

**Venerable Mother Luisa Josefa  
(Mexico/USA) 1866-1937**

*Established, with her husband, the little Hospital of the Sacred Heart.*

*Learned how to nurse and care for the sick*

*working alongside her husband.*

*Took her place as a nurse on a rotating schedule with the other women.<sup>1</sup>*

*Founded the Carmelite Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mexico,*

*a contemplative-active community dedicated to the care of the poor;*

*sick, abandoned, and orphaned children and to establish schools.*

*Fled Mexico to Los Angeles, California, U.S.A. - religious refugee.*

*Traveled back and forth to Mexico starting schools, orphanages, hospitals and clinics.*

*Founded the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles*



**Maria Luisa de la Pena Navarro** was born on June 21, 1866, the Feast Day of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, in Atotonilco el Alto in Jalisco, Mexico, to Epigmenio de la Pena and his second wife, Luisa Navarro. Her father's first wife, Arcadia Romo, died bearing their daughter, Gabriela, who died soon after. The little town of Luisita's birth is in northeastern Jalisco, about eighty miles from Guadalajara.

Luisita, as she was called, was the third of fourteen children born to Epigmenio and Luisa. Her first two sisters both died in

infancy. When Luisita became ill six days after her birth, her parents rushed her baptism. Luisita was baptized on June 27, 1866, at the parish of St. Michael the Archangel by Father Juan Mungia. Her godparents were Manuel Rojas, an uncle and Dona Rafael de la Pena, her aunt. Luisita's father was a landowner and farmed many large ranches growing: limes, guavas, apples, lemons, oranges, grapefruit, beans, potatoes, corn, carrots, onions, chilies and tomatoes.

Their town was deeply religious, and Luisita's parents provided her with a solid religious foundation. Luisita's mother, a devout Catholic, would give her daughter money, food and clothing every Saturday morning to pass along to the poor. She also prayed fifteen decades of the Rosary daily with her family. Epigmenio and Luisa placed their home under the patronage of St. Joseph and on March 19, annually, hosted a banquet (fiesta) with family and field workers. The day began with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, followed by a dinner with music and entertainment. There was no work on Sunday. All attended the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at St. Michael Catholic Church and then gathered in the plaza to enjoy food and live music.

Luisita was enrolled in Senorita Lupe Escoto's elite school for girls of privileged families but was too sickly to be around large crowds. Instead, her parents enlisted the assistance of an unmarried member of Epigmenio's family, Agapita, to be her private tutor. Pita, as Luisita called her was very religious, received communion daily (at a time when daily Communion was extraordinary), and was observed by Luisita to have heart-to-heart conversations with God.<sup>1</sup> She had a profound influence on Luisita's life. Luisita was raised with both love and discipline and thereby developed a compassionate heart and moral compass.

Luisita received the Sacrament of Confirmation sometime between June 6 and June 29, 1874, at the age of 7 or 8, during the pastoral visit of Archbishop Pedro Loza y Pardave. The exact dates she received the Sacraments of Confirmation and her First Communion are unknown. As a young girl, she was overheard praying, "My God, give me a holy heart with a pure intention to please You."<sup>2</sup>

At age 15, Luisita married Dr. Pascual Rojas, M.D., a good friend of Epigmenio, who was a frequent visitor to the de la Pena home. Arranged marriages were common at the time, and Pascual's mother had requested Luisita for her son when Luisita was in the cradle and Pascual still a boy in school. At the time of their marriage, Pascual was thirty. They were married first in a civil marriage at Luisita's home on Tuesday, February 7, 1882. The Sacrament of Matrimony occurred two days later on Thursday, February 9, 1882, at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church with the church crowded to overflowing. They honeymooned riding on horseback the fifty-eight miles to Guadalajara, stopping along the way at small towns where they spent the night and visited local attractions. After visiting Guadalajara, they traveled by stagecoach to Mexico City, a three-hundred mile-journey. There they visited theaters, concert halls, museums, gardens and parks. Pascual brought Luisita to visit the convent of the Conceptionist nuns at her request. Enjoying the beauty and prayerful atmosphere, Luisita asked him to leave her there. With the assistance of the Mother Superior, Luisita was persuaded that her place was at her husband's side.

Luisita and Pascual lived in a two-story home with a view of St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church and a panorama of the surrounding hills and countryside. On a typical day, Luisita "Senora de Rojas," awoke at 5 a.m. and prayed in her bedroom, kneeling before a crucifix that Pascual had given her. She attended the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and received Holy Communion as often as the Church permitted. She arranged that the servants could also attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass later in the morning. Though they had servants, Luisita prepared her husband's breakfast daily and washed their breakfast dishes. She then worked on embroidery while her husband studied his medical journals and books.

While her husband was making house calls, Luisita would read spiritual works aloud to the staff while they did sedentary work. She usually read from the *Lives of the Saints*. At eleven a.m. she walked outside in the sunshine to increase her lung capacity and strengthen her breathing. After lunch, Pascual would rest for twenty minutes while Luisita remained at his side reading a good book. In the afternoon, Luisita would visit and bring food to the sick. She would pray in a procession with their ranchers for rain when there was a drought. Soon she began visiting the sick with her husband in the afternoons — this is where she acquired her nursing skills. Other days she would sit by the window, and her husband, upon his return, would find her in contemplative prayer.

Following the death of a woman who was found in a ditch, sick, abandoned and entirely helpless, an Atotonilco governess, Senorita Carmen Gutierrez, suggested to Luisita that they gather a group of women and establish a charity organization to care for the destitute. Thus, on October 9, 1891, the first meeting of the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul, under the patronage of the Sacred Heart of Jesus met and elected Luisita its first president. Father Celso Sanchez Aldana, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel, presided over the meeting, and the group was canonically established on November 15, to bring food and comfort to people in need and provide catechism lessons.

Seeing a need for a place for the seriously ill to stay while receiving treatment, two months later the group established the little Hospital of the Sacred Heart. Neighbors and parishioners of St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church made monthly pledges to support the new hospital. The hospital had a mission of bringing health to both body and soul. Luisita was one of the hospital's first volunteers.

In 1895, when Luisita's father died, the hospital was in its fourth year. The local women learned how to nurse and care for the sick. "This was 100 percent better than the previous health care of the indigent, for whom nothing had ever been done."<sup>1</sup> Luisita took her place as a nurse on a rotating schedule with the other women.

On Ash Wednesday 1896, Paschal fell ill and was emergently transported to Guadalajara for surgery. The surgery was unsuccessful. Aware that he was terminal, Luisita prepared him for eternal life leading him through a retreat of the Spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, reading to him spiritual books and ensuring that he received the Last Sacraments (Anointing of the Sick, Viaticum and an Apostolic Pardon). His death certificated reported that he died from a severe urinary tract infection. This was the time before antibiotics.

His funeral was attended by over 3000 people and presided over by Father Aldana. He was buried at home, in Atotonilco. Following his burial, Luisita returned to her childhood home living with her widowed mother and early childhood tutor, Pita. She resumed her prayer routine, awakening at 4 a.m. and kneeling before the crucifix that Pascual had given her. She and Pita set aside time each day for spiritual reading. She disposed of her husband's estate, giving proceeds to the poor, the hospital and the church.

After all was in order, she applied for admittance to the Monastery of the Visitation Nuns in Morelia, Michoacan. St. Jane Frances de Chantal, who was also a widow and co-founded the Visitation Order with St. Francis de Sales, was her favorite saint. She was refused admission due to her frail health.

She returned home and would be seen walking or riding on a donkey with a basket of food, medicine and other necessities for those in need. Luisita told one of her servants who thought she was too preoccupied with the poor, "One must approach the sick like beggars, with a plea." In the afternoon, she would rest or crochet or play with the children. Before dinner, she devoted time to prayer. She then recited the rosary with workers.

Desiring to leave a monument to her husband, she planned to construct a monument in the cemetery or hospital. Instead, Father Sanchez Aldana suggested that she build a chapel for the hospital that would also serve the poor. This resulted in Atotonilco's Calvary Chapel. As president of the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul, Luisita continued to oversee the growth of the hospital. Luisita's sister, Concepcion de la Pena, financed an expansion. By 1894, two years after her husband's death, the hospital included "two reception rooms and two patient rooms, one for men and one for women, one surgery room, a pharmacy, a kitchen, a lounge, and an ample Atotonilco patio."<sup>1</sup> Luisita added a wing to the hospital, planning for living quarters for religious sisters who might work there one day. The Calvary Chapel was begun in 1900 and completed in 1903.

With the chapel finished, Luisita applied for admission to the cloistered Carmelite nuns at the Monastery of St. Teresa in Guadalajara. At the age of almost thirty-eight, on March 3, 1904, she was admitted as a postulant. On Monday of Holy Week in 1904, she began her novitiate, taking the name Sister Maria Dolores of the Blessed Sacrament. Though Luisita clearly exhibited the Carmelite spirituality, she was not able to eat the monastery food, or observe their mandatory fasting or their penances. In addition, the women from the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul were unsuccessful in carrying out the work of running the hospital. Supplies were wasted and patients suffered from lack of expert attention. The building was falling into disrepair. The women pleaded to Archbishop Jose de Jesus Ortiz of Guadalajara for Luisita's return. This he discussed with the pastor in Atotonilco and Mother Maria Refugio Josefa of St. Albert, Superior of the Carmelite monastery. He then advised Luisita to leave the Carmelite monastery and continue her work in Atotonilco. On June 24, 1904, Luisita returned to her hometown with the blessing of the Archbishop, her pastor and the nuns at the monastery.

Six months after Luisita's departure from the monastery, she joined with five other women and, with the blessing of Father Medrano, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church and Archbishop Ortiz, she formed a new community on December 24, 1904. On Christmas day at 6 p.m. the first members were received by Father Medrano: Luisa de la Pena, Guadalupe Ruiz, Paula Ibara, Maura Castellanos, Monica Angulo and Maria del Refugio Perez.<sup>1</sup> Luisita was given the title Sister Superior and each woman addressed as "sister." Their vocation was to actively care for the poor, the sick, the abandoned, and orphaned children and establish schools.

Between 1904 and 1909 Mother Luisita struggled in obedience with the local pastor who desired the sisters to be out with the community, whereas Mother Luisita preferred a semi-cloistered arrangement, thinking that the sisters should not go out of the house. After considering a constitution similar to the Sisters of the Poor and then the Vincentians, in 1911, Archbishop Ortiz sent the sisters books that would model them after a Carmelite religious. Mother Luisita would be the foundress of a new, active Carmelite community for women.

In 1910, Mexico entered very turbulent times. Portirio Diaz's dictatorship-like rule was ousted, and Francisco Madero was elected as president. Divergent uprisings broke out in different parts of the country led by Venustiano Carranza, Alvaro Obregón, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, jointly called the Mexican Revolution. Wealthy landowners and the Catholic Church were attacked. From 1914 to 1918, many priests and religious were imprisoned or killed.

This was also a turbulent time for the Mother Luisita and her sisters. The Holy Father opposed the creation of new religious orders and desired small orders to join with other groups. Archbishop Ortiz informed Mother Luisita that he wanted her sisters to be annexed by the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. This effort ceased on June 19, 1912, when Archbishop Ortiz died.

Mother Luisita shared her misgivings with the new Archbishop Francisco Orozco y Jimenez. He decided they should join the Sister Servants of the Blessed Sacrament in Zapotlán, Jalisco, which was within the Archdiocese of Guadalajara, eighty-five miles southwest of Atotonilco. In obedience, Mother Luisita dissolved her community and, on July 22, 1913, journeyed to Zapotlán with several of her sisters to join the Sister Servants. On September 24, 1913, she, along with twelve of the Atotonilco Sisters who had transferred, received the habit. She took the name of Sister Juana Francisca de Chantal of the Blessed Sacrament.



Governor Portillo y Rojas expelled the Mexican bishops from the country following a 1914 procession associated with the consecration of Mexico to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Previously, in 1899, His Holiness Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Annum Sacrum* (Holy Year) he had requested bishops to consecrate their countries to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Pope Pius X (1903-1914) whole-heartedly approved, and this was done on January 6, 1914 in Mexico. After the bishops left or went into hiding, the revolution intensified. In March 1914, Mother Teresa del Rosario, the superior general of the Sister Servants, was instructed to place the sisters in homes of trustworthy persons. Religious persecution was intense and it was unsafe for religious sisters to remain in community.

Sister Juana Francisca (Mother Luisita) was placed in the home of Don Juan Domingo Hinojosa, whom she had met eighteen years earlier following the death of her husband. In obedience on March 2, 1915, while still in hiding, Sister Juana Francisca, along with four other novices, professed her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Sister Juana Francisca

performed humble duties: housework, kitchen work and worked in the orchard. She awoke early and began to make tortillas at 6 a.m.

Archbishop Orozco returned to Mexico in 1916, and Sister Juana Francisca shared her misgivings regarding the merger with the Sister Servants who lacked a ministry to the sick. On May 22, 1917, Archbishop Orozco authorized the separation of the two communities and on May 22, 1917, Luisita and three companions began their return journey back to Atotonilco.

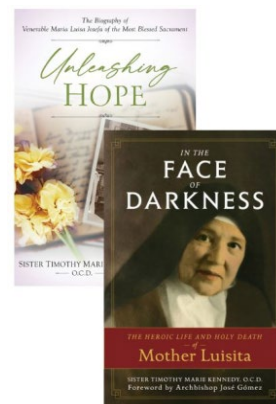
In Atotonilco, Luisita resumed the work of her heart: care for the poor, the sick and orphans and to educate children. The Holy Father still would not permit the formation of new religious orders. The archbishop visited Mother Luisita and told her to continue what they were doing but not to admit any new postulants. On another visit, the Archbishop gave more hope. He instructed Mother Luisita to affiliate with a Third Order. The sisters discussed joining the Third Order Franciscans, while Sister Teresa of Jesus proposed joining with the Third Order of Carmelite Sisters of Saint Teresa in Mexico City. This was acceptable to the Carmelite Sisters and approved by the bishop. On February 2, 1921, Luisita and her sisters began to follow the Carmelite Rule with their official title of Carmelite Sisters of the Third Order of Guadalajara.

On April 1, 1921, Friday of Easter week, Mother Luisita and six other sisters received the Carmelite habit in a surprise clothing ceremony officiated by Father Abundio Anaya, vicar-general of religious. Father had just shown up at their door and stated it would occur this day. Mother Luisita received the name “Maria Luisa Josefa of the Most Blessed Sacrament.” That same day, Mother Luisita and the six other sisters made their first vows. On April 22, 1921, Mother Luisita, at the age of fifty-five, was selected as superior general. Receiving the constitution of the Carmelite Sisters from Spain on January 11, 1924, Mother Luisita blended this with the constitutions of the Carmelite Sisters in Mexico City. By the end of the year, the Carmelite Sisters of the Third Order of Guadalajara had their own constitution.

Within Mexico, times continued to be turbulent. There were bloody persecutions of the Catholics in the 1920s and 1930s. From 1920-1924 there was a lull in the persecution since the newly elected president Alvaro Obregon tolerated the Catholic Church and did not enforce the 1917 constitution’s anti-clerical laws. However, when the Vatican’s apostolic delegate to Mexico placed the cornerstone of Guanajuato’s Christ the King statue, he expelled Archbishop Filippi. In 1924, Plutarco Elias Calles won the presidential election and began a severe and barbaric persecution of the Catholic Church in Mexico with a goal to wipe out all religion from Mexico in a single generation. He was an atheist and free mason. Sister Timothy Marie Kennedy, O.C.D.’s books, *Unleashing Hope* and *In the Face of Darkness*, chronicle the challenges of Mother Luisita and the religious during this treacherous time in Mexico.

For safety, the sisters wore lay clothing. They hid in local houses. The mayor closed the girls’ school, a department of the hospital operated by the sisters and they operated the children’s school in a private home. Mother Luisita was told to get the sisters out of Atotonilco. The entire community walked the twenty-five miles to San Francisco de Asis. It was dangerous to travel on any road. On October 25, 1925, it became unsafe to pray in a church; people were instructed to pray in their homes. Mother Luisita instructed, “Form a beautiful and rich tabernacle within your heart for Our Lord and then do not let Him go. In that way, you will always have Him with you. Enter within yourself, and meeting Him, tell Him all your experiences.”

President Calles intensified persecution against the Church. Following a boycott proposed by Anacleto Gonzalez Flores and other Catholic groups, Calles seized more church property, expelled all foreign priests and closed monasteries, convents and religious schools. When Calles required priests to acquire a government license to exercise their priestly ministry, on July 22, the Episcopal Committee in Mexico asked His Holiness Pope Pius XI if they could suspend all Catholic religious services in Mexico.



On July 31, 1925, all Catholic churches in Mexico were closed. Rome placed the country of Mexico under interdict, no sacraments would be offered in the country. After Mother Luisita and her sisters received Holy Communion, both the tabernacle in their small oratory and the one in the parish church were emptied.

The Cristeros War (1926-1929) was in full force in 1927. The Army, under the leadership of General Jesus Maria Ferrerira confiscated all people's property and by May 1927 required that people from the rural areas concentrate in the plazas of selected cities. This resulted in greater poverty and starvation. Religious orders were treated very poorly. "The Franciscan Sisters from San Martin de Bolanos were ambushed by soldiers and carried away on horseback. They were returned about a month later and refused to speak to anyone about their ordeal."<sup>2</sup> Mother Luisita's Carmelite Sisters escaped on rooftops or by being walled in to protect themselves from the soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

On Monday, June 20, 1927, Mother Luisita, age 60, accompanied by Sister Teresa of Jesus Navarro, 40-years-old, and a newly professed 24-year-old Sister Margarita Maria of the Sacred Heart Hernandez, boarded a train en route to the United States as religious refugees. If caught, they could suffer the same fate as the Franciscan Sisters.

Sister Timothy Marie Kennedy, O.C.D., chronicles the great challenges Mother Luisita and the sisters encountered in the United States and the generosity of the bishops, priests and laity as the sisters established a refuge for the Mexican Carmelites and also shared their gifts and talents with the people in the United States, many of them also refugees. Times were difficult since this was also the time of the great depression in the United States. However, Divine Providence could always be counted upon, sometimes at the last minute. Unique grace-filled stories are recounted by Sister Timothy Marie Kennedy in both of her books.<sup>1 2</sup>

In 1928, the community in the United States expanded with the arrival of an exhausted group of 18 sisters from Mexico. Mother Luisita had agreed that the sisters would provide domestic services at the Christian Brother's newly built College of St. Mary. From Long Beach, they took a 400-mile train ride to San Francisco and then a 7 miles board ride to Oakland since the Oakland Bay Bridge would not be completed until 1936.

Mother Luisita returned to Mexico in 1929, four months after the signing of peace accords, but it was still unsafe. Within four months she was told by Archbishop Orozco y Jiménez, who himself was in exile in the United States, to return to the United States. She arrived back in Los Angeles on January 21, 1930. Here the Archbishop asked her to establish a novitiate in the United States with a plan to canonically establish congregations in both Mexico and the USA. Subsequently, at the request of Father Callahan, she established a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles which was more aligned with the charism of the Sisters. The sisters did not renew the domestic service contract at the College of St. Mary.

Beginning in the 1930s, the Mexican government began teaching more socialism in the public schools. General Lazaro Cardenas, elected president in 1934, enforced the 1917 constitution restricting religious liberty. Private schools that did not teach socialism were declared unconstitutional and closed.<sup>2</sup> Teachers were forced to take an oath as follows:

I declare that I am an atheist, an irreconcilable enemy of the Catholic Church and Roman religion, and that I will endeavor to destroy it, detaching conscience from the bonds of any religious worship and that I am ready to fight against the clergy anywhere and whenever it will be necessary.<sup>2</sup>

Parents reported that indecent sex education was taught in a grossly crude manner to all ages, even as young as kindergarten. One of the parents told Mother Luisita, "In one state, when



a mother of a girl heard what occurred that day in school, she got out her husband's revolver, walked to the school, asked the teacher to step outside the classroom, and shot her dead."

Another parent came soon after with stories of how whole towns rose against a school. She described how the people got together with sticks and stones and showed up at the school. The teacher was with the mayor of the town, discussing the new curriculum. When they heard the mob outside, they scurried up to the roof. The townspeople took turns guarding the school, leaving the two stranded on the roof for two days and two nights without shelter or water.<sup>2</sup>

Mother Luisita health began to decline. She experienced an attack of uremia but continued to write encouraging notes to her sisters and the novices in hiding. She had returned to Mexico, but in April 1935 again journeyed to the United States. There she developed a glandular infection and was seriously ill requiring surgery. Following a difficult recovery, she returned to Mexico only to find the situation had worsened. In August 1935, "a new law stated that the government would confiscate any building, including a family home, if any type of religious activity whatsoever was carried out within that home, even if the supposed actions were inferred or implied." Then suddenly in 1936 President Cardenas ceased the extreme religious persecution.<sup>2</sup>

Mother Luisita was thus able to establish three more schools in 1936. She now had nine houses, seven in Mexico and two in the United States (Los Angeles and Duaret, California). On July 12, 1936, the first ordinary general chapter of the new community was held in Guadalajara at which time Mother Luisita was officially elected the superior general. Unfortunately, times continued to be turbulent and the sisters again went into hiding in private homes on October 15, 1936. That Christmas, she called all the sisters to celebrate Christmas with her in Guadalajara. Subsequently, she placed the congregation in the hands of the vicar for religious, Don Alejandro Navarro, who came to visit her bedside in place of Archbishop Jose Garibi Rivera, who was out of the city.

On February 9, 1937, Mother Luisita received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick from Father Jose Refugio Huerta, S.J. On February 10, 1937, Ash Wednesday, an unknown priest gave her Jesus in Holy Communion (Viaticum, food for the journey). Several priests and then the bishop visited. Lastly, Father Modesto Sanchez arrived, as her breathing became labored, he blessed her with the Blessed Sacrament, as the Angelus bells were ringing. She sighed, taking her final breath at 5 a.m. on February 11, 1937. She always had a rosary in her hand which was found under her body after she died. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was celebrated in her room in the early morning of February 11, 1937, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. The vicar of religious returned and found many kneeling at her bedside, touching objects of devotion to her body. The funeral Mass was held on February 12 at the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus, even though it was still a crime to have a Christian burial in Mexico.<sup>2</sup> She was buried in her Carmelite habit with a crown of flowers on her head. So many people came in and out of the house that the authorities became suspicious resulting in the sisters having to flee the home, climbing on the roof the house and jumping to another.

Mother Luisita is buried in a side chapel at the motherhouse of the Carmelite Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mexico in Atotonilco el Alto, Jalisco, Mexico. Mother Luisita was declared venerable by a decree of heroic virtue on July 1, 2000, by Pope Saint John Paul II.<sup>3</sup> The postulator for her cause is Rev. Marco Chiesa, OCD and the petitioners: Carmelitas del Sagrado Corazon, Fray Juan de Zumarrage 462, Col. Chapalita, 45000 Guadalajara, Jal., Mexico.

*"Don't expect to acquire sanctity in any other way than  
by conquering yourself and by doing little things which will enable your soul  
to attain the necessary strength to endure greater troubles."*

*"May you use every day of your life to love Him, to serve Him,  
and to thank Him for the love He has for you."*

Official prayer for the beatification asking for Mother Luisita's intercession. Venerable Mother Luisita, pray for us!

*O Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, King and center of all hearts!  
Look with merciful love on the petitions we present to You  
through the intercession of Your servant,  
Mother Maria Luisa Josefa of the Most Blessed Sacrament.  
(Pause and request your petition)  
We humbly beseech You to glorify her  
who was always such a fervent lover of Your Sacred Heart  
by granting us these favors  
if they are for Your greater honor and glory.  
Amen.*

Graces obtained through Mother Luisita's intercession may be reported to: Superior General, Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles, 920 East Alhambra Road, Alhambra, California 91801 U.S.A.; (626) 289-1353

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Reference:

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2. Sister Timothy Marie Kennedy, O.C.D. (2018). *In the Face of Darkness: The Heroic Life and Holy Death of Mother Luisita*. Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 5.
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