

Bl. Maria Rafols Bruna

(Spain) 1781-1853

Dedicated to serving the most helpless: the sick, the mentally ill, abandoned children and the disabled. During Napoleonic wars she worked in bombed ruins to save the sick and children.

Begged enemy camp French generals for help with the sick and wounded.¹

Imprisoned and exiled during the Carlist Wars.²



Maria Rafols-Bruna was born November 5, 1781, in the Molino d'en Rovira, 1 km from Vilafranca del Penedes and 64 km from Barcelona, Spain, to Cristobal Rafols and Margarita Bruna. Maria was the 6th of ten children. Her parents were poor and simple peasants. On November 7, 1781, she was baptized with the names of Maria Josefa Rosa. She received the Sacrament of Confirmation at the age of four (along with her sisters Margarita and Josefa, the latter two months old) from the Bishop of Barcelona, Don Gabino Valladares, in the convent of the Carmelitas Calzadas de Vilafranca. The family was constantly

changing residences due to financial difficulties. Five of her little brothers died. Her father died of exhaustion at the age of fifty leaving her mother to raise five children. These early childhood difficulties enabled Maria to understand the difficulties of the poor, the sick and the dying.

Accompanied by Venerable Father Juan Bonal, twelve religious sisters and twelve Brothers of Charity traveled to Zaragoza, Spain, on December 28, 1804, to care for patients at the Royal and General Hospital of Our Lady of Grace. There they cared for the sick, insane, abandoned children who availed themselves of the charity hospital. The motto of the hospital was *Domus Infirmorum Urbis et Orbis*, House for the sick of the city and the world.

At sunset upon their arrival, they made their first visit to *Pilar* to put their new risky mission in the hands of Our Lady. (*Pilar* refers to the Church of Our Lady of the Pilar in Zaragoza, Spain, which houses the infamous pillar on which the Blessed Virgin Mary stood as she encouraged the Apostle St. James the Great in his preaching to convert the people of what is now modern day Spain in 40AD. “Becoming the apostle of what today is Spain, St. James was having a hard time evangelizing the northern region of Zaragoza. One night, as he prayed asking help for his plight, he suddenly beheld a great light in the midst of which he saw Our Lady surrounded by a multitude of angels. The interesting thing is that Mary was still living in Jerusalem at the time.”).³

From there they went to the Hospital of Our Lady of Grace founded in 1425 by Alfonso V. Maria Rafols was made superior of the religious sisters at the age of 23. She had to face the challenge of bringing order, cleanliness and respect to the group, and above all, a spirit of dedication and compassion to the poor in their care. The women became known as the Sisters of Charity of St. Anne. After three years, the brothers had disappeared, but the sisters stayed and increased in number. Maria Rafols knew how to



Church of Our Lady of the Pilar,
Zaragoza, Spain.

circumvent the pitfalls with prudence, tireless charity and a heroic temperament. She was a determined and brave woman, willing to take risks. She demonstrated her and her sisters' ability to perform the bloodletting operation, frequently used in medicine at the time, before the entire Hospital board. At this time, and by a woman, this ability was inconceivable.

Soon after arriving, the first sisters endured the bombs of the War of Independence in the Sieges of Zaragoza. The hospital was bombed and burned by the French. Between the bullets and ruins, she exposed her life to save the sick, begged for them and deprived herself of her own food. When the city lacked food, medicine and water, she went to the French camp and petitioned Marshal Lannes and received from him items to care for the sick and wounded. She attended the prisoners and interceded for them, and, in some cases achieved their freedom.

In 1813 Mother Maria Rafols cared for the orphaned or homeless children, the poorest of the poor. Her presence kept order and peace in this department, one of the most difficult in the Hospital. She followed the children in their adoptive homes and removed them if they were not cared for and treated well by the families.

During the First Carlist War (1833-1840), despite the fact that she was declared innocent at her trial, Sister Maria Rafols was imprisoned for two months and spent six years of exile at the Hospital of Huesca with an order founded in 1807, similar to the one in Zaragoza. At the slightest suspicion or slanderous denunciation, she, like so many others, suffered the same fate. Throughout her prison term and in exile, through humiliation and slander, she suffered with peace and without a complaint. Upon her return, she simply resumed her work with the children. *[The Carlist Wars were Spanish civil wars fought by contenders to claim the throne following the death of King Ferdinand VII - Queen Maria Crista became regent on behalf of their infant daughter Queen Isabella II (Christinos). His brother Infante Carlos of Spain, Count of Molina also claimed the throne (Carlists).]*⁴

Sister Maria Rafols died on August 30, 1853, about to turn seventy-two in Zaragoza, Spain of natural causes. She had been a Sister of Charity for forty-nine years. Her death was a reflection of her life: serene, peaceful, showing affection and gratitude to the Sisters.²

Blessed Maria Rafols-Bruna was recognized for her heroic virtue on July 6, 1991, and declared venerable. She was beatified on October 16, 1994, both by Pope St. John Paul II.⁵ (Memorial - August 30)

References:

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