were painted bright green and that cheered our hearts!" Then, with her missionary enthusiasm, she continues: "What consoled us most of all was to see how, little by little, the people of Junín, originally so far from God, gradually moved towards Him, through their frequenting the Church and being won by kindness and persuasion."

The wonderful discovery

Laura and Julia had arrived at the College on January 21st. It was summer and holiday time. Why did Mercedes not wait for the beginning of the school year before parting with her daughters? Her heart was broken but she had to do it. The ranch at Quilquihué, the 'falcon's haunt', would never be home for them. Those two children were always the centre of her life; the living heritage of Dominic Vicuña to whom she was devoted and whose memory could not have been for her in her situation, anything but a bitter reproof... He would have had them educated in a manner worthy of their ancestors. So it was better that they left Quilquihué immediately...

Julia, or Amandina, as she was called in the College, burst into tears as she clung to her mother's dress. Laura too seemed sad and thoughtful, but for other reasons. She threw her arms around her mother, assuring her that she would take care of her little sister... When the moment of parting was over, Laura felt happy as her inner feelings of anguish quietened, and so she set out to face a new life.

Fr. Crestanello assures us: "She was overjoyed." And he tells how Mercedes was amazed at her reactions when she knew that she was going to the college.

Laura then confessed to the priest that she could not explain the reason for this deep joy which took over like a fountain of clear water. "It's true, however, that I was happy," she used to say. "Baby Jesus must have been pleased with my mother's decision." Mercedes, therefore, must have given God a place in the hearts of her children.

“Laura was happy because Jesus would be pleased.” This is something to be said for Laura’s mother in such a difficult position. Sr. Azócar assures us that Laura could read and write a little and could say some prayers. She had very little religious knowledge, but she had plenty of what could lead her to understand the Divine.

Her innocent heart was ready to discover God, that most fascinating of all discoveries. We could compare her first days at the college to an ‘overture’. One breathed in the poor college of Junín an air of Gospel love, an atmosphere of fervent piety and serene joy, all of which is the result of the family spirit which is typically Salesian.

Being holiday time, the days passed by happily, and the rhythm was not too regular. There were only the Superior and Sr. Azócar in the house, and Laura followed them everywhere and chatted spontaneously with them. She noticed their patience with Julia who was moody and at times capricious. She admired their serenity and peace, and was drawn by their pleasant ways, since she found them always available and approachable.

Soon she learned to live according to a timetable, to look after herself and her personal belongings as well as those of her sister. But above all she learned to follow the Sisters into Chapel for prayer. It was there that she made the marvellous discovery of a personal God, who is above all Father; of the Son, God made man, a victim of love for man and put to death because of sin. On her knees in the plain little room, which served as the Chapel and housed the Blessed Sacrament, the innocent child repeated the prayers she knew and those she was learning.

The Superior says that “from her first days in the College they noticed in Laura a sense of judgement well beyond her age and a real inclination to piety... Her devotion, for a child, was serious without affectation or exaggeration of any kind.”

February and March passed by quickly and the school year began on April 1st. Laura listened to the reading of the college rules: "Remember that we are created to love and serve God our Creator and that knowledge and all the wealth of the world are nothing without the fear of God."

So there was a serious meaning to life. Santiago, Temuco, Norquin, Las Lajas were only stepping stones along the way to this discovery. And she also heard: "Try to practise virtue from your earliest years because to wait for old age is to put yourself in the very grave danger of being eternally lost..."

Eternally lost!

Because of sin!

And immediately her thoughts flew to her mother, to Quilquihué. What had the child seen at the ranch? A pure soul is capable of deep intuition. It can distinguish between what is opportune and what should not be done. It reacts instinctively to evil.

Laura would not have been able to put into words the very big change she had seen taking place from the time her father was alive in Temuco. Yet in a confused way, she understood that her mother had gone far away from God. Alongside the first wonderful discovery, the terrifying fact of eternal perdition pierced her soul like a dagger.

Love for Laura, meant a desire for the loved one's peace with God, the priceless gift called grace! The crucifix from the altar spoke to her more clearly every day, of cruel martyrdom... and she did not realise yet that Junín was going to be for her the mountain of sacrifice!

God in first place

In the little College of Junín, they taught a variety of subjects, both academic and practical. There was reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as domestic science, home-management and the first elements of civic education. The pupils, fourteen boarders and seventeen day pupils, were all girls "who found it easier to handle the horse's reins than the pen and the needle." They came from the Cordillera, from as far as six hundred miles away. Used to the free life of the vast open spaces, they opened up and grew strong, almost like wild plants, usually docile and inclined to piety but self-centred and inconstant.

They were taught singing too, for its refining influence, and so that they would be able to perform in Church and at the little family celebrations. But above all christian formation was given first place in the education of these girls, on whom depended the first announcing of God's message in the Neuquén. Laura drank deeply at the spring of religious knowledge. Sr. Azócar was her teacher since the child had been admitted to a course for the older girls. It would correspond to our second or third class in the elementary school. Fr. Crestanello says: "If before joining the College Laura's behaviour was exemplary, from the day on which she got to know the Sisters and had religious instruction, she grew in virtue and refinement." And he continues: "Right from the first catechism lessons she was very keen to learn all that was being taught, while deep down in her heart there was a growing desire to put all she heard into practice."

Sr. Azócar was continually with the pupils, assisting in the playground, in the dining room, in Church and in

the dormitory. For this reason she was able to get to know Laura and she soon recognised her as better than all the others. "She was gentle and strong at the same time."

Frs. Crestanello and Genghini preached the retreat at the beginning of the school year to the two colleges — boys and girls — assembled in the Salesian Chapel. Laura imbibed every word avidly like someone who had endured a long thirst. For her, it was something new to spend the days praying and listening to sermons about God. She learned to make an exam of conscience. At its conclusion she said: "I have been and am very bold, but from now on I will be very good."

Searching in the depths of her soul, she realised that she easily got impatient with Amandina who was a difficult character. After the retreat the college began again its strict but pleasant schedule. Study, work, light-hearted recreations, prayer, walks, and the lovely Salesian feasts succeeded each other to renew spirits in the fervour of piety and in good-will for study and work.

Fr. Genghini says: "Laura Vicuña had a more than average intelligence, so much so that there was no need to repeat things for her. At school and in the workroom she was never idle; though from her refined appearance and tranquil character, it was evident that she was not one of those who got easily agitated or fussed about everything."

And the Superior, Sr. Piai, affirms: "She was very industrious and conscientious about succeeding in all her study." To bear this out let us look at her marks in the school register for the final exams of that year: "9 for reading and 10 for all the other subjects." There followed an observation: "She distinguished herself particularly for her conduct and religion." The child, just ten years of age, immediately transformed study into wisdom, catechism into life.

Sr. Azócar was speaking about grace and the divine channels through which the christian can receive it and

live: they are seven and have their source in Calvary, the seven sacraments.

As she listened, Laura's face became radiant with the desire for Communion. When Sr. Azócar came to speak of the last of the sacraments, Matrimony, with the necessary delicacy but with clarity, she dealt with the unlawful marriages of Neuquén, its biggest wound. Unexpectedly Laura fainted.

The teacher and her companions gathered round to help her. Sr. Azocar said: "No doubt, from my words she realised that her mother was living in a state of sin." When the Superior heard of the incident, she suggested that the Sister discretely go back over the topic again. Who knows, perhaps her not being well physically, had nothing to do with what they imagined...

During the following lesson, at the first mention Laura got pale, began to tremble and lost her strength. It was necessary to help her... and to change the topic! What she had guessed, suspected, feared, was now all too clear. This light from on high uncovered for her the depths of the abyss into which her mother was sinking.

A crown of three stars

The school year finished with solemn prize-giving on January 1st, 1901. Laura got the one and only prize for conduct as well as the prize for hard work and application. Then the children set off in the direction of the Cordillera and their distant homesteads. Mercedes, who had come for the prize-giving, brought back her daughters to the 'estancia' at Quilquihué.

Fr. Crestanello assures us that Laura had not wanted to go. The college was for her a 'paradise'. But it is easy to understand that her hesitation to follow her mother was through her fear of the 'sparrow hawk.'

She had been told that at the ranch she would be able to pray... that God was near those who call him... The Sisters at Junin were not really aware of Mercedes' true situation.

Laura returned to Quilquihué in fear and trembling. The herdsmen, horsemen, shepherds and their families all looked at her with great admiration.

Mercedes was rather anxious — but, for that summer, Manuel Mora treated Laura with respect. She, however, shivered at the very sight of him! As often as she could she sought refuge in prayer. But her mother obliged her to pray in secret. Why?

The long rides on horseback, life in the open, the plentiful food helped her health immensely, so that her physical development seemed to speed up to keep pace with her precocious spirit.

The days followed each other without great variety and yet they only served to increase in the child an indefinable torment... She feared for herself and she felt a great compassion for her mother...

When she was told that it was time to go back to the college she jumped for joy. "I am going back to my favourite place!" She was thrilled to get back there.

Straight away she wanted to go to confession. She opened her heart to Fr. Crestanello and renewed her commitment to grow in virtue. She enjoyed meeting her teachers and companions again.

Laura was a happy child and she willingly took part in the lively recreations. However, a keen eye could notice a trace of sadness in her... The Superior understood, a secret sorrow was gnawing at her soul. And to give her comfort, the only comfort possible, she admitted her with two other companions to her first Holy Communion. When she told her the good news, Laura remained speechless. Her radiant expression spoke of her happiness. But immediately her thoughts flew to Quilquihué, to her mother and she broke into sobs.

“Crying, Laura? Are you not happy?” asked Sr. Piai.

“O yes, I am happy,” stuttered the child. “I am thinking of my mother... my poor mother!”

Fr. Crestanello says: “She had always been obedient and submissive, affable and humble; but after that day one noted a greater perfection in her actions.”

Laura loved to think often of the presence of God. Does not scripture say: “Walk in my presence and be perfect.”

She had a special love for confession. Rising from the confessional her face was full of the joy and contentment which flooded her heart. When her sister poked fun at her for these frequent confessions she replied: “Afterwards I feel stronger against temptation, and everything becomes easier.”

There was a new teacher at Junín, Sr. Anna Maria Rodriguez, who had the job of preparing her for the great day. She did it in a manner worthy of the One who was coming and of the soul who was waiting...

The ground was well prepared and the seed was first-class. The solemn function took place of June 2nd and it was the first time such a celebration took place in the college.

Mercedes arrived in Junín on the eve. She brought Laura a white gown, sewn by her own hands; there were many other little gifts too, like soaps, perfume, sweets. The child would have wished for something very different. When she was told that her mother was in the parlour, she ran and threw her arms around her joyously.

“Mother!” — she said — “tomorrow I will be making my first Holy Communion. Forgive the displeasures I have given you. If in the past I have been naughty, from now on I want to be your consolation... I will pray for you...” And she began to cry.

Then she received the Lord, and began preparing herself to be a ‘little host’.

These are her resolutions:

1. O my God, I want to love and serve you all my life, so I give you my heart and my soul, my whole being.
2. I want to die rather than offend you by sin, so I intend to mortify myself in all that might take me away from you.
3. I propose to do all I can that you may be known and loved, and to repair the offences which you receive each day, especially from the members of my own family.
4. My God, give me a life of love, of mortification, of sacrifice!

Francesca Mendoza, the young lady of Temuco who had joined the Sisters, affirmed, and then repeated it under oath, that observing Laura as she came back to her kneeler after Communion, dignified and composed, she noticed a crown of three stars on her head.

Everyone noticed this singular child — who, they said, seemed like a little queen — but no one else saw what Francesca maintains she saw. Mercedes, lost among the crowd, was measuring the abyss which separated her from her little angel!...

Nothing is ready made

A sculptor is not born such, neither is a surgeon, a teacher, a seamstress, and much less a saint. Who was it that said: 'Saints are born that way'? It is not true. We are all born sinners. The grace of Baptism opens the way towards great heights, but it does not substitute for nature which down the years carries its old wound.

Laura felt humiliation deeply. The three stars which Francesca Mendoza had seen shining on her head could have been an impression, but it is true that in the life of this young Chilean girl every virtue shone as a star and acquired greater splendour from humility. It in turn maintained its own radiance because of her heroic spirit of mortification.

Her appearance and early physical development were no indication of excellent health, in fact she was rather delicate. Actually, if we remember her infancy and early childhood, this is not surprising: always on the move, poverty, fears, had been her lot.

She suffered from a humiliating discomfort which became worse in winter. At Junín de los Andes there was no heating and in the cold season the temperature went down below zero. Laura suffered from enuresis (bed-wetting). How many humiliations because of this weakness!

While the boarders were getting up a young girl acted as vice-assistant, as the Sisters were in Chapel for meditation. That young girl forced Laura on more than one occasion, to carry the wet sheet on her shoulders. The affair was mentioned to the Superior and she intervened and forbade such a cruel punishment.

And Laura? She was extremely sensitive. From her

expression one could sometimes see the effort it cost her to be silent and humble herself, as attested Sr. Grassi, who belonged to the Junín community in 1901.

One morning Mercedes Vera, one of the first boarders and already aspiring to Salesian religious life, burst out crying while Laura underwent the humiliating punishment.

The two young girls were great friends. They shared the same aspirations. Mercedes was a few years older. Laura, however, outshone her where spiritual formation was concerned. The following dialogue proves it:

— Why are you crying? — asked Laura — Did you by chance cause some displeasure to Jesus?

— I'm crying because of what they did to you — replied Mercedes.

— It's not worth it — said Laura. — Didn't they dress Jesus up as a fool? Why shouldn't I accept a little humiliation, being so naughty?...

Neither Laura nor Mercedes liked beetroot. Sr. Piai, knowing their virtue and wishing to prepare them for religious life, ordered beetroot for the two of them three times a week. At table their little friends offered to eat their share instead. Mercedes questioned Laura with a glance: "Will I? ...Won't I?..."

— No — replied Laura with a firm voice — our obedience must be perfect. Jesus suffered so much for us on the Cross!...

It happened that once the two friends were in the workroom. Laura asked:

— Mercedes, who are you working for?

— For Jesus and Mary.

— Right! Let's do like Mother Mazzarello and make every stitch an act of love of God!

It was evening, after supper. Laura and Mercedes asked permission to leave the game to run and say a

prayer at the statue of the Sacred Heart, which stood on a fairly high pedestal near the entrance. The statue was so high that the two, even though they wanted to, could not reach the feet that evening to kiss them. How were they to do it?...

Twenty-five years later, Sr. Merceditas recalls: "Laura prayed with such fervour and trust that the statue came down to us — giving us the joy of paying it that homage..."

Naturally such things were told to no one...

Each of the older boarders had the privilege of cultivating a flower-bed in the garden and she could pick the flowers to decorate the altar. Laura and Merceditas had their flower-bed side by side. One day Sr. Piai ordered Merceditas to put down a stake to support a climbing plant in her plot.

"Will you help me?" asked Merceditas. While putting the dry stick into the ground, Laura mused: "From sticks planted in obedience roses bloom... I believe it is easier for a stick to bloom than for the words of a Superior *not* to be the will of God."

Some time afterwards, in fact, the stick blossomed. It was called the 'stick of obedience'. Monsignor Cagliero who came to Junín a year later, on a pastoral visit, listened to the unusual story. He wanted to see the stick. It was bearing the last flowers of the season, since the winter was coming. These flowers were picked, at Monsignor's request, and placed near the tabernacle for his intentions.

After Laura's death, her school friends vied with one another to have her flower-bed, and it was an ardently-desired prize to be allowed to gather the first blooms from the 'stick of obedience'.

Such was life — a bit like the "little flowers of St. Francis"... and perhaps much more.

Someone — who knows who — suggested that Laura be given cold baths to cure her of her organic weakness...

Outside, a pure mantle of snow extended over the

mountains and valleys. The severe temperatures made one dream of a warm hearth! When the infirmarian had prepared the cold bath, she called the heroic child, who put up no resistance whatever. Laura humbly and calmly undressed, and, in spite of teeth chattering and her body trembling all over, she went into the water — without a word! She accepted this repeatedly, even though the harsh ‘remedy’ was doing her no good. On more than one occasion she fainted.

However, nothing is ‘ready-made’. From her frequent visits to Chapel, Laura drew strength to conquer herself, to mortify herself...

Had she not made up her mind to do all in her power to make up for the offences against God, especially from members of her own family? Her mother! Her mother was the ‘thorn in her flesh’.

For her no sacrifice seemed too great. Her continual penance was leading her with giant strides towards perfection.

The Superior of the college affirms: “No one could ever accuse Laura of consciously breaking the rule. Everyone noticed her constant effort to grow in perfection.”

Julia was asked if it were true that her sister was “a little impatient” with her. She replied, during the informative process for the Cause of Beatification: “She was always loving and patient with me, ready to forgive my weaknesses, my bouts of anger, my flightiness.”

But virtue costs. It is not to be had ‘ready-made’.

The condor and the dove

The end of the second year of school was fast approaching for Laura.

Before beginning the final exams on the feast of the Immaculate (called 'La Purissima' in Spanish), the College had its first enrolment of the Children of Mary Sodality. It was another step in the formation of the young girls of Neuquén, who would later be the nuclei of christian families there.

The morning of December 8th, dressed in white, and with veils on their heads and blue sashes round their waists, the best girls in the college reminded everyone of the Roman martyr, St. Agnes.

One by one they approached the altar to receive the blue ribbon and the medal of Our Lady, a visible sign of their belonging to the Blessed Virgin and of their promise to live in fervent charity and as pure as lilies.

It was Laura's turn. Over her the priest said: "Receive this medal and ribbon as a special emblem of Mary and an external sign of your consecration to this tender mother..."

Laura's heart was full of joy, full to overflowing!

During the informative process in Viedma, Julia spoke out about her sister's virtue: "The day on which Laura received the medal of a Child of Mary was one of her happiest days." Returning to her bench, with that spiritual treasure on her heart, Laura proclaimed in her heart: "Death, rather than sin" — just like Dominic Savio.

She was as pure as a dove! Rather than become 'soiled' with sin, she chose death. It was said that Laura had a presentiment of what was awaiting her at

Quilquihué... She intensified her prayer, her fervour, her mortifications.

She also did very well in her exams.

After Christmas, Mercedes came to take her daughters away for the holidays. Laura bowed her head. Before leaving she sought advice of her confessor, and asked the prayers of the Superior, her teachers and companions.

She was very tense when she arrived at the falcon's haunt. The condor circled high and distant, waiting for the moment when he would swoop down on the prey.

Laura sensed danger in the air. Did Mercedes know? Did she think about it? Did she see it?

Manuel Mora, arrogant and tyrannical, vulgar and cruel, was not gentle even with her... Her life at the ranch was becoming more difficult and more pathetic every day. However, her foot was already chained and each day that passed was a fresh blow of the hammer driving her deeper into slavery. It has already been said that the owner of Quilquihué did not intend marrying Mercedes Pino. One of Laura's companions, Julia Cifuentes, notes that "Mora's preference was for Laura and that he was having her educated to marry her." But the man was to realise that he was making a mistake...

Manuel Mora's house, rich and comfortable, surrounded by green and warmed by the summer sun, would have been an ideal place for a rest for Laura, were it not for that 'evil', that danger...

When Mora tied his horse to a post and entered the house by way of the veranda, where they normally passed the day, Laura would vanish.

He swore.

One day... Let's hear the story in the words of Claudia Martinez, a lady of Junín, who was on very close terms with Mercedes after Laura's death: "Mora threw Mercedes out of the house, wishing to be alone with Laura. The girl, however, resisted him and managed to save herself from his assault"...

Mercedes, heart-broken, watched from the window. Mora beaten, planned another attack. Fancy being faced up to by a twelve-year-old girl!

Some time after this episode there was a celebration for the branding of the animals born within the year: sheep, goats and calves.

The shepherds and their numerous flocks came from long distances. First there was the dipping and shearing of the sheep, then the branding with fire, and on the last day, a great feast which ended in an orgy. The ranch resembled a countryside fair. Besides the shepherds, the servants and their families, there were present also the rancher's friends — owners of the neighbouring ranches.

There was drink, games and singing as they waited for the supper, and to be followed by a great ball at night. The women, dressed for the feast with dazzling shawls on their shoulders, were coming and going with refreshments and drinks.

Manuel Mora was already enjoying the conquest. Like the condor, he was trying to hypnotise the dove.

Laura, seeing the perfidious eyes fixed on her, called on the Madonna to help her.

The supper was almost over. The dancing began. The young girl would have liked to retire. But how could she? Pale as a ghost, she waited for the show-down which she felt was near. Mora began the celebrations and took the floor for the first dance. Laura saw him coming towards her.

She swore in her heart: "Death but not sin." To his invitation she gave a firm and decided "No!" Manuel Mora felt his anger rise; nevertheless he blandly insisted. The girl repeated "No!" The guests were watching. His tone became stronger, he insulted her. He was in his own house!... And Laura, still firm as a rock, refused.

Mercedes was anxious and tense. What could have happened?... After all Mora had only asked for a dance.

A dance? She well knew how that type of dance ended. Mora now passed from words to deeds.

Ah, yes? She didn't want to dance, the little saint?

He seized her by the arm, and threw her out into the dark with the dogs. Having closed the door he turned round, red with rage and humiliated, and went towards Mercedes. He shouted at her... and ordered her to force her daughter to come in, to ask pardon and to dance!...

Mercedes went out.

What did the mother say to her daughter in the dark of that Andean night? The fear of worse evils made her implore Laura to go back in. In the end, what's in a dance? Perhaps the woman had forgotten the scene she had witnessed through the window...

But Laura certainly remembered it!

Only too well did she know what the condor wanted...

So the girl said no also to her mother. She took refuge among the trees in the dark...

In the house the dance went on. Not, however, for Manuel Mora, who haughtily watched the entrance.

The door opened and Mercedes entered alone. Mora launched his imprecations at her. She would pay! He took her by the wrists and dragged her outside... If the fires had not been put out, and the brand beyond arms reach, the unfortunate woman would have had the same fate as Tomas Catala...

The dancing was over. Mercedes was tied to a post. No one, not even Mora's brother dared to intervene. He whipped her until the blood flowed.

The friends mounted their horses and left.

The consequences

Very difficult days followed in the wake of that horrific night — a cold war carried on by the man who had been defeated, anguish for Laura, uncertainty for Mercedes.

According to the account of Josephine Ferre, another lady of Junín, Manuel Mora “made the invincible Laura suffer... He spoke insultingly to her and was very rude in every way.” The bad ‘gaucho’ always has a bad tongue; and every outburst of Mora’s was another thrust of the dagger at the dove’s wing.

At times Mercedes rebelled at seeing her daughter treated with such disrespect. However, the ranch-owner had not given up his foul designs. He played another card. He refused to pay the fee. What is more, he expected the children to work as servants on the ranch. The mother objected: “They are mine,” she cried, “and I am not here as a slave!”

The man shouted: “Either a slave or dead! As for those two, we will see!”...

Sr. Piai came to know everything and offered to keep Laura free of charge for five years. The Sisters now began to understand a bit more... As Sr. Piai says: “Mercedes Pino was not able to pay the fees for her daughters, and the man who was her tyrant expected them to work on the ranch. However, from an expression he let slip, it was understood that he wanted to ruin them in revenge, because he could not stand the virtue of Laura — the ‘little saint’! We ourselves proposed to Mercedes that Laura should return to the college for five years, free of charge. The mother was to see to her clothing and shoes, and we would be satisfied with some small service.”

By February, Laura is back in the college.

After a few weeks at the falcon's haunt, she left it victorious — but her innocent eyes had measured, with horror, the abyss of evil and she remained deeply wounded by it.

The new situation as a non-paying pupil did not humiliate her. She would have consecrated her whole self to the Lord, like the Sisters who had now accepted her in charity. To be of service in this spirit, became a joy, not a humiliation.

In this way, Manuel Mora's refusal did not affect her... True, she had to get over the reluctance of her unhappy mother. Was it possible that Mercedes did not realise that Mora intended yoking also Laura to his infamous wagon?

Fr. Crestanello says: "Laura insisted with prayer and entreaty that her mother would allow her to go back to the college." Julia Amanda remained at Quilquihué.

The school year of 1902 began a month earlier.

During those days, they awaited the arrival of Monsignor Cagliero, Vicar Apostolic of Southern Patagonia.

He came. He presided at three big missions, beginning with St. Martin de los Andes, then down along the river Alumine, among the natives of Chief Namuncurá, and then climbing again to Junín. Merceditas hoped on that occasion to receive the black cape which distinguished those who were aspirants to religious life from the other pupils.

And Laura?

Fr. Crestanello says: "Laura longed to consecrate herself to God by religious vows."

This is the reason why Laura had implored her mother to allow her to go back to the college for five years, even if it were on alms.

She had still a long way to go before reaching the required age for the Noviciate.

Fr. Crestanello continues: "The example of the

deceased Sr. Anna Maria Rodríguez had won her heart...”

Sr. Anna Maria had died in October, after having formed the souls of her pupils along the lines of truest Salesian asceticism — holiness which was happy, simple, but constant and enduring as a diamond.

Acute peritonitis had carried off the generous Chilean teacher. Like the wise virgin, she had crossed the threshold of death, serenely, with her lamp alight. Laura thought it would have been a beautiful thing to substitute Sr. Anna Maria, to take her place...

At San Martín and along the banks of the Alumine the mission was being preached, and the young girl dreamed of her happiness, as she shared her thoughts with Merceditas...

Would Monsignor give both of them the desired black cape?

One morning Laura presented herself to the Superior. Her eyes were shining and her heart beat with sheer joy. Claspng her hands on her breast, she made her request. Sr. Piai did not answer immediately. Laura could not be accepted among the FMA on account of her mother! After so much suffering and so much hope, that “no”, even if given in a motherly tone, was a severe blow to the young girl. Nevertheless she found the strength to bow her head also in that hour.

God’s ways are mysterious and He always knows how to draw good from evil and sanctity from sorrow, for those who are humble and know how to accept.

“It was one of Laura’s greatest sorrows,” says Fr. Crestanello, “though she nevertheless united herself to the divine will and used the occasion to humble herself the more.”

A little paler than usual, but calm as always, she went that day into the garden to get vegetables with Francesca Mendoza, who remembers: “Laura confided to me that she suffered a great sorrow, and she asked me to pray for her, since they had told her that she could

not be a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. During the mission preached by Monsignor at Junín, Laura did not get the cape but she was confirmed with Julia, who had come from the ranch, and with some other companions.

On that occasion Mercedes remained some days at Junín. But Laura must have been aware of another hidden rejection... Her mother no longer loved her as she did before. Now she was concentrating all her affection on Julia...

Sr. Piai noticed this and she says with extreme respect: "Since Laura had been accepted gratuitously in the college and Julia stayed home at the ranch, Mercedes seemed to show a certain preference for the latter... Laura became aware of this and she suffered in silence."

God was leading her along the road of Calvary, so that later on her mother would return to Him along that same road.

Drop by drop

Monsignor Cagliero's secretary, reporting on the wonderful Easter of 1902, after noting that the final ceremony of that day had been the Confirmation, adds: "The most important conquest and the greatest miracle of grace during the mission was the big number of marriages which were blessed and legalised."

Laura certainly knew of these and may even have been present. The wound was reopened!

Mercedes was there but according to Merceditas Vera "she did not approach the Sacraments even once." She seemed to have aged and was thinner. She no longer thought of marriage! And Laura implored her to free herself from the yoke...

The unhappy woman left for the ranch almost with a sense of relief. Everything during those days at Junín, had sounded like a reproof.

Fr. Crestanello renewed the heroic little girl's courage. Was her mother becoming hardened in sin? Well, she would become more persistent in sacrifice, in generosity, in her offering... God does not let the cry of the broken-hearted go unheeded.

Before Monsignor set off again for Viedma, there was a big feast at the college. Merceditas' older sister, Maria Vera, was ready to receive the religious habit, having completed her probationary period as a postulant.

On the Tuesday morning of Holy Week, Monsignor Cagliero, in the presence of the whole community, including boarders and day pupils, performed the ritual blessing of the habit. She happily put it on and began calling herself Sr. Maria Vera.

Merceditas, possibly on an understanding with Sr. Azócar, took the black cape her sister had left off. Carrying it in her hands she went over to her father who was seated beside the Monsignor.

She talked and pleaded so much that Mr. Vera, a rich ranch-owner of Junín, gave his consent notwithstanding her young age. (Fourteen years)

But yes! Better to have his two daughters as Sisters, than that they should fall into certain hands!... Monsignor agreed too. Merceditas ran to share her joy with Laura. It was only natural.

“At five o’clock Monsignor will give me the cape!...”

Laura’s eyes filled up with tears. She was unable to keep them back. Courageously she smiled, and forced herself to take part in her friend’s joy... But two smiling lips under two eyes which are crying, beg unlimited compassion... Merceditas left the following in writing: “I noticed how immediately she became serene again; on her lips there reappeared her usual relaxed smile and she made an effort to really share my joy.”

Sr. Azócar, Laura’s first and very much loved teacher, seeing her suffering, suggested that she implore Monsignor for the grace she so much desired. And Laura tried. “Monsignor Cagliero,” affirms Sr. Marietta Rodríguez, “gave her only vague hopes...”

She was still so young!... The case would be reconsidered later on if Mercedes’ position were to be legalised...

There are always bitter pills to swallow!

That evening, however, Laura also had a moment of joy. Just a childish thing perhaps, but it left behind its ray of light.

During recreation Laura had the job of preparing the water in the jugs and of turning back the covers on the little ones beds as she was their vice-assistant.

Merceditas came searching for her. They were alone. Their friendship on that occasion reached a deep level, even if it was still in terms of the ‘childish things’...

No one more than Merceditas could better understand Laura's heartache.

"Take it," she said, slipping off her black cape, "put it on your shoulders as if it were yours"... It was a matter of an instant. However Laura understood. She had been confirmed two days previously. The Holy Spirit, who illumines the heart, had revealed to her an intimate secret which the author of a famous book *The Imitation of Christ* had already discovered: "It is not the habit which makes the monk."

Laura hurried to the Chapel. She prayed: "O Jesus, since I cannot be accepted among those who consecrate themselves to you in the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, I offer myself entirely to your love. I want to be yours, even if I must stay in the world."

Then she told everything to Fr. Crestanello, and that prayer from the heart, born in a moment between a lasting sorrow and the joy of an instant, became her daily aspiration. The Sisters who had noticed her suffering, also noted "her effort to participate in the joy of all."

She felt called to consecrate herself to God for the good of her neighbour, for the salvation of souls. And just because of the unhappy state of her mother's soul, she had not been accepted.

She bowed her head. Officially she could never belong to the ranks of Don Bosco's Sisters. But love is ingenious and young people are generous and enterprising.

Fr. Crestanello says that Laura began taking instruction from him regarding the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

For some time she had been practising to perfection the three corresponding virtues, but she wanted to bind herself to God with the holy bonds of religion, in exchange for which — who knows — she might obtain her mother's release from her bonds.

Fr. Crestanello kept her in suspense for some time; he prepared her seriously and only then did he grant her ardent wish. It was another moment of happiness.

One morning, secretly, after Holy Communion, Laura professed before God the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience...

Only Fr. Crestanello knew, and he alone would be aware of her consecrated life. She came and went, from school to the playground, doing the little chores entrusted to her as always, just like everyone else. Her situation as a non-paying pupil placed her in an inferior position in front of her better-off companions; but she was consecrated, and because of this, near to Heaven.

Life flowed on — drop by drop.

The best advice

Once again school reopened. Monsignor had left. The celebrations were over and study began again. Laura was attending a course which would be equivalent to our fifth year class. Besides that, she had charge of the younger boarders. She assisted them in the workroom, and at recreation.

In the morning she helped them to make their bed, she washed them, combed their hair and then brought them to Chapel to pray.

A school friend of hers says: "I never saw her give any indication of unwillingness or repugnance, as often happens with others who render such services." She proved so precise, punctual, serious, that the Sisters considered her well able to substitute them, when they gathered for their spiritual conferences.

So, we find Laura as the assistant in the study hall; we see her as a very young teacher, showing the less-gifted how to read; or the newest arrivals how to take a pen in their inexpert hands, or threading a needle for one, and repeating a lesson for another.

Sometimes too she gave a hand in the household chores. The postulant Maria Briceno tells how Laura used to go with her to wash the clothes in the river Chimehuin. The Superior remembers that she used to help the sacristan sometimes, happy to occupy herself with holy things. In fact, she was at the service of all. And they were unanimous in praising her.

Francesca Mendoza said: "Laura was like a mother for the little ones." And Fr. Crestanello: "She taught with great patience and charity. She never got tired or annoyed when she had to repeat the same things over and over. Finally when she had made herself

understood by her little companions she would add: "Now work harder, and I will pray that you learn fast"... And again: "She was always ready to help everyone, and to give up her own things and even her free time."

Did it not cost her to serve? She had consecrated herself to God for this! If she had some time for herself she spent it reading. There were a few books at Junín. Each year Sr. Piaí bought some on her way down to Chile.

During that school year (1902) the Sisters used to read "Threads of Gold" for the postulants. It was translated into Spanish and they had a page a day. But Laura was not content. And since she always remained a close friend of Merceditas, they used to go and ask the Superior for a loan of the book, so as to be able to reread it at their ease...

"I could gather," says Merceditas, "that Laura loved to meditate on the Angels, and she took it on herself to imitate sometimes the angel of kindness, other times the angel of patience or of courtesy, or the angel of little attentions, and so on"... Alone and placed on the margin of life the young girl enjoyed imitating the angels.

Did nothing on earth attract her? She was only twelve...

But before her stood a most severe counsellor — death!

Did Laura Carmen then wish for death? Few writings of hers were found, but one of them goes like this: "Death is the best adviser... It carries off the young and the old." And another page: "O happy Paradise, when will you arrive?"

One Sunday in church, Fr. Crestanello commented on the Gospel passage of the Good Shepherd. "...I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives his own life for his sheep... The hired man, instead, who is not the shepherd, sees the wolf coming and flees... I give my life for my sheep..." That reference to the wolf brought Laura's thoughts back to Quilquihué!

Her mother was the lost sheep. Laura had already suffered so much, offered so much for the conversion of her mother!... "Prayers and communions without number," says Fr. Crestanello. But she had to do more.

"The Good Shepherd gives his life..." This was a wonderful exchange: the daughter who offers herself a victim for the salvation of her mother! "There is no greater love than to give one's life for a loved one," Jesus had said.

That very Sunday Laura asked Sr. Azócar if it were possible to offer one's life to God... The Sister suggested that she speak about it to her confessor. So the young girl went to Fr. Crestanello.

She very simply states her resolve: to offer her life for her mother's soul! Fr. Crestanello hesitates. Laura begs, she implores. But the man of God sends her away unsatisfied. First he wants to pray and reflect. In the generous enthusiasm of her youthful love, the girl comes back on the issue again and again.

Fr. Crestanello found in her the makings of a martyr and a victim. And so it happened. As soon as she had obtained his consent, Laura ran to the foot of the altar. "Breaking into tears of joy and hope, she offered herself as a victim to Jesus and Mary for the salvation of her mother's soul." These are the words of her confessor.

As if nothing had happened, Laura again took up her life as the best boarder and an excellent student. And again the school year finished with good marks for her.

But now, what did a fine report-card matter to her?...

Fr. Crestanello says that from the day on which she offered herself a victim, the saintly young girl was persuaded that her prayer had been heard.

And the Sisters say: "Although slight and thin, her health had always been good, apart from that initial complaint, which disappeared as she got older. However, by the end of 1902, a gradual deterioration in her physical health was noted." The bloom of the flower was beginning to fade.

A beautiful girl

Just as a cloud, afloat in a sky full of sunshine, casts a shadow on fields and flowers, and dulls the greenness and the vivacity of the colours, so with Laura; it seemed that a shadow was beginning to cloud her youthful freshness. Fr. Crestanello says that this happened almost immediately after the offering of her life. The Superiors in the college noticed and they were anxious. They reduced the amount of manual work for Laura, made her take more rest and saw to it that she had more to eat.

Laura obeyed, even if it cost her to go to bed before the others, and having to take care of herself would lessen her mortifications. It was hoped that the holidays — we are in January/February of 1903 — would restore her to health. And so it seemed. On an understanding with Mercedes, Laura remained at Junín, which was for her the best remedy. She passed the time with the Sisters and postulants in friendly conversations, going for long walks, in pleasant reading, and fervent prayer. She regained her fresh complexion in the warm sun and pure air of the Andes.

Sr. Grassi says: "A new brightness which shone from her eyes, added to her usual smile. Only occasionally her expression was shadowed by tears."

Perhaps it has not been said yet, that Laura was very attractive looking. Hers was a beauty which was warm and full of light. Her ardent spirit and her zest for life, true to her manner, were calm and gentle and won her the name "the most beautiful flower of the Andean mission of Junín."

Laura's beauty came from within. It was as though, within her, there burned a light, fired with the purest oil.

He who has suffered much has lived the longest, not he who can count the most years. The oil for her lamp was sorrow.

That shadow in her eyes at times spoke of her continuous interior suffering... Let us look at this Chilean girl, transplanted in Andean soil, and see her as she was seen by those who met her along their way occasionally.

Only Manuel Mora failed to see beyond the external beauty which fades. Pasqualina Ramallo who was one of Laura's companions in 1903, wrote of her: "She was gentle and serene in spirit. I always found her exact in obedience and in fulfilling her duty... Her deep prayer-life was reflected in her features and bearing; rather than a human being she seemed an angel before the tabernacle, where she used to go and pray in her free moments... What shall I say of her spirit of love and mortification? Obliging by nature, she seconded the action of the Sisters in everything and strove to imitate them. She used her free time to comfort the sick pupils, to whom she brought meals and medicine. She gave them heart, suggested fervent aspirations to them, and willingly supplied for the infirmarian... In short, Laura was the complete young girl: a hidden violet whose perfume won over all who approached her. Because of this she was liked by all and was considered a friend for all time..."

Pasquelina could verify this and much more, because she lived side by side with Laura in the little college in the Andes.

But let us listen to another testimony.

It was Sunday. The boarders were making their way to the Parish Church for solemn Mass. Along the way the people stopped and greeted them, since Junín was like one big family cared for by the Salesians. However, at that moment along came a stranger. He was from some distant ranch. He noticed Laura, the last in line, and was struck by the exceptional appearance of the young girl. He followed her into the Church. Later, he

recalled: "Her eyes were shining with light, and a gentle smile played about her lips. She walked briskly and in a recollected manner... In the church she knelt on the floor, and left the better places to her companions..."

She fixed her eyes lovingly on the Tabernacle... I saw her in ecstasy, contemplating the Host and the Chalice when the celebrant raised them... I thought I was dreaming. I had never seen in those mountain places one so fervent in her relationship with God."

From that day onwards, the unknown man went every Sunday, after a long ride, to Mass in Junin...

We have many other moving testimonies of Laura's attitude in church.

Merceditas says: "I do not recollect having ever seen her leaning on the bench while she was kneeling."

And Fr. Crestanello: "During prayer, we could see that Laura's mind was absorbed in what she was doing... She was unaware of what was going on around her and many times it was necessary to call her and tell her it was time to go."

Sr. Piai maintains that Laura fulfilled every religious practice in a "real transport of joy." And one of her companions adds: "When she prayed in Chapel she was like an angel. It was sufficient to see her and one was inspired to be fervent." Another states: "Laura's deportment before the Blessed Sacrament was edifying... she seemed to be lost in contemplation."

Julia, many years afterwards recalled: "It seemed that when she entered the Church her face lit up. She went to her place and remained so absorbed that at times she was not even aware of who was beside her..."

People still talk about her... but the angels could have told much more! She was so mortified that the confessor had to force her to be more moderate.

This is true beauty which endures.

Hand in hand

In May 1903, the ceremony of the crowning of Mary Help of Christians took place at Junín, thus sharing in spirit with the celebrations at Turin.

At Valdocco, because of a concession of Pope Leo XIII, Cardinal Richelmy placed a precious gold crown on the head of Don Bosco's Madonna. At Junín, Fr. Crestanello, who was an artist, became also a sculptor and carved a statue of Mary Help of Christians in wood. It was crowned by Monsignor Cagliero to the delight of all present.

Laura had a passionate love for Our Lady.

She prepared for that feast with extraordinary fervour. The two colleges — boys and girls — competed in fervour as they kept the Marian practices. Some were learning poems and songs by heart. Others prepared the solemn sung Mass. Some decorated little altars where they placed flowers for the Virgin. Merceditas and Laura had the thought of decorating the altar with flowers. Every rose, every fleur-de-lis, every violet represented one of their sacrifices or some mortification. That year Laura was doing an extra course under the guidance of Sr. Azócar. As they approached the great feast, she invited some of her pupils to write a composition about Our Lady. The best was to be chosen for the entertainment. The solemn day came, and then the afternoon so long awaited by all. In the little hall, the highest scholastic and civil authorities were seated beside Monsignor. Everyone was there, and the parents of the boys and girls had arrived as early as the evening before.

Laura read her composition. Sr. Piai says: "She read with such grace and meaning that all the people

were moved... She looked older than her age. The audience could not be persuaded that at the age of twelve, or a little over it, she could have such fervent sentiments and such gratitude to Our Lady..."

After the composition, the boys and girls recited poems, and sang choruses in separate or mixed choirs. Finally the curtain opened and all remained breathless. A pyramid of children, Sr. Azócar's pupils, represented the glory of Mary in heaven. The children were dressed as angels and at the top of the pyramid the most beautiful angel, Laura Vicuña, was the one nearest the statue Fr. Crestanello had carved. That angel clasped the Madonna's hand in her own, in an act of love, of supplication, of offering.

While the audience in the hall contemplated the scene as though in ecstasy, a powerful choir, formed by the two colleges, brought that scene to life. Then the voices softened, and became silent as they left the moment to a soloist who sang:

*O Mary, beautiful rose,
You are the splendour of paradise;
Every heart acknowledges you,
O Mary, beautiful rose.*

The soloist was Laura. In the audience sat Mercedes!

In the confusion which followed the performance, while angels were detaching their wings, and leaving off their haloes, Laura confided to Sr. Azócar in a whisper: "While holding the Madonna's hand, I renewed my offering for my mother's conversion."

Merceditas assures us that Laura asked and obtained her confessor's permission to wear a hairshirt. She made it by plaiting a rough chord in knots which had hard points. Fifteen knots in honour of the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary. Why was she wearing it?

"To make reparation to God for the offences at Quilquihué, and for certain 'dances' held there," so she

said. Merceditas goes on: "I saw her pass long hours at night kneeling on the ground at the foot of her bed... I saw her pray with her arms extended in the form of a cross, and with her hands under her knees. I saw her kiss the ground..."

There was a portico within the college building, situated in the centre and in a place where every wind seemed to get it. No one liked sweeping it.

Laura asked for this job herself. When someone else had it she made them give it to her. And, yes! — say her friends — she had bleeding hands and chilblains!...

She did not like being praised, instead she fled from it. But her virtues breathed what St. Paul calls the "good odour of Christ".

The little ones had already named her "the little saint" — and they were not alone in this. Because of Laura there began to appear a certain amount of jealousy. This too is normal in a college... Some companions, more light-headed than naughty, made fun of her and treated her unkindly. How did she take it? Not only did Laura forgive, but she often knelt before the one who had offended her and asked pardon. On one occasion she signed her homework "the little fool for Jesus." Really one would want to be crazy to live and humble oneself to this extent. But it was the foolishness of the Cross!

One of the girls who was inclined to be jealous of Laura, on more than one occasion hid the wood Laura had prepared for the morning so that the stove in the classroom could be lit in time. The teacher arrived, the stove out and no wood! A reproof, no matter how gentle, as certainly it would be from Sr. Azócar, is always hard, especially if it is unmerited. Laura, however, never excused herself... she went quickly to the wood-shed.

Those who played the naughty trick, then used to show her the wood hidden under the desks and make fun of her. "OK," said Laura, calmly and serenely, "I have gained an extra merit for heaven."

Another used to provide herself with a bottle of water and since her place in class was near the stove, she could skillfully pour the water on the fire as soon as it was beginning to light up. Again another time, "calmly and serenely," even if it cost her, Laura bent over the stove and relit the fire, to the admiration of all the students.

After her death, on hearing accounts of the acts of virtue, particularly of patience which Laura had to practise because of the thoughtlessness of some of her companions, there were those who said: "I was one of them..."

Sr. Piai says: "Laura had a degree of humility unusual for a child of her age," and she continues, "she was jovial, always ready, at the first tinkle of the bell..." Yes, one ring was sufficient for her to cut short whatever work she had been doing. Any gesture, was availed of to lead her to the heights of heroism.

However, there was nothing affected or exaggerated about her.

She had a high appreciation of precision, a readiness and ease in carrying out her duty — all of which revealed her anxiety to become a saint.

Already death was giving her some signs...

The flooding

There had never been such a dark rainy winter. From the top of Chapelco huge clouds descended and continuously enveloped everything. Then the heavens opened, and it rained non-stop for days on end. In the little Andean college one went out of the house only if forced to do so, in a case of dire need.

A run to the stable, to the hen-house, or the wood shed, with something over one's head, and that was it.

The waters of the Chimehuin could be seen rising in front of their very eyes. Yet neither the boarders nor the Superior were too worried. Almost every winter the Chimehuin burst its banks and spread out over the surrounding countryside, flooding right up to the foundations of the house, and then retreating. Unexpectedly on the evening of July 16th, feast of Our Lady of Carmen, the waters burst into the college with a terrifying roar and in a few minutes reached a height of almost one metre.

As the girls studied in the hall, the doors flew open with the force of the waves which invaded every corner. Sr. Piai froze with fear as she heard the uproar, but managed to walk towards the study, knee-deep in water, to help the girls get out. One by one she helped them to safety — by walking across the beds!

The Sisters, Laura and Merceditas, Maria Briceno and Francesca Mendoza were coming and going, soaking wet, carrying the little ones on their shoulders.

The water continued to rise. Laura's godmother for Confirmation, a lady of Junín called Felicinda Lagos de Espinos, lived in a wooden house which was spacious and beautiful, in a more elevated part of the countryside. The lady immediately sent her servant, a native boy, to offer hospitality to the Sisters and girls.

By now dark night had fallen and the greatest problem was how to get the girls out of the house since it was completely surrounded by water.

A big cart was brought along. The Salesian coadjutor, Edward Genghini, took the frightened children on his shoulders and carried them to the wagon.

The Sisters waited till last and entrusted Laura and Merceditas with the care of their companions. Slowly the cart began to move. The horses pawed the ground in the swirling waters. On all sides the River Chimehuin roared while the children held on to each other crying and praying.

Mercedes recalls that when Laura had been lifted on to the cart she sighed: "O Mary, how fortunate I should have been to have died in your house!..."

This is not surprising. Already her favourite ejaculation had become the following: "Virgin of Carmel, take me to heaven!"

The children were trembling with cold and fear. Laura said to Merceditas: "Begin the hymn to Our Lady: 'Let us make a way through the unsafe sea!'..."

At first, weak and shaky, then a little stronger and more secure, the boarders' voices were heard singing in the night... Felicinda was waiting for them with open arms... However Laura was not thinking of the house made of wood owned by her godmother. While singing

*'Let us make a way through the unsafe sea
of a treacherous world;
To the longed-for shore who will ever bring us?'*

she had been thinking of the house which stands on the eternal shores!...

During their four day stay with the Lagos family, all were revived, comforted and content. Fr. Crestanello celebrated Mass each morning, and on July 20th they were able to return to the college.

The waters had retreated without having left too much damage behind.

Laura, with all the others, set about clearing away layers of mud from all the rooms. She had a bad persistent cough which made her tremble all over, and then left her bathed in perspiration. Quickly her strength was ebbing away. Sometimes, pale as death, other times with noticeable red marks under her eyes, she breathed with difficulty, as though she lacked air.

Sr. Piai was very anxious about her and called the doctor. If it had been any other boarder she would have been sent home to her family, but who could be so heartless as to think of sending her to Quilquihué?...

The doctor arrived; well, he was a doctor of sorts. He had the title, but he was simply a chemist and a particular type of chemist. His name was Mr. Cardiel and he did all he could.

He suggested nourishing food and rest and he gave her some kind of mixture for the cough. Fr. Crestanello says that the girl spoke very clearly to the doctor: "You are trying different remedies to cure me, but in vain, doctor. This is my last illness; I will never get better."

Francesca Mendoza, who had the job of milking the cows, used to bring her fresh milk with honey in it; however Laura on her part never asked for anything special. She accepted everything gratefully and in a spirit of obedience.

If they asked her: "How are you?" she replied: "A little better, thank you." She was always happy and smiling. But the bitter tide of sorrow was invading her soul!

And that soul burned with only one desire — to leave the cold winter of this earthly life... An exile from her childhood days, homeless, and one could say without a family, she had seen all her youthful dreams dashed against the rocks of human malice and misery... Already the sound of mighty waters from on high — from God's fountain which is nourishment and life — was fast approaching.

The bitter chalice

When Mercedes came to Junín for her usual monthly shopping, she found Laura seriously ill. While not confined to bed, her thin appearance was striking.

Her mother wanted to take her to Quilquihué...

Sr. Azócar sadly got together her best pupil's exercise books, and put them away for ever. Laura murmured: "Must I leave my heaven?"... It was the moment to bow her head and drink that chalice to the last drop. But Sr. Piai did not agree immediately to her going; she referred the matter to Fr. Crestanello. Mercedes went to speak to him.

The air was alive with the first scents of spring. The balsam of the great pines, the plentiful food and her mother's care would help the sick girl to recover.

Fr. Crestanello did not pry into her secrets, he asked no questions and put no obstacle in the way. He was already certain that Laura's sickness came from her virtue. He agreed to her going and the Superior did not create any difficulty. In fact, for some time now, Sr. Piai had completely handed over the young girl to that wise moulder of souls. She confesses: "As soon as I realised that I was dealing with an exceptional soul — and I became aware of it soon — I felt a sense of trepidation and I left her totally in the Confessor's hands."

Laura had only these words to say: "If Jesus wants this from me, His will be done."

Mercedes hurried to do the shopping. The young girl said 'good-bye' to her Superiors and companions. She then went to confession.

The sorrow was shared by all. Laura had known

how to treasure her suffering, and jealously keep it a secret. In fact, she used to say: "With all the attention I am getting, I fear that I will become accustomed to too much comfort."

The others, instead, were full of admiration at her virtue.

Then there was a last gesture of love. She was ready to cross the threshold of the house in which she would have loved to live and die, she turned to the Superior and asked her to give away her clothes to a needy family nearby.

Mercedes had made her put on a pale red dress, plain in cut, but elegant, according to her companions.

When the cart moved away, all waved their handkerchiefs as a sign of farewell and many secretly dried their tears. The mule-track skirted the river Chimehuin and Laura sadly contemplated its waters... Had she not said on that night of the flooding: "O, if only I could die in your house, Mary!"

Did she know then that she would never enter the college again?

When the ranch — the falcon's haunt — appeared on the horizon, Laura shivered.

Perhaps her mother noticed! But if the body shuddered, the spirit remained strong and fervent. Entering the ranch through the well-known veranda, Laura took on a severe expression; she retired behind a dignified reserve, where not even Manuel Mora dared to trespass. But what a humiliating thing to eat under that roof!

The rancher could not really say what that protective screen was, but the young girl was already giving him a certain feeling of uneasiness.

He contented himself with passing an occasional rude comment, or he gave vent to his bitter irony with derisive sneers. He did not dare to go any further. Laura was already a tree battered by the storm. And he, foiled in his foolish desires, was anything but moved

by her sufferings. Evil and spite were brooding in his heart and he could not wait to be rid of her face, which was a continual, if silent, condemnation!

Laura remained at Quilquihué from September 15th until November 1st. Each day was like the one before, only they became sadder for the child, deprived as she was of Mass, Holy Communion, a word from Fr. Crestanello, and the friendly company of the Sisters and her companions. Mercedes sadly watched the slow but continual deterioration of her daughter.

Did she understand, at least in some vague way, that she herself was the cause of it?

It does not seem likely. They were so near now! Laura accepted her mother's attentions with a grateful heart, she followed her with a gaze that spoke of tenderness... But there was also such a distance between them!

The daughter was wasting away, forced to contemplate with her own eyes the abject condition of her mother for whom she was silently offering herself in sacrifice. It was an endless agony...

Perhaps Mercedes was thinking of fleeing. Laura had begged her many times to free herself from the yoke of the condor!

But how? Where could she go? Laura's condition gradually worsened. The bitter chalice, called Quilquihué, was poisoning her!...

Manuel Mora caressed his 'slave-woman' in the same way as he would stroke the mane of his horses... Perhaps he had a presentiment that she was about to leave him? Mercedes took advantage of her master's good humour to ask if she could accompany Laura to Junín to have her attended by the doctor.

Julia could go back to school at the college, and she would rent a little house and look after her daughter...

He said neither yes nor no. So the three of them set out.

Somewhere to die

At Junín Mercedes rented a little two-roomed house. It was called a *ranchito* — a poor hut made of straw and mud pasted together. It was divided in two, had a floor of beaten earth, a leaking roof and a door.

Laura, however, considered it a thousand times more beautiful than the fine ranch of Quilquihué!

It was not her 'Heaven' where she had hoped to die, but she was free there.

At least there, she did not have to hide herself when praying. The sparrow-hawk was far away. She was alone with her mother, the mother who did not understand her, the mother for whom she was dying!

The Sisters, her companions and Fr. Crestanello could come to the *ranchito*. To die assisted by him, by her good Superior, by dear Sr. Azócar, would be as welcome as falling asleep after a tiring day, or a race, or after a good cry...

The doctor used to come too. He diagnosed peritonitis. Let us not forget that we are talking about the same Mr. Cardiel, and that at the time, at least in those parts, this subtle illness did not yet have a name.

However, Fr. Crestanello, Fr. Genghini and the Sisters say that it was a form of tuberculosis.

The days were sunny and Laura often sat outside under a big tree from where her gaze sought out the little spire, the college, or wandered over the mountains white with snow, or into the sky where her hopes lay.

The *ranchito* was a stone's throw away from the girls' college and was even nearer to the boys' school, whose little Chapel served as a Parish Church.

In Junín, November was the month of flowers, just as

May is for us, and it was dedicated to Our Lady in preparation for the feast of Mary Immaculate.

Laura now spent almost all of the day in bed. However, every evening during that month she attended the Marian devotions.

Often in the morning she mustered up sufficient strength to go to Mass and receive Holy Communion. Mercedes accompanied her there, and lovingly supported her. Sometimes her friends used to come to the *ranchito* and they took her mother's place and brought her to the Church.

Only the angels were aware of how much each step cost her! We know that for the feast of the Immaculate, December 8th, she was unable to get up... Her condition was becoming more serious every day. But we also know that right to the end, she did not give up her penances and her long prayers, especially for her mother.

A little, out-of-the-way settlement in the mountains is like a big family. Everyone had heard of Mercedes' situation; they knew all about her. On the one hand they pitied her, while at the same time it was being whispered here and there, that the daughter was having to pay for that very situation...

The name of Manuel Mora was held in horror there. Sr. Piai, Sr. Azócar, Merceditas and others often came to the sick girl's bedside and she was glad to see them and even happier still to be able to pray with them.

She kept the blue ribbon with the medal of Our Lady, in the form of an 'M' at the end of her bed. Sr. Anna Maria Rodriguez, who had died two years previously, had taught her to do that. Gazing at the ribbon, she reflected on her former teacher's words... How she would have loved to take her place as a Sister... now, instead, she was getting ready to meet her!

Occasionally, when her companions were with her, she found the strength to unite her voice with theirs and sing her favourite hymn:

*Venid y vamos todos
Come and we will go together...*

But the harpstrings were already breaking. To her companions she used to say: "How happy we will be in heaven with Jesus and Mary, if we have served them on earth!" If they said to her: "But you are always praying," she replied: "Since I am so near the end, it is right to pray a lot for myself and for others so that the Lord will give me patience and cheerfulness in my sorrows and his grace to the others"... Saying 'the others', her gaze searched out Mercedes. Many good ladies of Junín used to come to visit the sick girl, and perhaps on the advice of Fr. Crestanello, they kept Mercedes company, since the latter was often in tears, without, however, having the courage to look into the depths of her soul, or face the future.

Julia Martínez, Josephine Ferre, Laura's godmother, Felicinda Lagos, Flora Urrutia and many others tried to become close friends with Laura's mother, perhaps hoping that she would make the break with that deadly man...

Mercedes at times, was agitated, like one caught between two conflicting desires. More often than not, she tried to escape from these thoughts, and lived from day to day, very depressed, occupying herself solely with Laura and with keeping the house tidy...

And Laura, from that humble hut, raised up her cry, ever more insistently: "My mother, Lord, save my mother!" and then: "O Virgin of Carmel take me to heaven!..."

Manuel Mora

Christmas and the light of its star had passed by without Laura having seen the little Crib at the Salesian Church... The school year too was over.

Julia Amanda stayed on at the college with the Sisters. At the *ranchito* there were only two beds, one for Laura and one for Mercedes. Besides, Amanda's high spirits and the nature of Laura's illness must have suggested to Sr. Piai that it would be better to keep the little one in the college.

The summer of January 1904 was at its height. At times, bathed in perspiration, at other times cold as ice, the sick girl was breathing with difficulty, and was no longer able to leave the house. She sometimes passed an hour or so sitting beside the window, supported by pillows.

All she longed for was to die in peace, while she continued to pray ever more fervently for her mother's conversion. Would she die then without seeing the results of her sacrifice...?

Unexpectedly, one evening, there was the sound of horse's hooves in the little yard. The sick girl raised her eyes; Mercedes too noticed.

She saw Manuel Mora outside, already on the ground, tying the reins to a tree. He walked in as though he owned the place. Laura had closed her eyes... The rancher smiled cynically.

Whose money was paying the rent for the *ranchito*, and keeping those who lived in it? Was it not his?

He insisted on spending the night there. Mercedes felt her blood going cold. She tried to reason with him; but to no avail. The man was true to his old self. He

began, as at Quilquihué, to insult Mercedes and to pour out his venom on the girl.

Fancy, the "little saint" blocking his way?...

Mercedes refused, but Mora would listen to no reasons. There was a battle of words, which on his part heightened into a series of roars.

Mercedes begged him not to make himself heard by everyone.

In the meantime someone had tipped off Felicinda Lagos.

Laura, exhausted physically, but strong in spirit, got up at once. And since it seemed to her that her mother was wavering and beginning to give in, she said resolutely:

"If he stays, I am going to the college to the Sisters!"

With a great effort, she made as if to go. Mercedes did not know what to do and Mora did not want publicity. He tore after her like a wild animal, caught her by the arm, and beating her savagely tried to get her back into the *ranchito*! Fortunately Felicinda arrived and snatched the victim from those evil hands. Since by now a crowd was gathering, the villain jumped on his horse and rode away at full speed.

Yet once again he had been beaten. Laura was put back to bed, and she never got up any more. Well, yes, she did. Fr. Crestanello, who had come to console her, wanted to satisfy her last wish — to be able to kneel before the tabernacle and give thanks... He had come with some of the older boys of the college, who waited outside while he spoke to Laura. One of them, Sabino Cardenas, says that he heard some of her words, how she was offering her life and her sufferings to God so that her mother could "be free" and could "save her soul"...

After some time, Fr. Crestanello came to the door and asked for a poncho — the round mantle with an opening for the head, which was worn by all. He said: "Let us make a stretcher and carry the sick girl into the Chapel." With deep respect, as though they were

carrying a little martyr, the boys set out... This was the last time Laura saw the church which had witnessed her prayer and her suffering.

With what enthusiasm had she not sung hymns to Mary, to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to the saints, during those four years!... Now she could only breathe: "Amen!"

Never a lament on her lips for the harsh treatment received at the hands of Manuel Mora. One who hurried to recount everything to Fr. Crestanello said: "Once again, we were in admiration of our young friend's virtue. No doubt about it, she was a courageous little saint."

Everyone in Junín complained about the perverse ranch-owner as they talked about the unpleasant incident. And still Mercedes' eyes were not opened.

Laura pleaded with her: "Please, I beg you to leave that man!"

Natalina Figueroa referring to those days, says: "Fully resigned to God's will in her sufferings, Laura wished for nothing else but to see her mother leave that man who was treating her so badly."

Mercedes continued, coming and going, attending to her daughter with a love full of sadness, and still she did not understand. Or perhaps, she did understand, but she lacked the strength to break once and for all with Manuel Mora.

Alone

According to accounts, Manuel Mora's cruel attack happened about mid-January. During the days immediately after, Laura's condition got so bad that she herself asked for the last sacraments. Mercedes went to call Fr. Crestanello. The date was January 18th. The good Father came at once and a first glance told him that she was near the end...

The fever, the exhaustion, her difficult breathing did not allow her to speak at any length. However she managed to say: "Father, I will never get up again. I hope to go and see Jesus and Mary soon. I would like to go to Confession to prepare myself for the big step..."

Fr. Crestanello heard her confession and promised that on the following day he would bring her Holy Communion. He was wondering whether or not she should be told that he and the Sisters were about to leave for Santiago, to make their spiritual retreat.

That evening he did not have the courage to say it. During the night Laura coughed blood so violently that Mercedes became terrified. The girl was suffering intensely but not a single lament escaped her. Her mother was amazed at this. Little did she realise that each breath was not a cry of anguish, but one of love and supplication...

Fr. Crestanello came early and gave her Holy Communion and, during her thanksgiving, the dying girl renewed her resolve and the offering of her life for her mother.

Since it seemed that Laura would die at any moment, he remained with her until almost evening. By our poor human standards, it would have been well had she died that day... she would not have died alone!

The Sisters came to greet her.

Sr. Piai and Sr. Azócar stayed a while and her companions called too.

Claudina Martínez says: "I visited Laura a few days before she died... She endured everything without a complaint." Sr. Maria Vera, one of those about to leave for Santiago, says the same thing. Fr. Crestanello describes her hours of agony that day: "When the pain became worse, uniting herself to the sufferings of Jesus Crucified, Laura murmured aspirations which drew tears from the by-standers."

Off guard for a moment, the child whispered: "O Father, how much I am suffering!"

"I believe it, my daughter," answered Fr. Crestanello, "but be brave. Jesus will recompense you for it all..." And lowering his voice, "Remember the grace you are asking! Call on Mary Help of Christians and she will help you to suffer with love..."

"Yes, I am happy to suffer," answered Laura in a whisper. "My one desire is to please Jesus and Mary!"

Towards sunset the dying girl seemed to have recovered some strength, and so hesitantly they told her that the following morning the Sisters and the Salesians were leaving, as the caravan for Chile was ready to move off.

"Unfortunately, my child, that's what has to be," said Father Crestanello.

"My God!" exclaimed Laura. "Must I die then without any of those near me who could help me?" They were crying around her bed. Then Laura began again: "How hard it is, my Jesus, but may your will be done!"

Fr. Crestanello consoled her as best he could. He assured her that Fr. Genghini would be staying on at Junín and that she would not be abandoned.

Attempting a smile, the sick girl murmured: "If Jesus wants things that way, then I do too! But you, Father, don't give up praying for me so that I may persevere to the end and save my soul!"

Then it was Sr. Piai's turn and she had a lump in her

throat as she said farewell. She had really been a second mother to Laura, and to leave her now, in her agony, was a sacrifice beyond compare.

And Laura, who had hoped to die in the shadow of the college, and in the arms of her good Superior, buried this desire too in the heart of God.

She renounced this consolation to obtain the long-awaited grace, of which as yet, she had received no sign... "I will not see you again except in heaven, but I will speak to Mary Help of Christians about you, and about all the good you have done me!..."

Saying goodbye to Sr. Azócar, she spoke more with her glance than with words. She had no words left.

Her closest friends had gone and Laura spent the night of January 19th thinking of the long road the caravan would have to travel — from Junín to Temuco and then to Santiago... They were going to her birthplace.

They would be passing near the church where she had been baptised. Perhaps she remembered her father...

Laura was alone as she faced death and with this terrible question: Will I speak to mother about it before I die? Will I make her suffer pointlessly? Or will the suffering be of some value?...

Meanwhile the Sisters at the college were preparing the trunks and Laura was asking herself what should she prepare for the great crossing over?

Two years previously, when Sr. Anna Maria Rodríguez had died, she had offered in prayer the heroic act of charity for the souls in Purgatory, so now her hands were empty!... But she did not feel afraid. Alone, yes, alone and despoiled of everything, yet how happy she felt at that moment. It was the fourth anniversary of her entrance to the college and, in four years, she had travelled the whole way.

Friendships

On January 21st the Church celebrates the feast of the Roman martyr, St. Agnes. The Children of Mary, Laura's companions at Junín, went to Mass and then called to the *ranchito* to be near their friend as she approached death.

Laura was not able to receive Holy Communion as she was continually vomiting.

Her suffering was so great and so evident that her friends knelt down around her bed and asked Our Lady that the dying girl might once more receive Holy Communion. Merceditas was present. Perhaps she reminded her friends of two years ago, when she and Laura, on the eve of their reception as Children of Mary, were sweeping a classroom. On that occasion they took a picture of St. Agnes and having placed it on a desk, recited their act of consecration kneeling before it... Now, she who many centuries before, had offered her neck to the sword rather than lose her virginity, came from her heavenly throne to meet another thirteen year old, the little virgin martyr of the Andean Cordillera.

Two years ago, on the day of their consecration, Laura, in a burst of enthusiasm, threw her arms around Merceditas and said: "What a happy thought! In a few hours we will really be Children of Mary, our dear Mother"...

And now for the two friends, the moment for a last painful embrace had come... Death was hovering around the poor *ranchito*. Could one speak of joy? Yes, Laura kept near her the Handbook, which she always treasured, containing her duties and some beautiful prayers.

How many times had she not repeated: "O Mary conceived without sin, I, Laura Vicuña, take you as my protectress, my lady and my mother. At your feet I firmly resolve to use all my energy to promote your glory and devotion. From today on, I want to walk in your footsteps and imitate your virtue, especially your angelic purity, your perfect obedience and your boundless charity."

Purity, obedience and charity were the source of Laura's joy. She was peaceful because she had loved Mary.

At the Salesian college there remained Fr. Genghini and a cleric who had come to spend the holidays at Junín, hopefully to regain his health.

The latter's name was Felix Ortiz. Like everyone else in the place, he used to visit the sick girl. However, while the majority simply lamented the death of one so young, he stayed by her bed, which for him was an altar, to give and receive comfort and strength.

All were amazed at Laura's self-control.

We will transcribe here the words of some who saw her, and had to marvel at her calmness, her zeal, her refinement of soul and the supernatural spirit which gave life to her every word, breath and heart-beat:

"People left the room edified, recollected, lost in thought as though leaving the Church..." Some exclaimed: "Poor girl, how much she is suffering! She was so good, and yet she has to die so young!"

Laura had thus become the friend of all. The whole of Junín was in agony with her. Junín was learning what it means to die in the Lord.

The cleric Ortiz had a little statue of Our Lady — something very rare in those parts — and he offered it to Laura.

She was already at the end. Ortiz remained beside her, so let us leave the description to him: "The pale face and sunken eyes gave the impression that already the angel of death had left his cold kiss on her forehead."

She smiled when she saw me coming in. She seemed to revive and taking the little statue in her hands — the one I had given her some days before — she said to me in a faint voice: 'It is Mary who gives me strength in these moments.'

I went nearer the bed and after a few questions about how she was feeling — questions which she answered with serenity since all she wanted was the divine will — I asked her what made her happiest at that difficult moment. Always smiling, Laura whispered to me: 'What consoles me most in these moments is the fact that I have always been devoted to Mary. Yes, she is my mother... she is my mother... Nothing makes me so happy as the thought that I am a Child of Mary!'

Then the dying girl spoke to him from her heart. Ortiz tells us: "She uttered words which I carry engraven in my heart since they referred solely to me, and their memory has renewed my interior strength on many occasions."

Six years later, when already a priest, Fr. Ortiz said: "I still seem to hear those words — 'She is my mother'. In that expression lies the secret of Laura's life, a life which was innocent, serene, unspoilt; more angelic than human!" And he continues: "I understood then how far christian love can go and I no longer marvelled at Laura's virtue, at her deep spirit of prayer, her tender love for the Heart of Jesus and for Mary Immaculate, her sincere humility, her reserve and modesty and her terrible fear of the world. Neither do I wonder at her love of suffering or at her offering her life to save the person she loved most in the world... All had its source in her love for Mary... With that blessed name on her lips, some short hours afterwards she peacefully gave up her soul to God!"

I am dying for you

Laura had already said good-bye to all. At the girls' school the only one left was Sr. Marietta Rodríguez, the infirmarian. Laura sent for her, to thank her for her kindness and care.

Sr. Marietta wrote: "I found her resigned to God's will. She said to me: 'I hope my mother will decide to live a good life. Then I will die in peace'."

She had spoken to Merceditas with great emotion: "Dear Merceditas, be constant in virtue... We were friends on earth, and I will not forget you in heaven... Good-bye! I will greet Our Lady for you. I hope to see her soon."

She wanted to see Amandina. While the latter sobbed with her head between her hands, as she leaned on the bed, Laura exhorted her: "Have great charity and patience with Mamma. Try not to displease her and always treat her with great respect. Be humble and obey her. Do not abandon her in her needs, even should you go to another state... Remember these words of your sister who is about to leave you... We will meet each other in heaven!..."

Since the vomiting had ceased she was able to receive Viaticum, which Fr. Genghini brought early on the morning of January 22nd. Shortly afterwards he gave her Extreme Unction.

Death was very near, and yet it seemed that she could not die. Mercedes, greatly agitated, was coming in and out of the sick room. She bent over Laura, and attended her with great kindness, but Fr. Genghini tells us that she appeared at times to avoid her daughter's gaze.

Many times that same daughter had begged her to

leave Manuel Mora!... Would she now watch her die without promising to break the vile chain?...

Or perhaps was Mercedes afraid to admit the tragic situation?

Fr. Genghini remained alone with the dying girl at least for some moments. This had possibly been the agreement between them. Afternoon moved in to evening and Fr. Crestanello's caravan was already on Chilean soil...

Laura, after drowsing for a long time, wakened up and looked around.

Merceditas and Maria Vera were praying in an undertone. Fr. Genghini was beside the bed. Laura made a sign to him to call her mother. She must speak to her, it was time; this was the last chance.

"Mercedes!" he called. The woman, believing that her daughter's last moment had come, cried out: "My daughter, my daughter, are you going to leave me alone?" and she ran to the bedside.

Fr. Genghini retired into a corner, while Merceditas and Maria went to the door and remained there as though in a dream.

Laura, with infinite tenderness, said: "Yes, mother, I am dying!... I asked this of Jesus." Mercedes gazed intensely at her daughter, and big tears ran down her cheeks. Laura continued:

"For almost two years I have been offering my life to Him for you!... for the grace of your return!" Mercedes fell to her knees.

"Mother, before I die, shall I not have the joy of seeing you repent?" The hushed silence was broken only by Mercedes' sobbing.

Finally, almost beside herself with anguish and remorse, she exclaimed: "Then I have been the cause of your Calvary, and now I am responsible for your death? Oh my Laura, I swear this moment that I will do what you ask me... I repent. God is witness to my promise!..."

Laura was transfigured. She called out "Father!"
Fr. Genghini came.

"Father, my mother has promised to leave that man. You too are a witness to her promise!..."

And Mercedes continued: "Yes, Laura, tomorrow morning I will go to church with Amandina and go to confession..."

Mother and daughter embraced and the closeness was so intimate that it seemed a dream!... It was only then that Merceditas and Maria got to know of Laura's heroic secret. Before long everyone would know.

The sun was setting and a great peace spread over Laura's face. Mercedes, inconsolable, was sobbing.

Laura kissed the crucifix, smiled and murmured: "Thank you Jesus! Thank you Mary! Now I die content!" And she died.

A few seconds before, Julia Cifuentes had entered the room, and she assures us that "Laura died while speaking." Hers were words of light, a light that did not grow dim.

Afterwards

Laura's mother sent Mercedes to the college to ask for the white dress and blue sash which she had worn on the day of her reception as a Child of Mary. Then, weeping bitterly, she dressed the corpse of her angelic little daughter.

Laura's companions lovingly placed the ribbon round her neck, and the rosary beads and Sodality regulations in her hands. In the fields the flowers were blooming everywhere; it was mid-summer. Her friends and neighbours and all the people of Junín came to the *ranchito* with flowers.

Fr. Genghini, the cleric Ortiz, Sr. Marietta and Mercedes took turns near the corpse, praying for her soul. People filed past, filled with emotion, and left a flower as they offered a prayer. It was a real demonstration of affection, of veneration, of compassion... One heard such comments as:

"She was a saint!"

"Laura, virgin and martyr, pray for us!" to which Mercedes, seated near her daughter, replied: "Yes, a martyr for my sake!..." and she began to cry again. All of a sudden she seemed to get a grip on herself and she dried her tears. She called Fr. Genghini and begged him to tell Manuel Mora "not to think of her anymore, because she had decided to change her way of life!"

The victim had been accepted and Mercedes was already on the road to conversion.

All of Junín turned out for the requiem Mass for Laura. It was consoling to see the mother go to receive Holy Communion, after having been to confession

before Mass. Many a tear-filled eye followed her to the altar — as many as the prayers which had been offered for her.

Meanwhile, Manuel Mora went around the countryside in a wild rage!

The coffin remained in the church all day. The God of mercy was drawing life from death. Laura's death certificate declares: "Today, January 23rd, 1904, Laura Vicuña was buried, aged thirteen, cause of death: peritonitis..."

Towards sundown Laura's body was brought to the cemetery. Again the whole countryside, full of emotion, accompanied the remains. Julia Amanda recalls: "There were many people present at the funeral and burial, because everyone loved Laura."

Maria Vera assures us, too, that every family in Junín took part in the service — "drawn by Laura's reputation for holiness..."

Where would they bury the little martyr? Mercedes no longer possessed anything. All she had were her hands to work with. But immediately a wealthy and benevolent family, the Herreras, offered a place for Laura in their family tomb. And, since two years previously they had given a niche for Sr. Anna Maria Rodríguez, teacher and pupil found themselves beside each other in that rest which is a prelude to the final resurrection.

Ortiz recalls: "Those who had known Laura intimately, and admired her virtue, bade a last farewell to the remains, as they murmured quietly:

"Angel, virgin, martyr, pray for us"!

On the road home Manuel Mora appeared. Seeing that the girl was now dead, everything could begin all over again... Things could be as they were at the start... Mercedes would return to Quilquihué!

Fr. Genghini, not Mercedes, went forward to meet the haughty ranch-owner and give him her message. This priest had already become Mercedes' protector.

Manuel Mora gritted his teeth but in the presence of so many, all he could do was go away...

The good women of Junín took their turns and kept Mercedes company during the next few days; they felt that the falcon would return! And he did.

He swooped down on the *ranchito*, revolver in hand. He had hoped to find the victim alone, to terrify her into following him. Flora Urrutia and Emilia Heucheff in angry tones, tried to persuade him to leave the woman in peace. He, however, answered Mercedes in a rough voice: "How well you have protected yourself between two women!" he said.

"Should it cost me my life," she answered, "I will keep my oath to my daughter!"

But he retorted: "You will not escape me. I will be happy only when I see you dead."

The flight

They say that Mercedes showed the courage of a lion as she kept her promise. In fact she could not put a foot outside the house without being in danger. She did not risk living alone, but neither did she give in!

Natalina Figueroa says: "At Laura's death, Mrs Pino had to hide herself because Manuel Mora threatened her with death if she did not return with him to the ranch."

Because of this she planned to flee. Julia Amanda went back to the college. Flora Urrutia, through a servant, sent a big package to the *ranchito*...

In it were clothes for the disguise. Then the lady herself came to explain her plan to Mercedes. Half way between Junín and Carlo Richter's ranch there was a small *ranchito* belonging to the Urrutia family. She could hide there if necessary. Carlo Richter was a rich land-owner who had property near the frontiers. His wife would help her for the second part of the journey... On the appointed day Flora would have the horses ready... The people knew of the plan, but in order to protect Mercedes, they kept it a secret...

"One evening," according to Amelia Martínez, who lived along that route, "as I stood at the window, I noticed passing by, a lady I did not recognise. My friend Maclovia Gutierrez who was beside me whispered: — 'It is Mercedes Pino. She is trying to get away!...'"

They continued to gaze after her. As soon as she was out of the built-up area she found the one who was to accompany her waiting, with the horses ready. At top speed, she set off along the road to the Richter's *rancho*.

But someone else — there is always a traitor — was hurrying along to the ranch at QuilquiHué! Manuel Mora, with a curse, got into the saddle and followed the tracks of the fugitive. As luck would have it, she had not stopped at Flora's *ranchito*! When she eventually arrived at the Richter's farm she found Mrs Richter ready. Having changed the horses, they continued towards the frontier, since their intention was to go down into Chile.

Manuel Mora reached the Richter's farm shortly after the two women had left.

Charles detained him talking, until he thought the little caravan was sufficiently far away. Then, as man to man they discussed the burning issue, and he dissuaded Mora from following Mercedes. The ranch-owner returned to QuilquiHué, certainly not convinced, but once again, he had been beaten!...

During the difficult crossing of the Cordilleras, Mercedes met up with Fr. Crestanello's caravan as it headed back towards Junín. In a flood of tears she poured out her whole story to Sr. Piai, and asked her to care for Amandina.

She said she would stay far away until her good friends in Junín sent word that Mora no longer thought about her... and she could return.

She did, in fact, go back after some time. She lived with Josephine Ferre, whose parents were rich and highly respected, even by Mora. Later on she rented a little house where she retired with Julia Amanda, who continued at school as a day pupil.

Everyone was helpful, and Mercedes persisted in her resolve, risking death rather than go back on the promise she had made... Fr. Crestanello, according to the sisters of Junín, with his kind words, tried "to alleviate her sufferings and give her moral support to face the troubles which tormented her."

Others relate that the Commissioner of Police gave

Sergeant Silva the responsibility of providing "personal protection" for Mercedes.

Already the year was ending, summer was near, and Julia Amanda, now twelve years old, had finished school. She was like her sister, physically well-developed and seemed much older than her years.

A fine young man, Orazio Jones, asked her to marry him and Mercedes immediately gave her consent. The wedding was celebrated in the little Church of Junín on November 10th of that year. Julia herself says: "I must admit that I could not immediately understand why my mother gave me in marriage at twelve years of age, in 1906. But as I got older, I concluded that she no doubt had been guided by this desire — to save me from the dangerous situation in which she had found herself with Mora."

The same Mora came to a tragic end. There was horse-racing at the Flores' ring. It seems that Mora had lost in the betting... He got into an argument with a certain John Aranda, punching him in the face. Aranda's step-brother entered the fight... Manuel Mora was stabbed...

He died on the street covered in his own blood.

For those who would like to know how Mercedes ended her life, Fr. Genghini tells us that she died a christian death on November 17th, 1929, in Cherquenco, in the Temuco valley. She was fifty nine.

Testimonies

“Like the virgin St Agnes, Laura Vicuña showed a degree of virtue beyond her years. Through faithful correspondence to grace, she reached the height of christian heroism, offering her own life for the salvation of her mother. Hers is an example bound to impress not only the young people of today, but also their parents and educators. It shows the wonderful fruitfulness of the Church, which is ever producing new flowers of grace and holiness, also among the young.”

Mgr. Louis Chavez Gonzáles
Archbishop of S. Salvador

“She is an example of christian holiness which must not be left in the shade; she must become known, honoured and proposed for imitation by our young people. They have great need of such examples.”

Mgr. Gagnor
Bishop of Alexandria

“The shining example of Laura Vicuña helps our young people — often empty, superficial, or generally sceptical — to understand clearly what is the meaning and value of life. America will have a new patron. A new star will shine in the Church’s firmament.”

Mgr. Nicodemo
Archbishop of Bari

“Although so young in years, the servant of God appeared very mature in virtue which was well-proven — simple and candid, ardent in prayer, generous and strong in sacrifice, even to the heroic offering of her life for the salvation of her mother. In these times of ‘brokenness’ and moral crisis for young people, where the tendency is to flee from sacrifice and to crave for pleasure, this angelic servant of God can be a model and incentive towards those strong, pure, christian ideals, which today are too often forgotten.”

Cardinal Maurillo Fossati
Archbishop of Turin

“In the beginning I felt that Laura lived an ordinary life, but as the years passed I became more persuaded that the exercise of her virtues demanded heroism. Besides, I can declare that the servant of God’s reputation for sanctity, so widespread today, is well-founded.”

Sr. Marietta Rodríguez
Infirmarian at Junín

“Laura was presented to the pupils as a model of piety, obedience, humility, mortification and many other virtues which she cultivated to a high degree.”

Sr. Virginia Mossino

“I was in Junín de los Andes from 1922 to 1938. During that time I heard them speak of Laura with such enthusiasm and respect, as though she had died only recently. They praised her mortification, they recalled the offering of her life for the conversion of her mother; they visited her tomb frequently and during recreation they used to sing the traditional hymn composed by Fr. Ortiz about Laura.”

Sr. Maria Mendoza

“It was an incentive to virtue, for the students in the college, just finding themselves in the classrooms and workroom made holy by Laura’s presence.”

Sr. Adele Camargo
Past pupil of the college at Junín

“They managed to give a true description of Laura. From what I knew of her, her amiability, charity and humility were really as they described.”

Sr. Grassi

“To Laura I would give two palms: the palm of purity, and that of love... I think that very soon Laura will be one of the greatest glories of the young people gathered in our Salesian Houses.”

Servant of God Don Filippo Rinaldi

“Apostolic spirit and martyrdom in a life so young are miracles worth remembering.”

Cardinal Minoretti
Archbishop of Genova

Thoughts

“Mary is my mother. What consoles me most is the thought that I am a Child of Mary.”

“We must offer sacrifices to God for the salvation of souls.”

“Be devout to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians. Be constant in virtue.”

“It is Mary who gives me strength and joy in these moments. She is my mother.”

“Love Jesus and Mary and you will be happy at the moment of death.”

“My God, give me a life of love, of mortification, of sacrifice.”

“We will be reunited in heaven.”

“Be loving and kind to your neighbour. Do not despise the poor. Do not treat anyone with coldness and you will be respected by all.”

“If you should go to another state, do not ever forget mother.”

“If Jesus wants it that way, then I do too.”

“Yes, I suffer gladly. My one desire is to please Jesus and Mary. Please God I will succeed.”

“Must I die without any of those near me who could help me? How hard it is, my Jesus. But may your will be done.”

“I hope to go soon to see Jesus and Mary. I would like to go to confession so as to prepare myself better for the big step.”

“You must know how to suffer and to forgive each other’s failings, and love each other as good friends.”

“Since I cannot work and I am near the end, it is right that you should pray a lot for me, so that the Lord will give me patience and happiness in my pain and suffering, and his holy grace to others.”

“How happy we will be in heaven with Jesus and Mary, if we have served them on earth. Let us try to live good lives: Jesus and Mary will help us. Let us beg them never to abandon us.”

“Virgin of Carmel, take me to heaven.”

“It seems to me that God Himself keeps the memory of His presence alive in me. Wherever I am, at school, in recreation, everywhere, the thought of God is with me, to help and console me.”

“If we remembered often that God sees us, how many failures we would avoid. There would be no need for Assistants! We would do everything well.”

“Who knows but that my sickness is the effect of a broken spirit! Yet, I do not think that I am acting the invalid out of cowardice. However, when I think of the pain suffered by Jesus for love of me, I realise how bad I am at suffering my little annoyances willingly. Being cared for as I am, I fear that these attentions will get me into the habit of expecting too much comfort.”

“What good fortune it would have been, for me to die in your house, O Mother.”

“We must live only for Jesus. I will consider myself a little fool for Jesus.”

“I cannot keep back my tears when I think of how Jesus humbled himself for love of us.”

“O longed-for heaven, when will you come?”

“O Jesus, since I cannot be accepted among those who consecrate themselves to you in the Institute of the FMA, I offer myself completely to your love. I want to be all yours, even if I have to remain in the world.”

“From sticks planted in obedience roses bloom. Remember, Merceditas, just as a dry stick can bloom, so can God speak through the voice of Superiors.”

“Let us make an effort every day: Jesus suffered so much for us on the Cross.”

“O Mary, we confide to your Immaculate Heart our consolations and our griefs, our fears and our hopes. Be our peace in the storms, our shield in battle, and our refuge in time of need.”



Biographical notes

- 1891 - April 5th: Laura Carmen Vicuña is born at Santiago in Chile.
- 1891 - May 24th: she is baptised in the Church of St. Anne.
- 1899 - Her mother flees to avoid persecution, but, on the farm of Quilquihué, where they hope to find refuge and safety, they fall into the hands of an evil man, Manuel Mora.
- 1900 - January 21st: she enters the college of Junín de los Andes which had been opened a month previously by Fr. Milanesio at the request of Monsignor Cagliero. It was directed by the FMA.
- 1901 - January 1st: Laura wins first prize for conduct and application.
- 1901 - June 2nd: she receives her First Holy Communion.
- 1902 - During the short holidays, she courageously preserves her virtue, in spite of the insidious advances of Manuel Mora. She renounces the vacation to be safe in her beloved college.
- 1902 - Easter. She is confirmed by Monsignor Cagliero.
- 1902 - She offers herself as a victim for her mother's conversion. (Probably the second Sunday after Easter).

- 1902 - December 8th: she is received as a Child of Mary.
- 1903 - Spring: she leaves the college for ever, seriously ill.
- 1903 - October: she returns to Junin, to a little house rented by her mother.
- 1904 - January: she takes to her bed, never to get up again.
- 1904 - January 18th: she asks for the Last Sacraments. Before dying, she begs her mother to give up her sinful way of life and she receives a formal promise.
- 1904 - January 22nd: Laura dies a saintly death. At the funeral Mass on 23rd, in the presence of the whole population, her mother receives the sacraments.
- 1954 - Canonical recognition of her remains.
- 1955 - December: beginning of the informative process for Beatification.
- 1956 - March 2nd: Laura's mortal remains are entombed in the Church of the FMA in Bahía.

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