



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

August 9, 2023

Dear Friends,

“THE Saints are the true expression and the finest fruits of America’s Christian identity. In them, the encounter with the living Christ is so deep and demanding that it becomes a fire which consumes them completely and impels them to build his Kingdom”, wrote St. John Paul II in the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America* (January 22, 1999, no. 15). This was the fire that burned in the heart of St. Narcisca de JESÚS, the “Niña Narcisca” of Ecuador.

Narcisca de JESÚS Martillo Morán was born in 1832, on a farm called Nobol in the hamlet of San José in Daule, a coastal area of Ecuador which is part of the archdiocese of Guayaquil. She was the sixth child in a family of nine. Her landowner father and mother, Pedro and Josefa, both illiterate, were blessed with a keen intelligence and their hard work earned them considerable wealth. Narcisca de JESÚS learned the first rudiments of the catechism with great ease. Her love for God, whose presence she sensed through nature, and for the Blessed Virgin MARY, was her defining trait. Her mother died when she was only six years old. With the help of a traveling teacher and one of her older sisters, she learned reading, writing, cooking and sewing, an art in which she attained true mastery. She also had a talent for music and played the guitar. In her rural and patriarchal family, everyone learned to work and pray together: family evening prayers were never skipped.

## Good and expert priests

NARCISCA de JESÚS was confirmed on September 16, 1839. “In receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation, she felt clearly in her heart the call to live a life of holiness and devotion to God. To sustain the Holy Spirit’s action in her soul with docility, she always sought the counsel and guidance of good and expert priests, considering spiritual direction as one of the most effective means to arrive at holiness.” (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for the canonization, October 12, 2008). Hers was an artistic soul, gentle and sensitive, but far from indulging selfishly in her many talents, she always strove to help others. She enjoyed nothing more than to sing religious songs accompanied by the guitar, especially the poems of St. Teresa of Avila set to music, or to recite the *Hail Marys* of the Rosary. In the morning, she would get up before the rest to devote herself to prayer and meditation. It was easy for her to recollect

herself and she did all she could to remain in the presence of God, yet she never became a misanthropist.

“Strive as often as possible through the day to place yourself in God’s presence”, advises St. Francis de Sales... “Consider what God does, and what you are doing—you will see His Eyes ever fixed upon you in Love incomparable...” (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, XII, 2). In his *Rule*, St. Benedict writes: “Let a man consider that God is always looking at him from heaven, that his actions are everywhere visible to the divine eyes... The Lord is always looking down from heaven on the children of earth to see if there be anyone who understands and seeks God” (chapter 7, 1st degree of humility).

From a very early age, Narcisca de JESÚS was granted mystical graces but also afflicted with sufferings. The local priest was her first spiritual guide. During the day, her inclination to prayer could only be satisfied by the precious little moments that her duties allowed her. She fled from certain festive or social gatherings, particularly balls and dances; her siblings and her parents could not understand why, and they called her the “montubia”, the “little native”, a rather disparaging term. However, she helped her family prepare for the parties, and would discreetly slip away as soon as the guests began to arrive, retiring under a fruit tree to pray in a place that has since become a place of pilgrimage.

Of course, it is normal to take part in festive events and it can even be virtuous when done out of love for God and neighbor. But in Narcisca de JESÚS, the avoidance of these feasts was the fruit of a special inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, God attracts certain souls to solitude, according to the words of the prophet Hosea: *I am going to seduce her*



Saint Narcisca de JESÚS  
1832-1869

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and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart (2, 16). When she was praying there, Narcisa de JESÚS lost track of time and nothing could disturb her; she was not even aware of the torrential rains that sometimes hit the country. One day, during a heavy storm, her father, Don Pedro, sent his men to go and look for her. They returned soaking wet, but with nothing to show for their trouble. Then Narcisa de JESÚS showed up, her clothes completely dry...

### *Associating with the Redeeming Sacrifice*

NARCISA de JESÚS felt herself called upon by God to do penance for the world that rejects it. When anyone attempted to convince her to soften her many penances, she would reply: "I came into the world to suffer", that is, to prove her love for God by sharing in Christ's sufferings.

"JESUS freely offered his life as an expiatory sacrifice, that is, he made reparation for our sins with the full obedience of his love unto death", teaches the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. "This love to the end (Jn 13:1) of the Son of God reconciled all of humanity with the Father... By calling his disciples to take up their cross and follow him JESUS desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who are to be its first beneficiaries" (Nos. 122 and 123).

Following the footsteps of Mariana de JESÚS de Paredes (a hermit known as the "Lily of Quito", 1618-1645, who was canonized in 1950), Narcisa de JESÚS heard God's call to associate herself especially as a victim with the redeeming sacrifice of JESUS, for herself and for the salvation of all. However, the penitential life of this beautiful, strong, tall and agile young woman with blue eyes, did not make her sad but kind and happy; her gentle and serene character made her especially good and obedient, generous and compassionate towards the poor. She lived and worked like any other young country woman, but she carried out her tasks out of love for God and with great self-denial. In addition to her domestic duties, Narcisa de JESÚS worked as a seamstress. Her kindness endeared her to all, both in her home and in the neighborhood. When there was a call for help, she was always available. An excellent catechist, she could not fail to communicate the fire of divine love. She was especially inspired by a local miraculous image of Christ on the Cross, the "Lord of Miracles", that was the source of many graces. When her father died in 1851 or 1852, she grieved deeply. She was twenty years old when Our Lord invited her to go and live in Guayaquil. Leaving the family circle to go to the unknown caused her much pain.

Mrs. Sylvania Gellibert, an intellectual woman of the upper bourgeoisie who lived near the cathedral in Guayaquil, owned a rural property near the Martillo farm. She was deeply devout, and she had formed a profound spiritual friendship with Narcisa de JESÚS, whom she took to the big city. The main port of Ecuador, Guayaquil had been elevated as a diocese in 1838, but at the time, the see had been vacant for several months. A small steamer

allowed to cover by water the 35 miles (55 km) that separate the region of Daule from the large port. When Narcisa de JESÚS first came into contact with the bustling city, she felt bewildered, but her intense interior life soon helped her to adjust. She desired with all her heart to remain unnoticed, and to occupy a very humble place. She was given lodgings in a small room in an attic, with a hammock for a bed. Now she could go to Mass every day and receive the sacraments frequently. Among the priests of the place, the young girl particularly noticed Canon Luis de Tola, rector of the diocesan seminary and a future bishop, who had visited the Daule region several times. This priest became her first spiritual director, and Narcisa de JESÚS showed great docility to his instructions. His first concern was to dispel the young woman's fears, having discerned in her spiritual ways the work of the Holy Spirit. Canon Tola soon associated Canon José Tomás de Aguirre, also a future bishop of the harbor town, with the guidance of this uncommon penitent. Narcisa de JESÚS recited the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin in private every day and joined some of the hours of the Great Office celebrated by the cathedral Canons. In the evenings, she prayed the rosary with the Gellibert family, before slipping quietly away to her attic, while all the others stayed together for the family gathering.

### *Paris fashion*

HER main occupation was sewing. At that time there were no sewing machines in Guayaquil, and making clothes demanded a lot of work. Narcisa de JESÚS' first client was her hostess, Doña Sylvania, but her reputation as a seamstress spread rapidly and orders poured in. She was even asked to make haute couture garments inspired by the latest Paris fashion. In her work, she strove to apply the advice of St. Teresa of Avila: "Make every stitch an act of love." But at the same time, she increased her penances, as much as her director would allow, to conform herself more to Christ in his Passion. Her meals were very limited. She devoted herself, moreover, to the care of the sick, with great delicacy and love. Soon she won the love of both her hostess's household and the neighborhood.

But her popularity contradicted her desire to remain unnoticed, and she looked for another place to live. Doña Sylvania reluctantly let her go. Narcisa de JESÚS found a job in the large patriarchal house of Colonel Camille Landin. She was offered a fine room on the second floor, but she refused and instead chose to live in a storeroom in the attic. She practiced her trade as a seamstress, making both humble clothes for the servants and beautiful gala dresses for the lady of the house, Doña Carmen. The latter, however, was not easily satisfied, and when a dress was not entirely to her taste, she did not hesitate to let it be known. Narcisa de JESÚS' days were governed by the sound of the bells of the church of St. Francis belonging to the Franciscans, on the other side of the street. She daily attended the first Mass there, at five o'clock on weekdays and at four o'clock on Sundays. Following the example of St. Mariana of JESÚS,

she acquired a large cross with protruding nails. She would place her arms in rings fixed to the horizontal part, and pray in this position for many hours the better to resemble Christ. “In her passionate love for JESÚS, who led her on a path of intense prayer and torment and to identify herself increasingly with the mystery of the Cross, she offers us an attractive witness and a perfect example of a life totally dedicated to God and to her brothers and sisters” (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for the canonization).

### *Moral authority*

**B**EFORE long, her saintly life had earned her the respect and love of all. Despite her humility, she even enjoyed a certain moral authority with respect to Doña Carmen: servants caught in error often sought refuge with Narcisa de JESÚS in order to obtain mercy. After a year and a half, having consulted her director, she felt that she must move again. She found an uncomfortable and damp room in the house of María Orias, a widow. It was probably at this time that the first open attacks of the devil against her began. In 1859, Canon Tola undertook a long journey to Lima, Peru, to attend to his failing health. Narcisa de JESÚS sorely felt the absence of her spiritual director. Before leaving, he entrusted her to a young but excellent priest, Don José Millán, who completed her formation and confirmed her in the spiritual path on which she was progressing. Don José put her in touch with a young lady in high society, Mercedes Molina, who had renounced everything in order to live only for JESÚS (she later founded a religious order, and was beatified by St. John Paul II in 1985). Both girls used to attend the first morning Mass in the cathedral.

That same year, Narcisa de JESÚS was approached to run the house of Canon Pedro Pinto. After consulting her director, she accepted the position as a true apostolate. She took over the management of this large household, but she was troubled by the importance of such an honorable position. After a few weeks, she resigned and moved to the family of Mercedes Molina, where she found lodgings under the stairs. Together with Mercedes, one of her sisters and another girl, they lived a quasi-religious life in great unity of heart; they were called the four “blesseds”, or “Beatas”. Josefa, a niece of Narcisa de JESÚS who worked as a seamstress with her aunt, also lived there. She later testified to several mystical graces received by her aunt. Narcisa also had the gift of prophecy: for example, she suggested to a niece of Mercedes who was entering the Carmel that she should take the name of Sister Mercedes of the Cross, because she would have much to suffer. Her forty years of religious life would indeed prove to be a prolonged martyrdom.

In 1862, the Jesuit Fathers arrived in Guayaquil and settled near the house of the Beatas. One of them, Father Segura, soon became Narcisa de JESÚS’ confessor and introduced her to the spirituality of St. Ignatius, especially through *The Practice of Christian Virtue* by Father Alfonso Rodriguez, which became her favorite book. From

then on, she no longer signed her surname as Martillo, but as Narcisa de Jesús, to signify that she had married Christ. In 1865, another Jesuit, Father García, founded the association of the Daughters of MARY, which Narcisa de JESÚS happily joined. The following year, she agreed to accompany Don Millán to Cuenca (southeast of the capital) where tuberculosis of the lungs was forcing him to withdraw. After an epic journey, she worked to save his precious life for the Church. But less than a year later, the disease took the life of this good priest, and Narcisa de JESÚS found herself alone in lands that were almost foreign. Bishop Estévez of Cuenca urged her to stay in his city to become the cornerstone of a strict observance Carmel that he intended to found. She declined the offer because she felt that her mission was to strive for holiness while preserving her lay status in the world. Returning to Guayaquil in 1867, she for a time offered her help to Mercedes Molina who had just founded an orphanage. She then returned to doña Sylvania Gellibert’s house and resumed her life of prayer, penance and work. Her income allowed her to feed and care for five beggars.

### *Eight hours a day*

**I**N 1868, a Franciscan Father called on her to follow him to Lima, Peru, to join other Beatas who had formed a community according to the spirit of the Dominican Third Order, which the local archbishop wanted to reform. Narcisa de JESÚS was uprooted once again: she joined these women and began the reform according to a precise set of rules. She helped in the infirmary and ran the linen room. Her director of conscience was Don Medina, the future bishop of Trujillo. He was younger than she was, but he was endowed with an exceptional spiritual maturity that allowed him to understand and help her. The extraordinary graces that adorned the life of Narcisa de JESÚS made her fear that she was being deceived by the devil. The priest reassured her and instructed her more thoroughly on the discernment of spirits. Narcisa de JESÚS systematically and humbly reported to him the graces she received. With his approval, she spent eight hours in prayer every day, four during the day and four at night.

Such long hours of prayer are not within everyone’s reach, but it is good to devote time to the Lord, as St. Charles de Foucauld recommended: “For our life to be a life of prayer, two things are necessary: first, that it contain each day a sufficiently long time devoted solely to prayer ; second, that during the hours devoted to other occupations, we remain united with God, guarding the thought of his presence, and turning, by frequent elevations, our hearts and our gaze toward Him” (*Spiritual Writings*).

Mass was not celebrated every day in the house. When it was so, Narcisa de JESÚS would remain near the door and as soon as she saw a priest passing by, she would ask him to give her Communion, without which she could not live. She took several private vows, including those of poverty, chastity and obedience to her confessor. One day, Christ

took His Heart from His chest and had her kiss It, saying: "This is a grace I have not granted to anyone else!" Narcisa de JESÚS' love for the Heart of JESUS increased tenfold. She also foretold certain events such as the fate of the house of the Beatas where she lived, the Peruvian missions in the jungle, the elevation of Father Medina to the episcopate... She continued her life of penance to the astonishment of physicians; they could not understand how she managed to survive with so little food. Her robust health was indeed an exceptional gift from the Lord.

### *How to become a Saint?*

**M**ANY people think that it is impossible to become a Saint, because they only consider the extraordinary graces of the Saints: terrible mortifications, visions, ecstasies, miracles and prophecies... But that is not where sanctity lies. It consists in living united to God in charity and in the effective practice of the virtues, under the guidance of the Spirit of God. St. Paul describes the effects of holiness that the Holy Spirit produces: *But the fruit of the Spirit is, charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness, longanimity, mildness, faith, modesty, continency, chastity. Against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's, have crucified their flesh, with the vices and concupiscences. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit* (Gal 5:22-25).

One day, the Lord revealed to Narcisa de JESÚS that her death was near. She rejoiced at the prospect of entering into Heaven. On September 24, 1869, on the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, after Communion, she had an ecstasy in which Our Lord and Our Lady invited her to ask for a

special grace. She asked for the most precious pearl (cf. Mt 13:45), the eternal salvation of several people, and also for her own entry into Heaven. Then she developed an inexplicable high fever. In her last letter, she thanked her friends in Guayaquil, especially Doña Sylvania Gellibert, to whom she bequeathed her penitential cross. At that time, people all over the world were praying for the forthcoming Vatican Ecumenical Council, convened by Blessed Pope Pius IX, which was to open on December 8. On that day, Narcisa de JESÚS dressed in white and spent the day in deep meditation. That evening, she bade farewell to the sisters, because, she said, "I am setting out on a faraway journey." The sisters thought she was joking. Shortly afterwards, the sister in charge of blessing the cells for the night informed the superior that an extraordinary light was shining in the cell of Sister Narcisa de JESÚS, and that a very pleasant smell came from it. The superior came and found that Sister Narcisa de JESÚS had died. She was 37 years old. It is believed that she had offered her life for the ecumenical council that would define the dogma of papal infallibility.

Many graces were immediately obtained through her intercession. Three days after her death, her body was still supple and showed no signs of corruption. The Ecuadorian ambassador in Lima asked Bishop Medina for a report of the facts of the case for the then president of Ecuador, Gabriel García Moreno (whose cause of beatification has been introduced in Quito). A century later, in 1955, Narcisa's body, still intact, was brought back to Guayaquil, where a shrine was dedicated to her on August 22, 1998. The small town of Nobol is also known today as Narcisa de JESÚS. On October 12, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI canonized St. Narcisa de JESÚS.

"JESUS invites each one of us to follow him, like these Saints, on the way of the Cross, so that we might then inherit the eternal life that he, dying, gave to us. May their examples be an encouragement to us; may their teachings guide and comfort us; may their intercession sustain us in our daily efforts so that we too may one day come to share with them and with all the Saints the joy of the eternal banquet in the heavenly Jerusalem. Above all may MARY Queen of All Saints, who in this month of October we venerate with special devotion, obtain this grace for us" (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at the canonization, October 12, 2008).

*+ Sr Jean-Bernard, Abbess  
and all the monks of the Abbey*

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