by Cristina Siccardi

The Church has never made distinctions between the sanctity of the rich and the poor, between the learned and the simple, because God, One and Three, judges the degree of Faith and nothing else. In the same way, Bishops Tomasz Peta, Jan Paweł Lenga, and Athanasius Schneider in their *Profession of Immutable Truths about Sacramental Marriage*, point to those who gave witness by their deaths to the condemnation of cohabitation, placing on the same level St. John the Baptist, St. John Fisher, St. Thomas More, and the young woman, Laura del Carmen Vicuña.

The writer Ernest Hello explains in a passage well suited as a warning to the contemporary Church that lets herself be attracted more by weakness (sins) than good (the virtues): "The world collapses in vain. The Church counts her days with her feasts. She will never forget one of her doctors, nor one of her children, nor one of her virgins, nor one of her hermits. You curse her. She sings. Nothing can frighten her, nothing can ever put to sleep her invincible memory." (*Fisionomie di Santi*, Fògola, Turin, 1977, pg. 7). **[Published in English in 1903 as *Studies in Saintship*.]** The invincible memory is Tradition, and it is Tradition that prevails over fantasies, schizophrenia, and heresies.

Pope Francis, author of *Amoris Laetitia*, should know (of) the Chilean girl who led part of her short life in Argentina, but he didn't speak of her in his recent trip to Chile, which concluded exactly on January 22, the liturgical feast day of Laura del Carmen: she is certainly not a politically and religiously correct blessed for our times.

Venerated since her very *dies natalis* (January 22, 1904), the cause for canonization was opened on September 19, 1955 and on June 5, 1986, the title of venerable was conferred on her. "Following the official recognition of a miracle wrought through her intercession, Laura del Carmen Vicuña, a treatise of purity, of filial love and of sacrifice" was beatified by John Paul II on September 3, 1988 in Castelnuovo Don Bosco (in Asti, Italy). Pilgrims, most often from Argentina and Chile, visit her tomb in the chapel of the College of Mary, Help of Christians, in Bahia Blanca (550 kilometers southwest of Buenos Aires).

Laura del Carmen Vicuña was born in Santiago de Chile on April 5, 1891 to José Domingo, a career military man from a noble family, and the seamstress Mercedes Pino. The little girl with a Marian name (Carmen for Our Lady of Mount Carmel) was baptized in Saint Ann's Church the following month: it was May 24, feast of Mary, Help of Christians. It was in that year that the conflict between President José Manuel Balmaceda and Chile's Congress broke out, causing the Civil War.

A relative of José Domingo, Claudio Vicuña, took part in the elections as opponent and

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successor of the President, but failing in the attempt, his political adversaries began to persecute the entire Vicuña family. José Domingo with his wife and two daughters, Laura del Carmen and Julia Amanda (born in 1894), was forced to flee to the Argentinean border on the Andes in 1897; but died three years later, leaving his wife in grave financial difficulty.

Mercedes then decided to cross the border, to reach Argentina: the wealthy agricultural businessman Manuel Mora offered to accompany her to Junín de los Andes. Cities and villages in Patagonia were devastated by floods during the winter of 1899 up to the Atlantic coast, where the Salesian Bishop and future cardinal, Giovanni Cagliero wrote to his confrères in Chos-Malàl struck by the floods that "never was such a frightening and broad disaster seen in these parts."

The three Chilean exiles were shaken by the events, in the midst of water and slime. They arrived in the town of Neuquén, where Mercedes found work and upkeep for herself and her daughters on Mora's estate, thus accepting to become his lover.

On January 21, 1900 (the feast of St. Agnes) 9 year old Laura and 6 year old Julia were admitted to the Salesian Girls School of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians in Junín de los Andes. In the Salesian Boys School in the same Argentinean town, another young person destined to climb the ladder of an intense spiritual life would also be formed: Blessed Ceferino Namuncurà (1886-1905).

Since her birth Laura did not enjoy good health, but various difficulties including the intense chill and the long voyage to Junín further debilitated her. Being baptized and consciously coming to know herself as a daughter of God the Father awakened in her the desire for holiness, to be united with the Lord.

On June 2, 1901 she received her First Holy Communion, and following the example of St. Dominic Savio, developed resolutions to love God with her whole self: 1: "My God, I want to love and serve You for my whole life, and so I give You my soul, my heart, my whole being." 2: "I want to die before sinning; so I want to mortify myself in everything that could separate me from You." 2: "I propose to do as much as I can, so that You can be known and loved, and to repair for the offenses You receive from men every day, especially from those in my family. My God, grant me a life of love, of mortification, and of sacrifice."

She discovered then and there the purpose of her life: to free her mother from sin. The pain caused by the presence of her mother who joined her for the great event – without herself being able to receive the Eucharist – was terrible, and she knew the reason: Mercedes Pino lived with a man who was not her husband.

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On March 29, 1902, the two sisters received Confirmation, their mother again present but still avoiding the confessional. It was on this occasion that Laura requested to be admitted to the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians as a postulant, but she was refused due to the private and public conduct of her mother.

A little later, Laura took private vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, because as her biographer and spiritual director, Fr. Augusto Crestanello reported: "I want to be all Yours, even if I have to stay in the world." (*Vida de Laura Vicuña*, Escuela Tip. Gratitud Nacional 1911).

"The little crazy one of Jesus" as she signed her homework, could give up everything but not Confession, Communion, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament: the Sacred Host and her overflowing love for Mary Immaculate were the two unshakable Columns on which her sanctity was founded. Starting from her baptism, Our Lady was always present every day of her life, and she joined the Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary on December 8, 1900, wearing its medal.

During a holiday in 1902, Laura and Julia went to see their mother in Quilquihué. It was then that Manuel Mora tried to abuse Laura, but already aware of the inopportune attention of the man, she was able to overcome it. Defending herself by readiness, she resisted him and won.

Following the example of Don Bosco, the teachers in Junín brought their students to daily Mass, and all repeated several times a day "Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us." Our Lady hastened to aid the 10 year old girl full of not only innocence but also wisdom, who invoked Her. Mora took his revenge by refusing to pay the girls' tuition, but the Institute's directress welcomed the Vicuña sisters back free of charge, anyway.

On May 24, 1903, Laura del Carmen manifested the fullness of her love for the Help of Christians in a singular way: in the presence of the civil and church authorities, she read with ardor and grace a magnificent salutation to Mary she had written herself. Then came the great decision: she offered her life to the Lord. As her spiritual director wrote: "Laura suffered in the depth of her heart… One day, she decided to offer her life and accept death voluntarily, in exchange for the salvation of her mother. She begged me to bless this ardent desire of hers. I hesitated (to do so) for a long time."

(Her mother's) living with a man outside of the Catholic sacrament of Matrimony and estrangement from the Faith, were a source of agonizing pain for Laura. Fr. Crestanello ceded to the girl's insistence: she couldn't betray the three bases of the "Rule of Life" she had given herself at First Communion, and her commitments made with God. The Lord

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would soon give ear to her self-donation.

In September of 1903 she was unable, debilitated as she was, to take part in the spiritual exercises. She had no choice but to leave the college and to be assisted by her mother in an apartment in Junín de Los Andes, where in January 1904, Manuel Mora visited, planning to spend the night in the same place. But Laura was resolute despite her serious health condition: "If he stays here, I'll go back to the Sisters' college," and so it happened.

Mora chased after Laura, violently beating her, but she was still able to reach the Institute, where she found Fr. Crestanello, renewing the offering of her life for her mother's conversion, whom she called for on the evening of January 22, after receiving Viaticum: "Mamma, I'm dying! I asked Jesus for this. It's been almost two years that I offered Him my life for you, to obtain the grace of your return to the Faith. Mamma, won't I have the joy of seeing you repent before I die?" Mercedes finally gave in, and her daughter passed away peacefully: "Thank You, Jesus! Thank You, Mary! Now I die happily!"

Her mother returned to the Sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist at Laura's funeral. The Saints participate in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and sometimes like Christ, through Mary Immaculate, reach the immolation of themselves for their neighbor's redemption just as Laura del Carmen Vicuña did. If her immolation was not useless, it is because that of Christ continues, and will continue, not to be.

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