 Reading time: 7 min.

Who was Dorotea de Chopitea? She was a Salesian cooperator, a true mother of the poor in Barcelona, creator of numerous institutions at the service of charity and the apostolic mission of the Church. Her figure takes on special importance today and encourages us to imitate her example of being “merciful like the Father”.

A Biscayan in Chile

In 1790, during the reign of Charles IV, a Biscayan, Pedro Nicolás de Chopitea, a native of Lequeitio, emigrated to Chile, then part of the Spanish Empire. The young migrant prospered and married a young Creole woman, Isabel de Villota.

Don Pedro Nolasco Chopitea and Isabel Villota settled in Santiago de Chile. God granted them 18 children, although only 12 survived, five boys and seven girls. The youngest of these was born, baptised and confirmed on the same day: 5 August 1816, taking the names Antonia, Dorotea and Dolores, although she was always known as Dorotea (Dorothy), which in Greek means “gift of God”. Peter and Elizabeth’s family was wealthy, Christian, and committed to using their wealth for the benefit of the poor people around them.

In 1816, the year of Dorotea’s birth, Chileans began to openly demand independence from Spain, which they achieved in 1818. The following year, Don Pedro, who had aligned himself with the royalists, i.e. in favour of Spain, and had been imprisoned for it, moved his family across the Atlantic to Barcelona, so that the political turmoil would not compromise his older children, although he continued to maintain a dense network of relations with political and economic circles in Chile.

In the large house in Barcelona, the three-year-old Dorotea was entrusted to the care of her twelve-year-old sister Josefina. Thus Josefina, later “Sister Josefina”, was Dorotea’s “little young mother”. She entrusted herself to her with total affection, allowing herself to be guided by her.

When she was thirteen years old, on Josefina’s advice she took Father Pedro Nardó, from the parish of Santa María del Mar, as her spiritual director. For 50 years Pedro was her confessor and counsellor in delicate and difficult moments. The priest taught her with kindness and strength to “separate her heart from riches”.

Throughout her life, Dorotea considered the riches of her family not as a source of amusement and dissipation, but as a great means placed in her hand by God to do good for the poor. Fr Pedro Nardó had her read the Gospel parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus many times. As a distinctive Christian sign, he advised Josefina and Dorotea to always dress modestly and simply, without the cascade of ribbons and light silk gauze that the fashion of the time imposed on young aristocratic women.

Dorotea received the solid home schooling which at that time was given to girls from well-to-do families. In fact, she later helped her husband many times in his profession as a merchant.

Wife at the age of sixteen

The Chopiteas had met up in Barcelona with friends from Chile, the Serra family, who had returned to Spain for the same reason, independence. The father, Mariano Serra i Soler, came from Palafrugell and had also carved out a brilliant financial position for himself. Married to a young Creole girl, Mariana Muñoz, he had four children, the eldest of whom, José María, was born in Chile on 4 November 1810.

At the age of sixteen, Dorotea experienced the most delicate moment of her life. She was engaged to José María Serra, although the marriage was spoken of as a future event. But it happened that Don Pedro Chopitea had to return to Latin America to defend his interests, and shortly afterwards his wife Isabel prepared to cross the Atlantic to reach him in Uruguay together with their youngest children. Suddenly, Dorotea was faced with a fundamental decision for her life: to break the deep affection that bound her to José María Serra and leave with her mother, or to marry at the age of sixteen. On the advice of Fr Pedro Nardó, Dorotea decided to marry. The marriage took place in Santa Maria del Mar on 31 October 1832.

The young couple settled in Carrer Montcada, in the palace belonging to her husband’s parents. The understanding between them was perfect and a source of happiness and well-being.

Dorotea was a slim, lanky individual with a strong and determined character. The “I will always love you” sworn by the two spouses before God, developed into an affectionate and solid married life which gave birth to six daughters: all of them receiving the name Maria with various complements: Maria Dolores, Maria Ana, Maria Isabel, Maria Luisa, Maria Jesus and Maria del Carmen. The first came into the

world in 1834, the last in 1845.

Fifty years after the “yes” pronounced in the church of Santa Maria del Mar, José Maria Serra would say that in all those years “our love grew day by day”.

Dorotea, mother of the poor
Dorotea was the lady of the house, in which several families of employees worked. She was José María’s intelligent co-worker, who soon achieved fame in the business world. She was by his side in times of success and in times of uncertainty and failure. Dorotea was by her husband’s side when he travelled abroad. She was with him Tsar Alexander II’ Russia, in the Savoy family’s Italy and Pope Leo XIII’s Rome.

On her visit to Rome, at the age of sixty-two, she was accompanied by her niece Isidora Pons, who testified at the apostolic process: “She was received by the Pope. The deference with which Leo XIII treated my aunt, to whom he offered her a white sundress as a gift, has stayed with me.”

Affectionate and strong
The employees of the Serra house felt like part of the family. Maria Arnenos declared under oath: “She had a motherly affection for us, her employees. She cared for our material and spiritual welfare with real love. When someone was ill, she saw to it that they lacked nothing, she took care of even the smallest details.” “Her salary was higher than that given to the employees of other families.

A delicate person, a strong and determined character. This was the battlefield on which Dorotea struggled throughout her life to acquire the humility and calm that nature had not given her. As great as her impetus was, greater was her strength to live always in the presence of God. Thus she wrote in her spiritual notes: “I will make every effort to ensure that from morning all my actions are directed to God”, “I will not give up meditation and spiritual reading without serious reason”, “I will make twenty daily acts of mortification and as many acts of love of God”, “To do all actions from God and for God, frequently renewing purity of intention.… I promise God to purify my intention in all my actions.”

Salesian Cooperator
In the last decades of the 1800s, Barcelona was a city in the throes of the “industrial revolution”. The outskirts of the city were full of very poor people. There was a lack of shelters, hospitals and schools. During the retreat she made in 1867,

Doña Dorotea wrote among her resolutions: “My favourite virtue will be charity towards the poor, even if it costs me great sacrifices.” And Adrián de Gispert, Dorotea’s nephew, testified: “I know that Aunt Dorotea founded hospitals, shelters, schools, workshops for arts and trades and many other works. I remember visiting some of them in her company. When her husband was alive, he helped her in these charitable and social works. After his death, she first of all saw to the patrimony of her five daughters; then, her “personal” goods (her very rich dowry, the patrimony received personally in inheritance, the goods that her husband wanted to register in his name), she used for the poor with careful and prudent administration.” A witness stated under oath: “After having provided for her family, she dedicated the rest to the poor as an act of justice.”

Having heard from Don Bosco, she wrote to him on 20 September 1882 (she was sixty-six, Don Bosco sixty-seven). She told him that Barcelona was an “eminently industrial and mercantile” city, and that his young and dynamic Congregation would find plenty of work among the boys in the suburbs. She offered a school for apprentice workers.

Fr Philp Rinaldi arrived in Barcelona in 1889, and he writes: “We went to Barcelona at her call, because she wanted to provide especially for young workers and abandoned orphans. She bought a plot of land with a house, the extension of which she took care of. I arrived in Barcelona when the construction had already been completed…. With my own eyes I saw many cases of assistance to children, widows, the elderly, the unemployed and the sick. Many times I heard it said that she personally performed the most humble services for the sick.”

In 1884 she thought of entrusting a nursery school to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: it was necessary to think of the children in the outer suburbs.

Don Bosco was not able to go to Barcelona until the spring of 1886, and the chronicles amply report the triumphant welcome he was given in the Catalan metropolis, and the affectionate and respectful attentions with which Doña Dorotea, her daughters, grandchildren and relatives surrounded the saint.

On 5 February 1888, when he was informed of Don Bosco’s death, Blessed Michael Rua wrote to her: “Our dearest father Don Bosco has flown to heaven, leaving his children full of sorrow.” He always showed a lively esteem and grateful affection for our mother of Barcelona, as he called her, the mother of the Salesians and the

Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Moreover, before he died, he assured her that he was going to prepare a good place for her in heaven. That same year, Doña Dorotea handed over the oratory and the schools in Rocafort Street, in the heart of Barcelona to the Salesians.

The last handing over to the Salesian Family was the Santa Dorotea school entrusted to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. 60,000 pesetas were needed for its purchase, and she handed it over saying: “God wants me poor.” That sum was her provision for her old age, what she kept to live modestly together with Mary, her faithful companion.

On Good Friday 1891, in the cold church of Marie Reparatrice, as she was taking up the collection she contracted pneumonia. She was seventy-five years old, and it was immediately clear that she would not overcome the crisis. Fr Rinaldi came to her and stayed for a long time at her bedside. He wrote: “In the few days he was still alive, she did not think of her illness but of the poor and her soul. She wanted to say something in particular to each of her daughters, and blessed them all in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, like an ancient patriarch. As we stood around her bed commending her to the Lord, at a certain moment she raised her eyes. The confessor presented the crucifix to her to kiss. Those of us who were present knelt down. Doña Dorotea recollected herself, closed her eyes and gently breathed her last.”

It was 3 April 1891, five days after Easter.

Pope John Paul II declared her “Venerable” on 9 June 1983, i.e. “a Christian who practised love of God and neighbour to an heroic degree,”

Fr Echave-Sustaeta del Villar Nicolás, sdb
Vice-Postulator of the Cause of the Venerable