

A Decisive Hour for Conchita

By Father Alfred Combe
Translated from French by Irene Dutra

The locution of Jesus to Conchita on February 13, 1966, in Pamplona was a very important event, a turning point in her young life. Let us put the event in context: The last apparition of the Blessed Virgin to Conchita at the pines of Garabandal had taken place on November 13, 1965. "It is all over now," wrote the young confidante of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. "The happy moments when I was with my heavenly mama and my best friend, and the Infant Jesus, have passed. I have ceased seeing them, but I have not stopped feeling their presence." Beneath this bittersweet thought one could sense the real concern of the adolescent Conchita: "What is my vocation? What should I do with my life?"

A major turning point came for Garabandal's principal visionary, Conchita Gonzalez, when she heard in a locution, the voice of Christ say that it was not His will that she become a nun.

Conchita during her 1966 visit to Rome. From left are: Father Luis Luna, Countess Irene de Parma, Conchita, the Countess's secretary and Conchita's mother, Aniceta.



In truth, Conchita's decision had been made and announced many months before. She had obtained the consent of her mother, as well as the approval of her confessor and spiritual director, the renowned theologian Father Lucio Rodrigo of Comillas. For Conchita things were clear: When you have been molded for more than four years by the Blessed Virgin and Jesus, in person, and lived in their presence—oh, the indescribably sweetness of that wonderful intimacy!—when you hold in your heart the example of the young Bernadette of Lourdes and that of the still living Sister Lucy of Fatima, and when, above all, you have the ardor of youth, the generosity of Castilian blood—is there any reason to hesitate, to vacillate?

"I will be a nun, a bride of the Lord Jesus, in the Congregation of the Discalced Carmelite Missionaries. They have missions in Africa, where—if God wills it—I can serve the African people." It was thus that Conchita, happy and decided, prepared to enter the Carmelite convent school in Pamplona.

But then came an unexpected move of Providence: Cardinal Ottaviani, Prefect of the Holy Office (now the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) called Conchita to Rome. The trip was organized by Father Luis Luna, and all the expenses were graciously paid by Francisco Sanchez-Ventura. They left by plane from Barcelona on January 12, 1966.

On her return Conchita would write these terse comments: "The trip to Rome went very well; one could not have hoped for more... but they have forbidden me to say what happened there. I have only to obey, and God will do the rest. They were very nice to me."

True. Conchita was received with great cordiality by Cardinal Ottaviani in the company of the First Secretary

of the Congregation, Monsignor Philippe. The interview lasted two and a half hours, and Msgr. Philippe told me a year later, almost to the day, "Conchita made an excellent impression on us." It is also true that Pope Paul VI himself received Conchita and said these significant words: "I bless you, and with me, the whole Church blesses you." Then, from Rome, Conchita, her mother, and the secretary of the Countess Irene de Parma were driven to San Giovanni Rotondo, where the little group was received very paternally by Padre Pio, the Capuchin stigmatist, in his cell.

Their pleasant trip ended on January 21, 1966. Three weeks later, on Monday, February 7, Conchita finally entered the Angelical College of the Discalced Carmelites of Pamplona as a student. It was her birthday; she was 17 years old. Very happy, excited, determined, she started out on the path to consecration as a religious, her ardent desire.

But your will, Conchita, is it truly one with God's? Divine plans are often so different from our plans, even those of the most mature.

THE LORD INTERVENES— THE CALL AND THE MISSION

What happens next is well-known to us because of the account written by Conchita. Here is the first part:

On Sunday, February 13, 1966, as I was making my thanksgiving after Communion, I experienced both a great joy and an even greater sorrow and deception. I heard the voice of Christ

telling me: "Conchita, you came here to the convent school to prepare yourself to by My spouse and, you say, to follow Me. Do you not say, Conchita, that you seek to do My will? Well, now you are seeking to do yours. Will it be this way all your life? I chose you in the world so that you would remain in it, experiencing the many difficulties you would encounter because of Me. I want all this for your sanctification and so that you may offer it for the salvation of the world. You must talk to the world about Mary. Remember, in June, [apparently in another location] you asked Me if you would be a nun. I replied: 'Wherever you are, you will find a cross and suffering.' I repeat this to you now."

This interior message of the Lord was luminously clear; there was no hint of ambiguity. Direct, unswerving, it went straight to the point with firm authority and infinite tenderness.

The Call

"Conchita!" The Lord called her by name, as God had done to his beloved servants in the past: Abraham, Isaac, Samuel, David and so many others. In effect He called her by the name given her at baptism, that sublime sacrament that unites us in a life-giving and indissoluble way to God and that allows us to say to Him in all truth: Our Father; Jesus, our Lord; Holy Spirit, source of life, of light and of love.

"You came here... to prepare yourself to be My spouse. Do you not say, Conchita, that you seek to do My will?" Jesus knew then, the deep desire of His privileged one: to give her-

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self completely to Him. He did not refuse this offering of total love; He eagerly agreed to it, recorded it, signed it. But he wanted Conchita to fulfill this offering in a way different from the one she had chosen. The Lord had come, therefore, to tell her to change course. He did not say: "I chose you at Garabandal, in your village, hidden in the marvelous Cantabrian Mountains, the village to which you are bound by so many memories, those of your childhood and above all those of the happy days of the apparitions." No, the Lord clearly stated: "I chose you in the world—that is, in the normal condition of the faithful—"so that you would remain in it..."

Thus, Jesus was clearly calling Conchita to the lay state. That was her vocation. I am often asked why none of the seers of Garabandal entered religious life. The answer is simple: because the Lord wanted them to remain in the world. But the question can go beyond that: Why did the Lord want it so? Clearly it is the secret of God, Who does all with infinite wisdom. But isn't it possible that the Lord wanted to underscore the importance of what Vatican II had just emphasized (as no other council had before): the dignity of lay Christians, involved in the world. I believe this, and I support this belief by calling attention to the harmony, the complete agreement, between the message of Garabandal and the teachings of Vatican II, whose work so perfectly coincided with the apparitions of Our Lady of Mount Carmel at Garabandal. Moreover, if we look at these two events so different from each other—the Council and the apparitions of Our Lady—in the light of the Holy Spirit,

we can better understand how the latter came to complement and confirm the former (and vice versa) for the benefit of the Church in our time.

The Mission

But let us return to the Lord's locution. After the call to the lay state, there was the mission: the sending of Conchita into the world *"to experience the many difficulties you will encounter because of Me. I want all this for your sanctification and so that you may offer it for the salvation of the world. You must talk to the world about Mary."*

These extraordinary rich words emphasized three components fused

together, inseparable, making up a holy trinity: sanctification, the cross, the salvation of the world. Let us consider them one by one:

1) *I want all this for your sanctification*, said the Lord. At Garabandal didn't the Virgin Mary demand the same thing in her message? "But first, you must lead good lives," (that is, become a saint). It is in Scripture: "be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48); "be holy in all you do" (1 Pt 1:15); "what God wants is for you all to be holy" (1 Thes 4:13); "You will shine in the world like bright stars" (Phil 2:15).

2) *"Wherever you are, you will find a cross and suffering."* Our Lady of



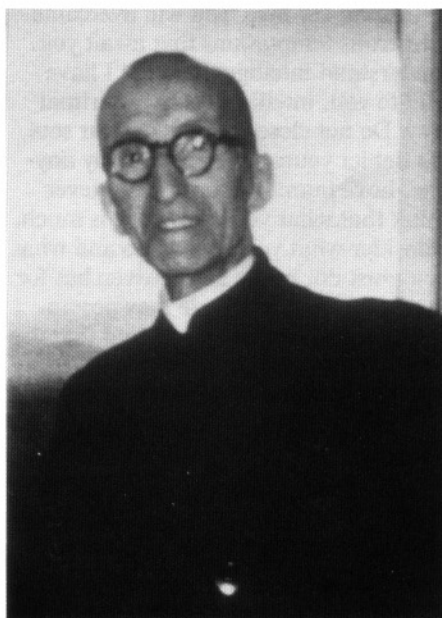
Conchita was the picture of confidence when she entered the school of the Discalced Carmelite Missionaries in Pamplona.

"You must talk to the world about Mary."

Mount Carmel said the same thing at Garabandal: "You should make more sacrifices. Think about the passion of Jesus." Here we are in the heart of the great mystery of our redemption: "The Son of Man must be lifted... that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him" (Jn 3:5); "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mt 16:24); "Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow in My footsteps is not worthy of Me" (Mt 10:38).

3) ... *that you may offer it for the salvation of the world.*" The apostle St. John tells us that God sent His only Son to save the world (Jn 3:16). And this Son ransoms, sanctifies, and purifies us by His blood. Thus, by the gift of faith and baptism He has joined us to Himself and so to His great work of saving the world. Each time, therefore, that we unite our sufferings and those of our brothers to the cross in an oblation of love, we collaborate in His work of salvation. We become **THROUGH HIM, WITH HIM and IN HIM** His work of redemption. "It makes me happy... to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ, for the sake of His body, the Church" (Col 1:24).

To these objectives of the mission of Conchita in the world, Jesus adds an instruction, which, I suggest, is united to them by divine law: "*You must talk to the world about Mary.*" Haven't we heard, alas, voices (clerical and lay) murmur or exclaim about the Marian apostolate or the simple piety towards Mary: "What an exaggeration... We are no longer in the Middle Ages... Mary should not hide Christ," etc. To such nonsense we should answer: "Is it us, is it the Church that made Mary the only Immaculate Woman, blessed among all women, the Bride of the Holy Spirit, the Mother of the Word Incarnate?" No, it is God Himself who



Conchita's confessor, Father Lucio Rodrigo, had consented to her desire to become a nun, that is, before her decisive hour.

has made Mary the masterpiece of His creation; it is He who has done marvelous things through her, adorned her with all His gifts, chosen her to be His faithful servant in order to accomplish His plan of salvation for the whole human family. And it is He who has given Mary to us as a mother and revealed her splendor.

The Church has only to examine carefully the long centuries of this divine revelation about Mary to better understand and teach the unique role in the plan of salvation that God has entrusted to His beloved servant. Therefore, let us direct all critical voices to the teachings of the Church, for example to Vatican II, which, in her Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, "*Lumen Gentium*," devoted all of chapter VIII—five long sections—to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and of the Church.

The Council speaks of Mary in many other documents, too, in partic-

ular in the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, where it says (Chapter I, 4):

Perfect model of this apostolic spiritual life is the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles. While on earth her life was like that of any other, filled with labors and the cares of the home; always, however, she remained intimately united to her Son and cooperated in an entirely unique way in the Savior's work. And now, assumed into heaven, "her motherly love keeps her attentive to her Son's brothers, still on pilgrimage amid the dangers and difficulties of life, until they arrive at the happiness of the fatherland." Everyone should have a genuine devotion to her and entrust his life to her motherly care.

Of course, this teaching of the Church for a Marian and apostolic life applies to every Christian in the world. But, of Conchita, Jesus Christ demanded more—much more—because she had received more. During the time of the apparitions at Garabandal, hadn't she lived, with her companions, in a wonderful intimacy with Mary and Jesus? Hadn't her whole being, body and soul, been touched—impregnated, as it were—by the wonders that had accompanied the message of Garabandal?

In this light, then, we can more accurately assess what Jesus asked of Conchita in his locution: "*You must talk to the world about Mary.*" This was the specific mission, the precious pearl, He was entrusting to her.

The Lord did not specify what means Conchita should use to accomplish this mission. He had confidence in her free and responsible initiative. Let us simply note that He excluded nothing—neither speech, nor writing, nor the press, nor audio-visual means. Nor did He determine for her the program of this Marian apostolate, though it clearly had to include the message of salvation Our Lady of Mount Carmel had given at Garabandal, as well as all the marvels willed by God to communicate the message to us.

The Lord did, however, warn Con-

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chita that her mission would be a difficult one: *"Wherever you are, you will find the cross and suffering."* And He repeated the warning at the end of the locution: "I wish to advise you that the remainder of your life will be a continual suffering." But in His love, He comforted her: "Do not be frightened. In your suffering, you will find Me and also Mary whom you love very much."

Thus, the vocation and mission of Conchita in the world are completely defined in the first part of the locution of February 13, 1966, at Pamplona.

COLLOQUY OF LOVE— ADVICE—COMFORT

These three terms could well sum up the second part of this divine locution. Conchita said: "Then You don't love me, Jesus?" And He answered:

Conchita, you ask Me that? Who redeemed you? Accomplish My will and you will find My love. Examine yourself well. Think more of souls. Do not be concerned about temptations. If you remain

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faithful to My love, you will overcome numerous temptations that await you. Understand intelligently what I have said to you, intelligently in a spiritual way. Do not close the eyes of your soul. Do not let yourself be deceived by anyone. Love humility, simplicity. Never think that what you have done is much. Consider what you have to do and what you must do, not to gain heaven but for the world, so that people may accomplish My divine will. Every soul that prepares itself, that remains disposed to hear Me, shall know what My will is.

I want to tell you, Conchita, that before the miracle occurs, you will suffer much, for few people will believe you. Your own family will believe that you have deceived them. I am the one Who wants all this, as I have already told you, for your sanctification and so that the world may comply with the message. I wish to advise you that the remainder of your life will be a continual suffering. Do not be frightened. In your suffering you will find Me and also Mary whom you love very much.

Conchita continues: "I asked if in Rome they would also cease to believe, but He did not answer me. Then He told me: 'Do not worry yourself with whether people believe or do not believe. I shall do everything. But I will also give you suffering. I will be with whoever suffers for me.'"

Colloquy of Love

Conchita perfectly understood the will of the Lord; she accepted it. But the drastic change of direction demanded of her gave rise to a thought, a kind of doubt: "I sincerely wanted to give myself to Him entirely. Wasn't my total love for Him reciprocated in His heart?" Thus she dared to blurt out a negative question, an exaggeration: "Then You don't love me, Jesus?"

His response shot back like an arrow: "Conchita, you ask Me that? Who redeemed you? Accomplish my will and you will find My love." Divine



On May 26, 1973, Conchita married Patrick Keena of New York.

words, concise, profound—words that each of us can welcome, like those of Scripture: "the Son of God... loved me and... sacrificed Himself for my sake" (Gal 2:20); "As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you. Remain in My love" (Jn 5:9).

Advice

After this exchange of love, Jesus did not simply cast Conchita into the world. He gave her advice and comfort, just as He had done to His apostles at the Last Supper before returning to the Father. His advice to Conchita was uniquely appropriate for her and for the mission entrusted to her. I will make brief comments on each part.

"Think more of souls." It is the gift of self to others. Without it, can one be an apostle?

"Do not be concerned about temptations." Temptations are not sins but obstacles to make us fall. We must then overcome them by our faithfulness to the invincible love of Jesus.

"Understand intelligently what I have said to you... spiritually." It is not a matter of intellect, or reasoning, or human knowledge—but of the intelligence and heart truly grasping the things of God.

"Do not close the eyes of your soul." Those who have eyes do not see, said



Jesus to the Jews who did not want to understand.

"Do not let yourself be deceived by anyone." What useful advice—not to let oneself be deluded or have things distorted in this world where the "prince of lies" rules. Jesus gave this same advice to His disciples, as reported by the four evangelists: "Take care that no one deceives you" (Mt 24:4-5, Mk 13:5-6, Lk 21:8, 1 Jn 2:26). And St. Paul repeats it to the Christians: "Do not let anyone deceive you with empty arguments" (Eph 5:6); "with specious arguments" (Col 2:4). "in any way" (2 Thes 2:3).

"Love humility, simplicity." When God perceives these twin virtues in a soul, He hurries to lavish it with graces. "He has looked upon the humility of His servant" (Mary); "Blessed are the humble" (Jesus).

"Never think that what you have done is much." We are all ordinary servants. There is no place for self-glorification: "love is never boastful" (1 Cor 13:4).

"Consider what you have to do..."

not to gain heaven but for the world." We are all sent into the Lord's vineyard to work there as good servants for the good of all our brothers.

"Happy that servant if his master's arrival finds him at this employment" (Lk 12:42). "Work for the Lord with untiring effort" (Rom 12:11).

Comfort

The word of God for those who welcome it is always light and peace. This was the case for Conchita on that day when Jesus called her and traced a path into the world for her. But afterwards, what would happen? Wouldn't the enemy come in the night and sow tares in her soul? Jesus understood: *"I wish to advise you that the remainder of your life will be a continual suffering."*

Christian life is not a path of roses but one of salvation by the cross. At the end of the locution Jesus, full of tenderness, comforted Conchita: *"Do not be frightened. In your suffering you will find Me and also Mary whom you love very much."* Jesus thus as-

"Before the Miracle occurs you will suffer much..." A distraught Conchita meets with Joey Lomangino a day or so after being interviewed by a reporter who was writing a feature article on Garabandal for a Spanish secular newspaper. The interview went badly for Conchita and when the article was printed, the information was not only distorted but it placed Garabandal in an unfavorable light.

sured her of His loving presence, as well as Mary's, at the center of her life. "With Him and in Him" (and so also with her and in her), "There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength" (Phil 4:14). "Unload all your worries onto Him" (Pt 5:7). "Make your home in Me as I make mine in you" (Jn 15:4-7).

Conchita does not tell us what answer she gave Jesus at the end of this important locution. But would I be far from the truth if I hazarded this response: "Jesus, you ask me to lead my life according to Your word. It is a pact of love; I accept and I sign it." □

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