

## **Eulogy for Sister Maria Victoria Hernandez of Christ the King**

April 13, 2011

S. Rose Marie Hennessy

Some of us are old enough to remember the Baltimore Catechism and even some of its well memorized phrases. When thinking of Sister Maria Victoria it was the phrase “made in the image and likeness of God” that kept going through me since I heard of her return to the fullness of this image on Friday, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011. She was so multifaceted and she is only one “image and likeness of God”. Image what our God must be like! What an embrace that must have been when she met her God, our God, face to face!

Each of us has known a variety of “faces” of Maria Victoria! In our St. Elizabeth Community we gathered on Friday evening at the dinner hour and the stories of Maria Victoria began to flow! I don’t want to imply it was a “who can top this?” experience of interaction memories, but it was! It began like: “I lived with her at Santa Teresita and.... I lived with her right here at St. Elizabeth and she... I lived with her at St. Michael’s and...” The writer, the researcher, the global trotter, the missionary, the friend, the archivist, the organizer, the family member, the teacher, the pray-er, the “mystic” all continued to live around that table, through those stories. I invite you to do the same at dinner. In joy, wonder, contradiction, conflict, sorrow, creativity, illness, health and much more, Sister Maria Victoria will live at our dinner tables through her life’s story. Her own story, written as an autobiography will continue to give us access to her life in word and photo. But, there is so much more than the written word and photos to be told.

The most unique women in our Congregation continue to live on in stories. We now welcome S. Maria Victoria into that history! In fact, she was in that “unique women of our Congregation category” while very much alive!

Maria Victoria’s parents, Jesus Hernandez and Guadalupe Pantoja were born in Morelia, Michoacán and Mazatlan, Sinaloa. They came to Los Angeles where they gave birth to five daughters and three sons. Our sister was named Thelma Elaine. Her birthday within the Congregation is identified as September 25<sup>th</sup> but on her Baptismal certificate it is September 20<sup>th</sup>. Given the researcher she was I’d go with the Congregational date! She was baptized that November in the year of her birth, 1915, in Holy Cross Church, Los Angeles, and so the spiritual journey began.

She attended several schools in Riverside and Los Angeles during her elementary years and graduated from St. Agnes High School before attending Belmont Junior College in Los Angeles. Having met Sister Flavia and Sister Bernardino at St. Michael’s, she entered Congregation at the age of 19 and later earned a BA in English and an elementary teaching credential. For 30 years she taught in elementary schools,

During her early years in the Congregation she was known as Sister Thora Marie. That’s how my class knew her as our teacher in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at St. James.

## THE ETYMOLOGY AND EVOLUTION OF A NAME

My god-mother was Scandinavian and it was her suggestion that I be baptized “Thelma” which means “Child of God”. On entrance as a novice with the Mission San Jose Dominicans my new name was Sister Mary Thora which I thought was horrible. I had asked for some form of “Joseph”, but was told that there were too many “Josephs” in the Congregation already.

A Council member thought up the name as she said the Congregation was trying to foment devotion to the Dominican Beatas. Mine was Bl. Clara Gambacorta of Pisa, friend of St. Catherine of Siena. Now you are asking where does “Thora” fit in? Bl. Clara’s maiden name was Vittoria, the Italian for Victoria. Since the last part is “toria”, she was sometimes nicknamed “Tora” or “Thora”. So there you have the evolution of my name.

On the very afternoon of Reception Day in 1936, it was changed to “Sister Thora Marie” which was a little more acceptable. For 25 years I suffered with this name which in Japanese means “tiger”; in Spanish “bull (toro)”; and in Greek mythology “god of thunder”; and in Hebrew “law” (torah). On giving a well —deserved “F” on a report card, one irate mother appellationed me with: Sister THORNA Marie. By the way, “Gambacorta” in Italian means “short legs”. I have them.

After Vatican II around 1965, many sisters were allowed to return to their Baptismal names. I definitely did not want to be called Sister Mary Thelma. So, one day I approached Mother Mary Dominic with: “Mother, I am tired of being called by a saint’s nickname “Thora”, would you allow me to be called by her full name: “Victoria”. I was readily given the permission. From that day on I was known as “Sister Maria Victoria”.

One Easter Sunday the community gathered in the auditorium to recreate after the Easter Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. After the crowd had dwindled down, Mother Mary Dominic, our Prioress General walked towards me, took my hands, and with a very intense look said: “Sister, did you notice how the theme “victory” was constantly in the text of today’s Mass and Liturgy? Why don’t you change your feastday from April 17 to Easter Sunday?” Thus it was that I received the greatest feast of the Church calendar, Easter Sunday, as my feastday! Praise be the Lord’

So we have come to know her, “short legs” and all, to learn from her and to be challenged by her knowledge, history, prayer, commitment to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, especially during the night hours, consistent prayer for priests and frequent bold statements.

We have benefitted, and for generations will benefit, from her serious account of our Sisters lives in Mexico from 1906 – 1946. During the journey in Mexico for the 100<sup>th</sup> celebration we read from this account, MINISTRY UNDER FIRE, as we journeyed on the bus from one sacred historical site to another. Sister Maria Victoria’s commitment to research and writing made this possible! It is a joy to know our Sisters in Mexico have this, their story, in Spanish.

Sister Marie Victoria's decisions in life gave us moments of surprise; the greatest being her sincere effort at the age of 80 to discern a call to another religious community, the Trinitarians of Mary at the Monastery of Mount Tabor in Tecate, Mexico! "Carved in my body and soul" is the unique experience of having my third grade teacher tell me at the age of 80 that God and Mother Lilly Diaz were calling her to be in Tecate by May 13<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima! She was there for the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima! God, Mother Lilly, and Sister Maria Victoria mutually discerned the call. Sister returned to the Congregation 61 years previously discerned!

Her final three years continued to find her in failing health but she never lost her sense of intelligent humor, passion for learning, commitment to praying for priests, most especially in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament!

I have no doubt that this unique woman of our Congregation is now experiencing aspects of our God that we cannot even imagine. I believe she was experiencing the many faces of God in unique ways throughout her 95 year journey of life! May she live on in us in gratitude and in story!