



Antonia Luzmila Rivas López,

daughter of the Peruvian Andes, and the first of eleven children born to Dámaso Rivas and Modesta López. She was born on June 13, 1920 in Coracora (province of Ayacucho, Peru,

known as the "corner of the dead"). Her parents provided their children with an atmosphere of faith, piety, humility, understanding and service, especially towards the poorest. Antonia Luzmila was baptized 11 days after her birth in the parish of her small village. In 1933, in Lima, she entered the *Sevilla* Institute, run by the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, where poor girls were housed and formed.

Attracted by the service of the Sisters, she clearly recognized the call of Jesus the Good Shepherd and so, once she finished her studies, she entered first as a postulant and then took the habit of novice, with the name of "María Agustina de Jesús". She was affectionately known as "**Aguchita**".

During her formation, she studied the life of St. Mary Euphrasia, St. John Eudes and the Annals of the Congregation, with enthusiasm, passion and creativity, to enrich her knowledge of charism.

On February 8, 1944, feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, she made her first religious profession, taking the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and the fourth vow of zeal, concretizing her commitment to mission and charism. María Agustina was 24 years old when, on September 13 of that same year, her father Damaso died.

On February 8, 1949, she made her perpetual profession at the age of 29, renewing her commitment, her dedication and joy. From then on everyone would affectionately call her "Aguchita" or "Agucha".

On December 17, 1952, her mother died. The sad news was compensated, however, by the joy of knowing that her brother César entered the

Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists).

From 1963 to 1967 she worked in the house of *Barrios Altos*, Lima, as director of the laundry, where she never ceased to evangelize the young residents under the care of the Congregation and to be a model of humble and self-sacrificing service for the young religious in formation.

In addition to the tasks of the Congregation, with great dedication to the poor and to the mothers of families, she organized soup kitchens and mothers' clubs, where she taught them how to earn a living through their own work.

She spent five years, from 1970 to 1975, as a nurse in the community of the Contemplative Sisters of the Good Shepherd, accompanying them, sharing what she knew, encouraging them to nourish their spirit of zeal and their dedication to the difficult cases of abused women, through their prayers and sacrifices.

In 1976 she formed the newly created community *Reina de la Paz* (Queen of Peace) in Salamanca - Lima, whose activities focused on assistance, promotion and prevention services for adolescent youth, between 11 and 18 years old, who were in a situation of abandonment, social risk and extreme poverty.

In 1986, she was appointed to accompany the Directress of novices in the community of *Barrios Altos*, where she remained until 1988.

Since March 1980, the Congregation has been active in the area of La Florida (province of Chanchamayo, department of Junín, Peru), being a presence of the Good Shepherd through the promotion, training and evangelization of native and settler women. The Sisters organized an educational and youth ministry, as well as projects that tried to promote women's empowerment in the area through an integral education that would turn them into protagonists and promoters of other women.

That same year, the Peruvian Communist Party *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) began its terrorist activities. The Good Shepherd community was the only stable presence of the Church in the whole area. The Congregation and the Sisters, after discernment, chose to stay and continue helping and

accompanying the population despite the danger that this implied. The apostolic work of the sisters was extended to the neighboring communities through programs for health, education, nutrition, literacy, handicrafts and family catechesis.

In March 1988, Aguchita was sent by the Province Leader to work and strengthen the team that had been working on the project for the promotion of women and to help the community with her experience. Aguchita was immediately enthusiastic about the idea of finally being a missionary, feeling a deep desire come true. She was aware of the risks involved in that area.

During the incursions of the subversive groups in the Yurinaqui Valley, on more than one occasion, the sisters considered the possibility of suspending the mission, but more important were the responsibility and awareness of what their presence meant as a peace and hope message in that dramatic time. In this context, the community and Aguchita had personally expressed their desire to remain there. In 1989, in order to better understand the situation in the country, Aguchita participated in a national meeting on non-violence, led by Father Ernesto Ranley of the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood.

After a brief retreat in Lima in January 1990, she returned to La Florida to resume her mission, despite a pending cataract surgery.



On September 27, 1990, a group of members of the *Sendero Luminoso*, composed mostly of young people, entered La Florida and called the entire population to an assembly. At that time, Sister Agustina was with a group of girls, giving them cooking classes.

When she joined the others in the central square, they forced her to line up with five other people. They brought a list of the people they were going to execute, among them a nun. They were accused of manipulating children with education and of criticizing violence; they were also accused of spreading a message of peace and justice, of organizing the population, of distributing food and

of supporting the Ashaninkas. They then ransacked the Cooperative's stores and the medical post, continued with their frequent threats and dispersed the population. The execution, which took place in a matter of seconds, left six people dead on the ground. Aguchita was the last one and as she always did, she interceded before God and the executioners for her brothers in martyrdom.

Aguchita, who throughout her life bore witness to the faithful following of Jesus the Good Shepherd, living the charism of love, mercy, acceptance and reconciliation, gave her life to God while teaching some little girls and imploring mercy for her people.

Importance of Aguchita's martyrdom for the Church of her time and for the Church of today.

The relevance of Aguchita's testimony is twofold: to reflect and dwell on her life is especially luminous for our Church today and the martyrdom itself, for the Peruvian Church of her time.

Regarding the first point, Aguchita's life is very relevant today. It is surprising to see the coincidences, in her daily life, with the guidelines of today's Church indicated by the Magisterium of recent years: Pope Francis, Synods, CELAM, etc... We share some of them.

The joy of announcing the Gospel that impels the church in its missionary outreach, emphasized by Pope Francis in his Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, is reflected in the same dedication and joy that Aguchita showed in her mission, in the catechesis to the poor and the needy mothers, and likewise to the many students who had her as an educator. Thanks to her they learned not only practical teachings, but also messages of life and fragments of the Gospel. Sister Aguchita, in fact, became a witness of the Christian who is devoted to what she believes in, who spreads Christ and his message in every occasion offered to her and those she herself sought in her outings. Her catechetical apostolate was remembered many times by the witnesses, who saw her going from one place to another with holy cards and images in her bag to give them to those she met, reading the Bible and teaching their mothers and the children of La Florida to read it, or simply transmitting God through a word of comfort and hope.

Aguchita reflects her relevance as a religious in a modern ecclesial context in which the Pope constantly reminds the faithful of the importance of consecrated life. Once again, the testimonies of those who knew her remind us how much Sister Agustina transmitted, through her life, her actions and her works: an exemplary model of a dedicated and obedient religious, extremely caring of each sister and of community life. She saw God in everything and showed it to others. The novices who had the opportunity to share with her recall that they were moved by the simplicity and zeal she showed.

The same can be applied to Merciful Love. The charism of the Congregation of the Good Shepherd, to which Aguchita belonged, consists precisely in making alive, where it is most needed, the mercy and love of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for his sheep. In her life as a professed sister, and particularly in the last years of her mission, Sister Agustina gave convincing proof of how to incarnate this charism in the daily and simple things of life, concerned for the weakest, sick and misguided sheep. For example, she prayed and asked for prayers for the "companions", "our lost sheep".

Since she was a child, she had felt all Creation as a transparency of God and His Love for us. She lived and taught an exquisite respect and care (for creation), she was an innovator and recycler of all that God has placed within our reach for our benefit and that of those around us. Everything had value for her, and could be made use of. She was ahead of her time in concretizing in daily life the ordinary gestures called for by Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato sí*.

We must not overlook the care she showed, through her Congregation, towards poor mothers, families in general and for the redemption and social justice of women, seeking to make them protagonists of their own lives, their families, local development and their church. Concerned about peace and dignified life in their families, she used to say to mothers: "You are the best teachers". How many families she accompanied and brought closer to God! with tact, patience and affection, 30 years before the Exhortation "Amoris Laetitia".

Aguchita is that holy woman, "from next door". If it were not for her martyrdom, she would have remained unnoticed by the majority of people.

She always dreamed of being a missionary in the jungle and God granted it to her. He allowed her to enjoy our beautiful Amazonia and to work with its welcoming inhabitants, both settlers and local people. As a bonus, God allowed her to water this fertile land with her life-giving, dedicated and intercessory blood.

Finally, Aguchita's martyrdom is a mature fruit of the Peruvian church: it germinated and grew in the highlands, flourished and matured on the coast and was sown to multiply in the jungle. Daughter of our church, peasant woman of the highlands, of the deep Peru, emigrant in the chaotic Lima, religious formed in Peru, promoter of the young and Peruvian women, martyr of the terrorism, of the famines and of poverty - Sister Agustina is ours, of all Peruvians, the mature fruit of a church that is struggling to grow and mature, to become an adult, to accept and to be enriched by all the variety of cultures that Peru has.



In these times of the pandemic, Aguchita invites us to walk, trusting at all times in the presence of God, living in solidarity and commitment with our brothers and sisters, children of the same church, rich in its diversity.

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