

Sister Maria Romero: educator, catechist, social promoter

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Long live Jesus and Mary! from San Jose, Costa Rica, in Central America. Let's continue *with the Salesian Thursdays*, with their common aspect of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) who have lived the preventive system in an exceptional way. A deep thank you on our part to the sisters who, with such professionalism and affection for the Institute, have made these meetings possible.

At the conclusion of the *Conference on the Contribution of the FMA to Education (1872-2022)*, Sr. Piera Ruffinatto indicated on the relevance of the Preventive System:

A method aimed at regenerating the social fabric starting with young people, women and the poor. It is a system that is a "human awakening", that is, it has a humanizing function that transcends the sphere of pure informing, instructing, assisting, recovering. It helps to liberate the best part of oneself and to create the conditions, the atmosphere in which children and young people can flourish and develop their potential, making their contribution to the society and to the Church.

An FMA who with her life and her Salesian educative practice demonstrated the relevance of the "Preventive System" was Sr. Maria Romero Meneses.

Although she faced very difficult situations in the course of her life, with the help of the Lord, some superiors, nuns and lay people who supported her, she achieved that "human awakening". Her work contributed to the regeneration of the social fabric in its historical moment, an impact that continues to this day.

In this regard, one of the priests, Pbro. Oscar Brenes, who has studied Sister Maria in depth, explains:

Here we are presented with Sister Maria as the believer who finds in the culture of her historical moment a rich and adequate channel of evangelization, both for her natural gifts and for her apostolic desires. We see her evangelizing through painting, poetry, cinema, typing, theater, sewing, embroidery and singing. She knows how to adapt to the age of her recipients, she manages to win the attention of her audience, we see her playing in the street with the children of the oratory and rewarding the skills of the children on feast days. [...], we sum it up in her own words: *there are silent fibers in the heart waiting to be pressed to vibrate and emit notes of happiness; the heart is a musical instrument from which we can begin, as we wish, a Pastoral Symphony by Beethoven, or the Funeral March by Chopin.*

In this meeting we will present Sister María as an educator, catechist and social promoter. First, a video with a biographical summary.

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2OF1qdsi8g>Sor María Romero]

As we have seen, Sister Maria was born in Granada, Nicaragua, but spent most of her life as a religious in Costa Rica, a country adjacent to her homeland in Central America.

We can outline her historical itinerary in the following way:

Sister María Romero Meneses					
1902-1920 18 years	1920-1923 4 years	1924-1930 7 years	1931 4 months	1931-1958 27 years	1959-1977 18 years
Granada – Nicaragua	San Salvador - El Salvador	Granada - Nicaragua	San José – Costa Rica	San José – Costa Rica	San José – Costa Rica
Family CMA	Education, first profession, Assistant of the formande, Music, oratorio	CMA: Juniorate Perpetual Vows, Teacher of music, painting, typing, catechesis, theatre, oratory	Novice Assistant Singing	CMA: Music, Singing, Painting, Theatre, Oratory, catechesis "Misioneritas", Speakers from the suburbs	House of Mary Help of Christians, Social Work

- From her birth until 1920 she lived with her family in her hometown of Granada, Nicaragua. At the age of twelve, she entered Mary Help of Christians College as a student, where her Salesian vocation was born.
- At the age of eighteen she traveled to San Salvador where she stayed for four years, from 1920 to 1923 for the formation of FMA and the first year of profession as assistant of the formees, music teacher and catechist in the oratory.
- From 1924 to 1930 she was sent to her first school, in Granada. She lived her juniorate there and made her perpetual vows. In these years she strengthened her educational identity as a teacher of music, singing, drawing, painting, typing, theater and animation in the oratory.
- In 1931 she was transferred to San José, Costa Rica. Four months in the Novitiate as assistant to the novices and singing teacher. Later to the Mary Help of Christians College in the same city, with the same responsibilities she had had in Granada, but adding all the apostolic work carried out in the peripheral areas of the city and in distant regions. She lived in this house for 27 years.
- From 1959 until her death in 1977, she lived for eighteen years in the House of Mary Help of Christians, where social works were developed and organized.

After coming into contact with Sister María's life briefly, let's begin with the first part of the topic:

Sister Maria Romero educator

The students of the two schools where Sister María carried out her mission were of medium and high socio-economic level; the oratorians, on the other hand, of a low or very low level.

Sr. Maria, as a member of these communities and formed by them, became increasingly aware of her identity as a Salesian educator. She always tried to prepare with quality her classes and gave her best. The pupils learned the individual subjects very well; they loved her very much and were happy next to her, because they experienced the goodness, gentleness and humility of Sr. Maria; her devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians were contagious. When she spoke of them, they all were silent and listened to her. She also taught them care and love for the poor.

However, in this field of education, she experienced the great limit of indiscipline, with all the consequences that this entailed. It was a source of great suffering for her. The following quotes describe this situation a bit:

She completely lacked discipline. It was useless for her to try to impose herself, even if she seemed strict; She won hearts with her kindness and patience. They would come to her and tell her their jokes, their failures and triumphs, everything that happened to them, they had a lot of trust and appreciation for her. She was appointed assistant to the girls of the boarding school, but they had to take away her job because she could not get discipline. When they had to go for a walk, they had to replace her and, for this, the girls invented excuses to stay at home and not go out for a walk, they preferred to stay home with her. (Sister Ana María Cavallini)

One afternoon, while the sisters were having a snack, one of the teachers said: "With me, the students are in the classroom as if they were at Mass." At that moment Sister Maria entered, and having heard the self-praise, she calmly and gracefully said: "But with me they are as they are when they leave Mass." They all laughed. She first of all. (Biografía de SMR, de S. Grassiano)

Sister Maria was able to win hearts and create "a network of communication"¹ through her lessons in music, singing, drawing, painting and theater. Her pedagogical approach, based on art and creativity, allowed students to express themselves freely and strengthen their skills, while encouraging a spirit of community, belonging and solidarity. Sister Maria also matured her educational motherhood through accompaniment, throughout her life. Below is the testimony of one of her former students.

I met Sr. Maria Romero when I was 7 years old, in Mary Help of Christians College in Granada, where I stayed for three or four years. After that, I kept in touch with her for more than thirty years until her death. All these years, we would write to each other, talk on the phone, or I would go to Costa Rica to visit her. My chats with Sister Maria were purely spiritual, I would tell her what was going on in my married life and she would give me advice. (Emma Holmann)

In addition to her 34 years as a school educator, in the last phase of her life, spent in the house in San José in Costa Rica, founded for social works, Sister Maria managed to realize her dream of guaranteeing a formal education for the most and the poorest. She managed to open a craft school that over time turned into a School of Social Orientation.

The aim was to create an educational environment imbued with the values of the Salesian Preventive System, despite the difficulties involved in working with young people who have suffered the consequences of poverty and abandonment. Some dropped out of the program, but many responded positively and were able to overcome their poverty.

Sister Maria always acted in collaboration with the community and in accordance with obedience. Perhaps for this reason, the implementation of a specific education for the poorest was "delayed", which in those years was not well received by some superiors and sisters in the province. Nevertheless, without any doubt, the ardor and passion of the *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, prevailed. She did not give up, which is why the Lord has done great things through her.

¹ Cf. MENDES Gildasio, Jóvenes, mundo digital y pastoral juvenil: la tercera parte de la entrevista al Padre Gildasio Mendes, Consejero General para la Comunicación Social por el Fr. Bruno Ferrero, 09 enero 2024, https://www.infoans.org/es/?option=com_k2&view=item&id=19924

Sister Maria's catechetical action

We will focus on two aspects: Sister Maria catechist and formator of catechists.

☞ *Sister Maria Catechist*

Sister Maria was an extraordinary catechist, a *pedagogue of grace and eternal truths*.

Sister Maria is a mystagogue. A witness to the Mystery. The whole of her life is illuminated by the experience of God. The living and compelling God of Sister Maria, who attracted and made people fall in love with her beloved Son, is a God who becomes a travelling companion. It is a shared journey. Sister Maria is aware of her vocation and mission. (O. Brenes)

In the same way, as indicated at the beginning, Sister Maria was in continuous transformation both at the cultural level and at the spiritual, Salesian, ecclesial and catechetical levels. she was constantly updating herself and sought the means to ensure that her catechesis was always faithful to the doctrine of the Church and to the profiles of the Institute. In the following quotation we can observe the concept that she herself had about catechesis:

Just as he who wants to learn law must study law; He who wants to learn surgery, medicine, etc., etc., in the same way we, if we want to learn to love God, must study Religion. There is no need to say: it seems to me that this is like this, that that is there, well, I suppose, I suppose... No! Just as we do not put ourselves in the position of pronouncing oracles in medicine without having studied it, saying it seems to me and supposing, in the same way we do with religion. Religion is the science of beliefs, the divine science that leads us to the knowledge and love of God, and as Christians we have the obligation to study it in order to keep the flame of faith burning, as we promised in holy baptism. (Blessed María Romero)

In a letter to a Salesian in Mexico, asking for catechetical material, she gives some appropriate suggestions for the Catechism of First Communion by Salesian Daniel Zurita, according to the new guidelines of the Second Vatican Council.

Summing up the field of Sister María's catechetical action, we can list:

- Catechist for the pupils and girls of the oratory and school
- Catechist in the oratories of the peripheries
- Sacramental catechesis: baptism, confession, first communion, confirmation, marriage
- Catechism for the Poor
- Liturgical celebrations
- Spiritual exercises for: boys and girls in public schools; the young people of the School of Social Orientation; her cooperators and collaborators
- Novena and feast of Mary Help of Christians
- Popular devotions: Apostolate of the Childhood, Apostleship of Prayer, Living Rosary, Guard of Honor, the first nine Fridays, the first nine Saturdays, the imposition of the Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the fifteen Saturdays
- Devotions combined with social protection: the Christmas novena for children aged 3 to 12; the feast of the Holy Innocents for pregnant women and babies up to 2 years of age; the feast of St. John Bosco for teenagers.

The Marian and Eucharistic dimensions were precisely the two pillars that cemented and impregnated her entire existence, her relationships, her praxis of education, catechesis and social promotion.

Sister Maria Formator of Catechists

With the passion of *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, Sister Maria wanted to bring the message of Mary and Jesus to all possible places where it was necessary to form catechists, because at that time, the Church of Costa Rica did not have a systematic organization in this area.

Sister Maria had formed a choir with the students of the school and the oratory. The young women themselves, influenced by Sister Maria's social sensitivity, began to open their eyes and hearts to the needs of the context around them: the spiritual and social desperation of the many poor families in the suburbs, to which was added the danger of the spread of proselytism by Protestants and communists who went from house to house to win followers. This situation greatly affected Sister Maria, who could not remain with her arms folded.

With the approval of the council of the house, these young women of the choir, together with Sister Maria, decided to form an evangelization group, they called themselves the "Misioneritas". The group was "founded" on December 25, 1939, after two months of reflection and preparation. They undertook to go two by two, every Thursday and Saturday (in honour, respectively, to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and Mary Most Holy), to the poorest neighbourhoods of the capital to evangelize, in addition to clothing and feeding and, in some cases, even to clean and tidy the houses they visited.²

In 1941 the Metropolitan Archbishop of San José, Msgr. Víctor Manuel Sanabria Martínez, expressed the desire that the Catholic Action Movement be extended throughout the diocese. The Rector and the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians College accepted the proposal as faithful daughters of the Church.

Advantage was taken of the already established group of missionaries. They came into contact with Bishop Víctor Manuel, who not only supported them, but also adapted his catechetical plan and the formation of festive oratories in the peripheral areas of the city, the most abandoned both socially and spiritually. They managed to establish 36 peripheral oratories with the characteristic Salesian environment, in which one could learn, play and enjoy life in a healthy way.

The catechists-missionaries received from Sister Maria the formation that prepared them for the missions and also to evaluate the actions undertaken. It was a continuous dynamism. Sister Maria always treated them with respect and with great affection; valued and valued their opinions; she admired in them their apostolic spirit and their readiness to make great sacrifices. She celebrated Catechists' Day with them. The young women felt loved and accompanied by Sister Maria.

All this work also had great obstacles to overcome: finding all the economic aid for the families, for the missionaries' trips, to find teaching materials; the suffering of the humiliation and violence suffered by the poor themselves; the danger of certain areas. One of the other challenges they faced, especially Sister Maria, were the misunderstandings, intolerance and murmurs against her

²Cf. ROMERO María, *Las obras sociales de las Hijas de María Auxiliadora en San José, Costa Rica, (1st ed. 1973). Edición conmemorativa en el 50 aniversario de la Casa de María Auxiliadora, O.S. 1959-2009. San José: Impreso por M&RG, 2009, 17-18. De ahora en adelante OSMA. Also in DALCERRI Lina, in ROMERO María, *Escritos Espiritualis* III, Rome, 1991 , 12.*

and her missionaries by some sisters and superiors who did not agree with this "new" mission in favour of the poorest.

Sister Maria, at the request of the superiors of Rome, wrote a book that collects the social works, history, work, sacrifices, anecdotes and adventures of her dear missionaries. The main actions they carried out are summarized below.

- **Evangelization** to families in the poorest and most abandoned neighbourhoods.
- **Animation in festive oratories**, in the style of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello: catechesis, singing, games, prizes. Some of the provincials promoted the participation of the Sisters in formation and the other Sisters.
- **The missions in remote places** where it was very difficult to reach and in conditions of absolute poverty (Guanacaste, Puntarenas, Alajuela, Sarapiquí). The missionaries were truly heroic. They have carried out numerous enthronements of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary Help of Christians, liturgical celebrations, recitation of the rosary, preparation for the sacraments.
- **Preparation of the resources** that led to catechesis, missions and oratories. They themselves, always together with Sister Maria, had to find the resources, prepare the prizes, help for the poor, draw up the frameworks for the enthronements, the material for catechesis and much more. Sister Maria also involved the families of her students for social assistance. She distributed textiles to many mothers so that they could sew T-shirts, dresses, trousers, which they would later bring as prizes to the oratories.

All this catechetical work has not been easy. She wrote to Mother Clelia Genghini: *I feel tired, very tired, but it doesn't matter, I'm happy*. One of the beneficiaries of the social works said:

Another thing we admired about this unforgettable nun was her spirit of sacrifice. I could see that she got very tired on foot and to visit his oratories in the suburbs. We could see her fatigue, that her feet hurt (let's not forget her rheumatism), that was a superhuman effort for her, but she didn't complain, she was always with her usual smile. (Ángela Valle)

Sister Maria Social Promoter

Her dream, since the 1940s, was to have a house with open doors for her dear poor people: *One day I will have a house for my poor* and this little house was inaugurated on the occasion of the feast of the Founder, St. John Bosco, on January 31, 1959, thanks to the direct intervention of Mary.

Her first benefactors were her former students and their families. Some missionaries continued to collaborate with her in social works that were growing more and more. Sr. Maria, with the typical charism of Salesian friendship, went to meet new friends who collaborated with her in everything. She is a living example of the generativity of the preventive system that does not remain closed, but always opens up to the peripheries of the most vulnerable.

In the book that Sister Maria wrote on social works, you can read in detail the history and anecdotes of each one. Below, we will only name them:

- **The "teas of Sister Maria"**. Although some private houses organized these teas to help Sister Maria's social works, these events began to be held in the House of the Virgin on the

first and third Fridays of each month. Lotteries were organized and quotas were given to raise money to be delivered at the end of the year.

- **Aid to "daisies".** They continued with food and other aid for elderly women with great economic needs.
- **Creation of the "bazaar"** for the poor. Since many people bring used clothes, shoes, utensils to this house, but in good condition, they were sold to the poorest at a symbolic price.
- **Handicraft and vocational courses** for poor young women. These courses, as mentioned in the first part, will evolve into the School of Social Orientation (1968), where entrepreneurship is encouraged.
- **The chapel.** In 1964 the construction of the chapel was completed and liturgical activities began. A beautiful community of believers has been created who also collaborate in social works and grow in love for Jesus in the Eucharist and Mary Help of Christians.
- **Literacy lessons** since 1967 for adult and senior women.
- **Medical Consultation.** In 1970 the medical clinic was inaugurated, which provides assistance to the poorest and immigrants.
- **ASAYNE.** In 1972 the Association of Aid to the Needy was founded, focused mainly on the creation of houses. Three citadels were built.
- **Boarding.** In 1973 the residential house for young women at risk began.

This social project, therefore, was not a "mushroom" that grew sporadically, on the contrary, as we have been able to see, it was the consequence of a Salesian educational vocation matured throughout her life. Each of these works bears the imprint of the Salesian spirit that wants to see "happy in time and in eternity" all those who come to the "House of the Virgin", either to ask for help or for a gesture of solidarity.

Ultimately

In the course of her life, sister Maria, always attentive to the signs of the times and to God's calls, she matured as a Salesian educator: to leave the structured centers to go to the peripheries, to the frontiers of the most vulnerable, and not in solitude, but in obedience, with her dear young people, already adults, and with the many lay people who joined in this educational-social adventure. We would say today in synodality.

Sister Maria, as a Salesian educator and catechist, aware that education must be a bridge to human solidarity, was "the feet of the Social Doctrine of the Church"³ in the era in which she lived and formed a generation of young people, lay individuals, priests, FMA, religious, who turned into torches lit by the love of God to transmit it to those most despised by society.

³ Cf. DOCAT, Pope Francis' prologue.

In this way, by also raising up the "misioneritas", little missionaries of the Gospel of goodness to bring joy and faith among poor families, she was able to bring many students of the college closer to the reality of poverty and degradation, so close and at the same time far away in the city of San José de Costa Rica. ⁴

Just like John Bosco, Jesus gives us his Mother as a teacher who teaches us and accompanies us to show young people the *ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue*; Sister Mary also entrusted herself to Mary's hand without ever leaving her, so the Lord was able to accomplish great works through her. And these works can also be carried out in each one of us and in our educational communities. Sister María inspires and encourages us!

Let us recite together the prayer pronounced on the occasion of her Beatification:

*Lord Jesus, you chose Sister Maria Romero
to follow you in all the paths of gratitude and self-giving.
We praise you because the poor have beheld in her your face of tenderness and trust.
Your Spirit has transformed her into a place of welcome for the lives of many;
Mary, your Mother, was the presence that preceded and accompanied their every step.
Lead our lives in the ways of Love and open us to each of your gifts
so that we ourselves may be a gift to all.
Through Christ our Lord.*

Let us conclude with Sister Maria's dear ejaculation:

***Put your hand, my Mother,
Put it before mine.***

(Blessed Maria Romero)

⁴ LOPARCO Grace, annotations.