

SAINT MANUEL BUENO, THE MARTYR
(San Manuel Bueno, Mártir)

If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope,
we are of all men the most to be pitied.
(1 Corinthians XV, 19: The New English Bible)

Now that the Bishop from the diocese of Renada, which includes my beloved village of Valverde de Lucerna, has begun the process for the beatification of our Don Manuel, or rather the Good Saint Manuel, because that's what he was in this parish, although only God knows why, I, Angela Carballino, want to record here, as a sort of confession, all I know and recall about that wonderful man who touched the most tender part of my soul, and was my true spiritual father, that is, the father of my spirit.

My other father, my biological father, was someone I hardly knew, since he died when I was just a young girl. I know he was an outsider who came to Valverde de Lucerna, and that he settled here after he married my mother. He brought with him a number of books: The *Quijote*, some works of classical theater, a few novels and histories, as well as the *Bertoldo*; and from those books, which were about the only ones in our village, I learned to use my imagination when I was a child. My mother never said much about the accomplishments of my father. Those of Don Manuel who, like everyone, she adored—quite chastely of course—were more important to her than those of her husband, although every day, when she said the Rosary, she asked God to bless him.

I remember our Don Manuel when I was ten years old, as if it was yesterday. That was when they sent me to the Catholic school in the provincial city of Renada. Our saint was then thirty-six years old. He was tall, slender, and dignified; he carried his head like our Buzzard's Peak mountain carries its crest, and in his eyes there was the same deep blue as the waters of our lake. He attracted our eyes, as well as our hearts, and when he looked at us he seemed to look into our body and see our heart. And what things he would say to us! And it wasn't just his words. People eventually became aware of his saintliness, and they felt inspired by his influence. That was when my brother, Lazaro, who was living in America and was sending us money to help us live more comfortably, asked my mother to send me to the Catholic High School so that I could finish my education somewhere outside the village, even though he didn't think very highly of the nuns. As he told us, "Since, as far as I know there are no good secular schools, and especially not for girls, we have to make do with what is available. The important thing is that our Angelita should receive a good education, and not the sort of nonsense they teach there in the village." So I entered the school and was planning to be a teacher, until I lost interest in pedagogy.

While in school, I got to know several girls from the city, and I became good friends with some of them. However, I still kept up with the events and the people of our village, from whom I received the news, as well as an occasional visit. Eventually the fame of our priest reached the school, and people began to talk about him in the episcopal city. The nuns also asked me many questions about him.

Ever since I was young I was prone to certain curiosities, preoccupations, and anxieties due, at least in part, to all those books of my father's I had read. All that became worse while I was in school; and that was especially true when I became very good friends with another girl who sometimes wanted to convince me that we should enter a convent and

commit ourselves to a permanent religious life, but then at other times she would speak guardedly about finding a lover and enjoying the benefits of married life. I never did find out what became of her, or what her life was like. And while all this was happening, I continued to hear things about our Don Manuel; every time my mother would say something about him in her letters, I would read it to my friend. Then she would tell me, "Oh, how lucky you are, girl, to live near a saint like that, a real live saint of flesh and blood, and be able to kiss his hand! When you return to your village, be sure to write and tell me about him."

I spent about five years in that school, and now it all seems like a dream. When I was fifteen and I returned to Valverde de Lucerna, all I ever thought about was Don Manuel: Don Manuel, and our lake, and our mountain. When I arrived, I was anxious to get to know him, to put myself under his protection, and let him set the course for my life.

It was said that he entered the Seminary in order to become a priest because he wanted to be able to look after the children of his sister, who had recently become a widow; they said that in the Seminary he distinguished himself for his mental acuity and his talent, and that he rejected the offer of a brilliant ecclesiastical career, because he wanted nothing more than to serve his village, Valverde de Lucerna, that was lost like a jewel between the lake, and the mountain reflected in it.

And how he loved his people! He spent his time healing unhappy marriages, reconciling rebellious children with their fathers, or fathers with their children, and trying to console those who were bitter or distraught, or helping those who were about to die.

Among other things, I remember when the unfortunate daughter of Aunt Rabona came back from the city with her child, abandoned and unmarried, and Don Manuel did not stop until he had convinced her former boyfriend, Perote, to marry her and say that the child was his own, telling him:

"You have to be a father to this child, who only has one in heaven."

"But Don Manuel, I'm not to blame...!"

"Who know, who knows...?; and anyway, it is not a question of blame."

And now poor Perote, who is paralyzed and not able to walk, has as his caretaker and comforter the child who, moved by the devotion of Don Manuel, he recognized as his own, even though he was not.

On the night of Saint John, the shortest night of the year, some poor women and a few men, who felt they were possessed by the devil, but were probably only overexcited or epileptic, had the custom of gathering at our lake; Don Manuel was able to convince them all that the lake was a sacred place, to try and alleviate them and, if possible, cure them. The effect of his presence as well as his attention, and especially his words and his voice, was such that it produced remarkable cures. Because of this, his reputation grew, and all the sick people in the region were attracted to our lake. On one occasion, a mother came to him and asked him to perform a miracle for her child, and he said sadly, "I'm sorry, but I don't have permission from the Bishop to perform miracles."

He especially wanted his people to be well-dressed, and if he noticed that one of them had torn clothing, he would say to them:

"Go see the sacristan, who is a tailor, and he will mend that."

And on the first day of the year, when people went to congratulate him on the day of his Saint—his patron saint was our blessed Lord Jesus—Don Manuel would ask them to give him a new shirt, so that he could give it to someone who did not have one.

He showed the same affection to everyone, and if he gave more attention to some, it was to those who were unfortunate, or those who were thought of as sinful. And since we had a poor retarded fellow who was our village idiot, Blasillo the Fool, it was to him that he gave the most love and affection; and he even managed to teach him a few things that it seemed a miracle he was able to learn. Then, with what little intelligence he had, he was able to imitate Don Manuel like a monkey. One of the most remarkable things about Don Manuel was his voice, a divine voice that could make you cry. When he said Mass or recited a homily, all those who heard him were deeply moved. Echoing from the church, his voice floated over the waters of the lake and came to rest at the foot of the mountain. And when, during his sermon on Maundy Thursday, he repeated those words: "My God, My God!, why hast thou forsaken me?", a tremor passed through the people, like on those days when a cold north wind ripples the waters of the lake. It was as though they heard our Lord Jesus Christ himself, as if his voice emanated from the old crucifix, in front of which many generations of mothers had expressed their sorrow. In fact, once when Don Manuel's own mother heard him, she couldn't contain herself and cried out from the pew of the church where she was sitting: "My son," and everyone burst into tears. It was as though this maternal voice had come from the image of Our Lady of Sorrows, her heart pierced by seven swords, which was in one of the chapels of the church. Then, after that, Blasillo the Fool went around exclaiming, with a pathetic voice like an echo, "My God, My God!, why hast thou forsaken me?", and the effect was so powerful that, when people heard him, they shed tears and rejoiced at the fool's imitative triumph.

Don Manuel's influence was so strong that nobody dared to lie in front of him, and even without going to the confessional, they confessed to him. Once, when a serious crime was committed in a neighboring village and the judge, an insensitive fellow who didn't know what Don Manuel was like, called him to the stand and said:

"Let us see, Father, if you can get this thief to tell the truth."

And the devoted priest answered him: "So that you can punish him? No, Your Honor, I will do nothing that could possibly lead to the death of this man. This is between him and God... Human justice does not concern me. Our Lord has said to us, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.'"

"But, Father, I have to..."

"Yes, I understand; Give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and I will give to God what belongs to God." As he was leaving, he looked pointedly at the alleged criminal and said:

"Just remember, whether God has forgiven you, is all that matters."

Everyone in the village went to Mass, even if it was just to hear him and see him at the altar, where he seemed to become transfigured as his face lit up. He initiated the custom of asking everyone, men and women, young and old, to say the Creed with him in unison, "I believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth..." and so on. And it was not a chorus, but a single voice, a voice that was simple and united, with everyone together forming a mountain whose peak, lost in the clouds, was Don Manuel. And when they came to, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting," it was as though the voice of Don Manuel had dropped into a lake, which was that of the people, and his became silent. After that, I could hear the sound of bells, which they say are submerged in the lake and are heard on the night of Saint John, and it was those who were submerged in the spiritual lake of our people; I could also hear the voice of our

departed who had been resurrected in us through the communion of saints. Later, when I finally learned of the secret of our saint, I understood that it was like a caravan travelling through the desert, whose leader had passed away, and whose lifeless body was being carried on the shoulders of his people to the Promised Land.

All those who feared death wanted to hold his hand like an anchor. In his sermons he never condemned those who were unbelievers, Masons, liberals, or heretics. Why do that anyway, since there were none in our village. Nor did he condemn the press. However, one of the frequent topics of his sermons was his warning against using bad language. Because he forgave everyone and everything, he never wanted to believe in the evil intention of anyone.

“Those who feel envy,” he once said, “are those who think they are envied, and the majority of persecutions are caused more by the desire to persecute, than by some wrong done by the person who is persecuted.”

“But Don Manuel, there were all those things he tried to say to me...”

And he replied:

“What someone tries to say to us should not matter as much as the things that are said without trying to...”

His life was active, rather than contemplative, and he tried very hard to avoid having nothing to do. Whenever he heard someone claim that idleness is the mother of all evils, he answered, “And the worst of all, is idle thought.” And when I asked him once what he had meant by that, he said: “Idle thought is thinking in order to avoid doing something, or spending all your time thinking about what you have done, and not about what should be done. Like saying: it’s no use crying over spilt milk, and continuing what you are doing, since there is nothing worse than feeling remorse, without making an effort to change.” Always keep moving!, always find something to do! Since then, I have realized that Don Manuel was fleeing from idle thought and inactivity, because he was running away from things he did not want to think about.

He always kept busy, but he was often forced to invent reasons for doing something. He wrote very little about himself, and for that reason, we have hardly any of his writings or notes. Nevertheless, he became an amanuensis for others, and especially, for mothers who couldn’t write, he wrote letters to their absent children. He also did a lot of manual labor, working with his hands on various projects in the village. During the threshing season, he went to the threshing floor, and while he was working, he would give lessons or advice, to those who worked with him. Sometimes he substituted for someone who was sick and could not work. One day, during the coldest part of winter, he came upon a young boy who was freezing, whose father had sent him to bring back a sheep that had wandered away from the rest of the herd. “Don’t worry,” he told the boy, “go back home and get warm; tell your father I will bring the sheep back.” Then, while he was doing that, he encountered the confused father who was trying to find him. During the winter he would chop wood for the poor. When a magnificent walnut tree died, the one they called the matriarchal tree, in whose shade he took shelter as a child and whose nuts he had eaten for many years, he asked them to give him the trunk. After they brought it to him, he cut six planks, which he left at the foot of his bed, and from the rest he made firewood to warm the poor.

He also was in the habit of making balls for the boys to play with, as well as different kinds of toys for other children.

He used to accompany the doctor on his visits, and he also wrote down prescriptions for the doctor. He took special interest in pregnancies and the raising of children, and he thought that one of the greatest blasphemies was the saying: "Give them the nipple and they'll be saved!" and also that other one: "Little angels to heaven." He was profoundly moved by the death of children. "A baby that is born dead, or one that dies soon after it is born, as well as a suicide" he once told me, "are the most terrible mysteries for me. What a cross to bear!"

Once, when someone took his own life, the father of the one who committed suicide asked if he could be buried in sacred ground, and he answered:

"Of course, because when he reached the final moment and was about to die, he had undoubtedly repented."

He also went to the school quite often to assist the teacher, to teach with him, and not just the catechism. All this, was because he was fleeing from idleness, and from being alone. This was so important to him that, in order to be with his people, and especially, with young people and with children, he would also go to the dances that were held in the village. He played the tambourine while the boys and girls danced, and what for others would have been a profanation of his priestly duties, for him, became a religious rite. When the Angelus sounded, setting aside his tambourine and his paddle, he began to pray, along with the others: "And the Angel of the Lord said to Mary, Ave Maria..." After that, he said: "Now go home and rest until tomorrow."

"The most important thing," he would say, "is for people to be happy, and for them to be content with their lives. Contentment with one's life is the most important thing. No one should want to die, until God wills it."

But a woman who had recently become a widow, told him: "That's not the way I feel; I just want to follow my husband..."

"And for what purpose?" he replied. "Stay here and give your life to God." During a wedding he said once: "Oh, if I could only change all the water in our lake to wine, to a wine that, no matter how much you drank you would be happy and never get drunk..., or at least, with a happy intoxication."

A group of poor circus performers once came to the village. The leader of the group, whose wife was pregnant and seriously ill, was being assisted by his three children as he performed as a clown. While he was making the children laugh, and also the adults, his wife suddenly became gravely indisposed and started to leave, followed by a look of anxiety from the clown, and a burst of laughter from the children. Don Manuel went with her to a corner of the stable in the inn, where he helped her die. When the performance was over and the clown, and the other people learned of her death, the former said with a tearful voice, "Senor Priest, they are correct when they say you're a saint," and he approached him, wanting to take his hand and kiss it. But Don Manuel acted first, taking that of the clown, and saying to everyone:

"No, honored Clown, you are the saint; I saw you working here, and I could tell that you were not doing it just to give bread to your children, but also to give happiness to those of others. I can also tell you that your wife, the mother of your children whom I sent to God while you were working, now rests with the Lord, and when you join her, the angels will reward you for the happiness you have given to others."

And the people, both young and old, could not help but weep; and they wept not just with sadness, but with a mysterious joy that embraced their sorrow. And then, thinking

back about that solemn occasion, I understood that Don Manuel's apparent happiness was only the secular and earthly form of an infinite and eternal sadness that, with a heroic saintliness, he tried as hard as he could to hide from the eyes and ears of all the rest of his parishioners.

When I thought about the constant activity with which he participated in the work and the diversions of others, I realized that he was trying to escape from himself, and from his loneliness. I remember him saying, "I fear solitude." But even then, from time to time, he would go by himself to the shore of the lake to visit the ruins of an ancient Abbey, where the souls of pious Cistercians are resting in the forgotten vaults of history. That is where the cell of the so-called Father Captain is located, and they say that on the walls you can still see signs of the blood that was splattered when he flagellated himself. What could Don Manuel have thought about when he was there? What I do remember, is that once when we were talking about the Abbey, I asked him why it was he hadn't decided to enter the cloister, and he answered me:

"It was not just because I was thinking of my widowed sister and her two children who needed help, since I know that God helps the poor, but I was not born to be a hermit, or an anchorite; living in solitude would cause the death of my soul, and I have a monastery, which is Valverde de Lucerna. I must not live alone. I must not die alone. I must live for my people, and I must die for my people. How can I save my soul, if I do not save the souls of my people?"

"But there have been saints who were hermits, or who were cloistered."

"Yes, but the Lord gave them the ability to live in solitude, something which has been denied me, and I must accept that. I cannot abandon my people in order to save my soul; that is the way God made me. I could not accept the temptation of the desert. I could not bear the cross of living by myself."

With the account of these memories, which are the basis of my faith, I have wanted to describe Don Manuel as he was when I was about fifteen years old, and I returned from Renada, to the monastery of Valverde de Lucerna, and fell at the feet of its Abbot.

"Greetings, daughter of Simona," he said when he saw me. "Here you are, already a young lady who has learned to speak French, to embroider, to play the piano, and who knows, what else! Soon it will be time for you to have a family of your own. And how is your brother, Lazaro? I assume that he is still in the New World."

"Yes sir, he is still in America."

"Ah, the New World! And us in the Old One. So when you write to him be sure to tell him, on my part, on the part of his priest, that I am wondering when he will return from the New World to this Old One, bringing me the news of what things are like over there. And tell him that he will find the lake and the mountain just like they were."

When I went to confess with him, my emotions were so confused I was hardly able to speak. I started out with "I, a sinner..." hesitating, and almost sobbing. And noticing it, he said to me: "But what is wrong, little lamb? Of what, or of whom, are you so afraid? I am sure you are not trembling in fear of God because of any sins you have committed. No, you are afraid of me; isn't that so?" And I began to weep.

"But what is it they have been telling you about me? What stories have you heard? Perhaps from your mother? Come, come; calm yourself and realize that you are speaking with your brother..."

Feeling reassured, I began to tell him about my worries, my doubts, and my sorrows. "Now, now, where have you read all that, Miss know-it-all? That is all just literature! don't believe in everything you read, even if it is from Saint Teresa. And if you want to amuse yourself, read something like the *Bertoldo*, as your father did." I came out of my first confession with that devout man feeling greatly consoled. And the emotion I felt when I had gone to see him, which was fear more than respect, changed into a profound pity. I was just a young girl then, almost a child; but I was becoming a woman, and in my heart I had a feeling of motherhood so that when I went to confess with him, in the tone of his voice I could sense a kind of silent confession on his part. I remembered when he had repeated the words, "My God, my God! Why hast thou forsaken me?", and his mother cried out "My son," and had disturbed the entire the congregation. After that, I went to confession in order to console him.

Once, when I went to confess with him, and I expressed some of the doubts I was feeling, he answered me:

"Well, you already know what the catechism says: 'Do not ask me about that, I who am ignorant; there are wise men in our Holy Mother Church who will know what to tell you regarding things like that.' "

"But the wise man here is you, Don Manuel...!"

"I, a wise man?, No! Never say that. I, Miss wise lady, am nothing more than a poor village priest. And do you know where these questions come from, and who is making you ask them? Why the Devil, of course!"

And then, taking courage, I managed to say what I was really feeling:

"And what if these doubts were directed at you, Don Manuel?"

"To whom? To me? And from the Devil? No, child, we do not know each other; we are not acquainted."

"And if he did say them to you...?"

"I would not pay any attention to him. Now, that's enough, all right? I have others waiting for me, who are truly sick."

I left thinking, why is it that our Don Manuel, so well-known for helping to cure those who are bedeviled, does not himself believe in the Devil? And as I was walking towards my house, I happened to see Blasillo the Fool who must have been wandering around the church, and when he saw me, as if to impress me with his skill, he repeated his customary words: "My God, My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?" After that I went home feeling very depressed, and I stayed in my room until my mother came home.

"It seems to me, Angelita, that if you keep on going to so many confessions, you are going to become a nun."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Mother," I answered her; "I have plenty to do right here in our village, which is my convent."

"Until you get married."

"I am not thinking about that," I replied.

Later, when I met with Don Manuel, I asked him, looking him straight in the face:

"Is there a hell, Don Manuel?"

And, without hesitation, he said:

"For you, child? No."

"And how about for others?"

"What does that matter to you, if you're not going there?"

"I care about it for others. So, does it exist?"

"Just believe in heaven, the heaven we see. There, look..." and he pointed up at the mountain, and then down at the lake.

"But you have to believe in hell, just like you believe in heaven," I insisted.

"Yes, you must believe in everything taught by our Holy, Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Mother Church. And that's enough!"

As he said that, I could read a kind of deep sadness in his eyes, that were as blue as the waters of our lake. Those years passed by like a dream. Without my even realizing it, the image of Don Manuel kept on growing inside me, since his presence was so frequent, like the "daily-bread" we ask for in the Lord's Prayer. I helped him in his work as much as I could; I accompanied him when he visited those who were sick, or the children in school; I arranged things in the vestry, serving, as he called me, like a Deaconess. There was a time when I was invited to visit the city by one of my school friends, but I had to return since the city was stifling me, and I felt like I was missing something. I longed to see the waters of the lake, I was hungry for the sight of the mountain, but more than anything, I missed Don Manuel, as if his absence was calling me, as if being so far away from him put him in danger, and he needed me. I began to feel a sort of motherly love for my spiritual father, and I wanted to alleviate the weight of his cross of being born.

That's how things were, when I was twenty-four, and my brother, Lazaro, came back from America with a small fortune he had accumulated. And he also came home with the idea of taking us to live in a city, perhaps in Madrid.

"In this village," he said, "you don't learn anything new, since things never change, and there is no way to improve." And he added:

"Civilization is the opposite of rural life; the last thing I want is for you to become a country bumpkin; I didn't ask you to go to school in the city, just so you could come back and vegetate here among these ignorant yokels."

I kept silent, although ready to oppose moving away, but our mother, who was now more than sixty years old, did not hesitate to speak up right away. "At my age, you want me to uproot myself?" she said angrily, and then she let him know, in no uncertain terms, that she could not live without the sight of her lake and her mountain, and above all, without Don Manuel. "You are like cats that are tied to the house!" my brother insisted. Once he realized how powerful his influence was on the people of our village, and above all on me and my mother, my brother became irritated about Don Manuel. He saw this as another example of the profound theocracy in which Spain had become immersed, and he began to repeat all the typical anticlerical vilifications, as well as other antireligious and progressive ideas, he had brought back from the New World.

"In this weak-willed country, priests control the women and women control the men..., and now the country has regressed to the feudal system..."

For him, feudal was a negative term; feudal and medieval were the labels he used when he wanted to condemn something.

Lazaro was bewildered by the lack of effect his diatribes had on us, and by the lack of influence they had on other people from the village, who listened to him with respectful indifference. "I can see there is nothing that will convince these country bumpkins." But since he was a good person, and he was also intelligent, it didn't take him long to see that the type of influence that Don Manuel had over our people was not what he thought, and he soon changed his opinion.

"No, he is not like the others," he said; "he really is a saint!"

"But, do you know what other priests are like?" I asked him, and he replied:

"Well, I can imagine it."

But even then, he never entered the church, nor did he stop speaking of his skepticism, although when he did this, he was careful not to mention Don Manuel. And now, I'm not sure why, among the people of our village, there was beginning to be an expectation that there would be some sort of competition between my brother Lazaro and Don Manuel, or rather, they expected that there would soon be a conversion of the former by the latter. No one doubted that, sooner or later, the Priest would lure him into his parish. For his part, Lazaro was burning with desire to go and see Don Manuel, to hear him speak and to talk with him, so that he could get to know him and learn the secret of his spiritual influence on people. Many urged him to do that until, out of curiosity, he finally did go to hear him.

"Yes, this is something else," he told me after he had heard him speak; "he is not like the others, but he still doesn't fool me; he is way too intelligent to believe all the things he has to say."

"You mean you think he is a hypocrite?", I said.

"A hypocrite? No..., but it is his profession which he has to obey." And in order to help me understand, my brother insisted that I read some books he had brought with him, as well as some others that he urged me to buy.

"So your brother wants you to read," Don Manuel said to me. "Well then, child, go ahead and read and make him happy. I know you will only read good things; you can even read novels. The so-called 'true stories' are often not the best. It would be better for you to read, than to feed upon the chatter and gossip from the village. But most of all, read books filled with compassion that make you feel content, with a peaceful and silent contentment. Isn't that what he wants?"

About that time our mother became deathly ill, and the thing she talked about most was her hope that Don Manuel would be able to convert Lazaro, whom she hoped to see once more in heaven, from a place between the stars, where one could see the lake and the mountain of Valverde de Lucerna. She was already ready to go and meet God.

"You are not going anywhere," Don Manuel said to her. "You are going to stay here, your body in this earth, and your soul in this house, where you can see and hear your children, although they will not be able to see or hear you."

"But Father," she said, "I am going to go and see God."

"God," my lady, is here, as well as everywhere else; and you will see Him from here, from right here. And all of us in Him, and He in us."

"God bless you," I told him.

"The contentment with which your mother is ready to die," he told me, "will be her eternal life." And then, turning to Lazaro he said:

"For her, heaven is continuing to see you, and now is the time to save her. Tell her you will pray for her."

"But...", Lazaro hesitated.

"But what?..., tell her you will pray for her, for the one to whom you owe your life, and I know that once you promise her you will pray, and when you do pray..."

My brother, his eyes full of tears, went to my mother and promised that, indeed, he would pray for her.

“And in heaven, I will pray for all of you,” my mother replied; and kissing the crucifix, with her eyes fixed on Don Manuel, she delivered her soul to God.

“Into Your hands I commend my spirit,” Don Manuel prayed.

After that, my brother and I were alone. What had happened with the death of our mother created a special bond between Lazaro and Don Manuel, who then seemed to neglect some of his other sufferers, his other needy, in order to spend more of his time with my brother.

During the afternoon they would take a walk along the shore of the lake, or they would walk in the direction of the ivy-covered ruins of the old Cistercian Abby.

“He is a marvelous man,” Lazaro told me. “You know how they say that in the bottom of this lake there is a submerged village, and that on the night of Saint John, at midnight, you can hear the bells of its church.”

“Yes,” I answered, “a medieval feudal village...”

“Well, I believe that in the depths of the soul of Don Manuel,” he added, “there is also a sunken village, and that sometimes you can hear its bells.”

“Yes,” I told him, “that is the village submerged in the soul of Don Manuel—and why not also in yours? It is the cemetery of the souls of our grandparents, from our village, from Valverde de Lucerna..., feudal and medieval!”

My brother started going to Mass every day to hear Don Manuel, and when it was said that he would join the parish, and that he would take communion when the others took it, a mood of rejoicing spread through the village, with the thought that they had finally saved him. But it was a rejoicing which was so sincere that Lazaro did not feel like they had conquered or belittled him.

When the day of his communion came, all the people from the village were there to take it with him. When it was my brother’s turn, I could see Don Manuel as white as the winter snow on the mountain, and trembling like the water of the lake when wind blows, and when he approached him with the Sacred Host in his hand, he was shaking so much that, while he raised it to Lazaro’s mouth he became dizzy, and it fell out of his hand. Then it was Lazaro who bent over to pick it up and place it in his own mouth. And as the people saw that Don Manuel was weeping, they also wept, saying: “How he loves him!” And because it was dawn, a rooster crowed. When we went home and entered our house, I threw my arms around my brother, and said to him:

“Oh Lazaro, Lazaro, what happiness you have brought to the entire village, to all those who are living, and those who are dead, and above all, to our dear mother! Did you see? Poor Don Manuel was crying with happiness. What joy you have given to everyone!”

“That’s why I did it,” he responded.

“Only for that, to make us happy? You must have also done it for yourself, for your own happiness, for your conversion.” Then my brother Lazaro, who looked as pale and as trembling as Don Manuel when he gave him communion, had me sit down in the same chair where our mother used to sit. He paused and took a breath, and then, as though he were making an intimate confession, he said to me:

“Look, Angelita, the time has come for me to tell you the truth, the whole truth, and I am going to do it because I have to, because I cannot, and I must not, keep it from you any longer. And besides, sooner or later you will probably begin to suspect it, and that would just make things worse.”

And then calmly and tranquilly, without trying to hurry, he told me a story that made me sink into a lake of despair. Many times, during those frequent visits to the ruins of the old Cistercian Abbey, Don Manuel had been urging him not to cause a scandal, to give a good example, and join the religious life of the people, to pretend to believe, if he was unable to do so, to hide his ideas about what he really believed, and he did this without trying to force him, or to convert him.

“But, is that possible, Lazaro?” I exclaimed, dismayed.

“Yes, quite possible,” Lazaro answered and then continued. “When I asked him with surprise, ‘And is it you, you a holy priest, who is asking me to pretend?’ he answered, hesitating: ‘Well, pretend, no! That is not pretending; as someone has said: Take the holy water, and you will end up believing. And when I looked him straight in the eye and asked him: ‘And you, after celebrating Mass, have you been able to believe?’ his gaze sunk into the lake, and tears filled his eyes. And that is how I uncovered his secret.”

“Oh, Lazaro,” I moaned.

And just at that moment, Blasillo the Fool came down the street with his usual litany: “My God, my God!, why hast thou forsaken me?” Lazaro shuddered, imagining he had heard the voice of Don Manuel, and perhaps, even that of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“After that,” my brother continued, “I understood his motives, and I also understood his sanctity, because he is a saint, a true saint. He was not trying to win me over to his sacred cause—because it *is* a sacred cause—in order to achieve a triumph for himself. He does it for the peace of mind, for the happiness, for the illusion if you prefer, of those who have put their trust in him. I understood that if he deceives them in that way, if that is really a deceit, it is not for personal gain. I accepted his intentions, and that is my conversion. I will never forget the day when I said to him, ‘But, Don Manuel, the truth, what about the truth?’, and trembling, he whispered in my ear, even though we were alone out in the country: ‘The truth? The truth, Lazaro, is perhaps something terrible, something intolerable, something frightful, and these people could not live with it.’ ‘So then why did you tell me all this, as though you were making a confession?’ I asked him. And he said, ‘Because if I hadn’t done that it would bother me so much..., so much that I was afraid I would reveal it to everyone, and that never... never! My task is to enrich the souls of my parishioners, to make them happy, to make them feel that they are immortal, not to kill them. What is important is for them to live a happy life, for them to believe in the purpose of life; and with the truth, with my truth, they couldn’t live. So let them live! And that is what the Church does, it helps them live. The true religion? All religions are true to the extent that they help those who profess them live spiritually, and then console them for having been born in order to die. And for all people, the truest religion is their own, the religion that has made them what they are. And mine...? Mine is to be consoled by consoling others, though the consolation I give them is not my own.’ I will never forget his words.”

“But this communion of yours has been a sacrilege!” I blurted out, repenting afterward for having said it.

“A sacrilege? And what about the person who gave it to me? And his Masses?”

“What martyrdom!” I exclaimed.

“And now,” my brother added, “there is one more person to console the people.”

“To deceive them?” I said.

“To deceive them... no,” he replied. “Only to corroborate their faith.”

“And what about those people?” I asked. “Do they really believe?”

“What do I know? They believe without thinking, by habit, by tradition. And what is important is not to wake them up. To let them live without worrying about it, so that they don’t suffer what we have gone through. Blessed are the poor in spirit!”

“That, dear Brother, you learned from Don Manuel! And now tell me, have you kept the promise that you made our mother before she died, when you promised you would pray for her?”

“But why wouldn’t I have kept it? What do you take me for, Sister? Do you think I am capable of breaking such a solemn promise, a promise that was made on the death bed of our mother?”

“What do I know...! You could have tried to deceive her just to make her happy.”

“If I had not kept my promise, I would have been the one who had to live without consolation.”

“Then what?”

“I said that I have kept my promise, and I have not failed to pray for our mother for one single day.”

“Only for her?”

“Well, for whom else would I pray?”

“For yourself! And from now on, for Don Manuel!”

Once we had finished, we separated and each of us went to our room; I, to cry all night long and to pray for the conversion of my brother and Don Manuel; as for Lazaro, I don’t know what he did then.

After that discussion with Lazaro, I was always nervous whenever I found myself alone with Don Manuel, whom I was still assisting with his priestly duties. He seemed to become aware that something was bothering me, and he must have guessed the cause. Then, after I finally went to confess with him—who was the judge, and who was the sinner?—the two of us, both he and I, bowed our head in silence and began to weep. Finally, it was Don Manuel who broke that awful silence, with a voice that seemed to come out of a grave:

“But you Angelina, still believe like you did when you were ten years old, isn’t that true...? You still believe?”

“Yes, Father, I believe.”

“Well, keep on believing. And sometimes, if you have doubts, keep them to yourself. You must do the best you can.” And then, trembling, I dared to ask him:

“But you, Father, do you believe?”

He hesitated a moment, and then said:

“I believe.”

“But in what, Father? In what do you believe? Do you believe in life after death? Do you believe that when we die, we will go on living? Do you believe that we will see each other again, that we will love each other in a future life? Do you believe in an afterlife?”

The poor saint sighed:

“Look, child, let’s leave this.”

Now, as I write this memoir, I ask myself: why didn’t he deceive me?, why didn’t he deceive me like he deceived everyone else? And why was he so upset? Was it because he wasn’t able to deceive himself, or that he couldn’t deceive me? I want to believe that he got upset because he could not deceive himself, in order to deceive me.

“And now,” he added, “pray for me, for your brother, for yourself, and for everyone. We must live. We must give others life.”

And after a short pause:

“Why haven’t you married, Angelina?”

“I think you already know the answer to that, Father.”

“But no, you must get married. Between Lazaro and me, we can find someone for you to love. Because you need to get married to cure yourself of these preoccupations.”

“Preoccupations, Don Manuel?”

“Yes, that’s right. And don’t worry too much about others, because we already have enough to worry about, just trying to look out for ourselves”

“And is that you, Don Manuel, who is telling me this?; you, who is telling me to get married in order to help myself, without thinking of others? Is that you?”

“Yes, you’re right, Angelina. I don’t know what I’m saying; I no longer know what I am saying, now that I am confessing with you. And yes, we must go on living!”

Then, when I started to get up and leave the church, he said to me:

“And now, Angelina, in the name of our people, do you absolve me?”

I felt that I was filled with some mysterious priesthood, and I said to him:

“In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, I absolve you, Father.”

After that, we left the church, and as we did that, I felt my motherly instincts begin to flourish again. My brother was ready to assist with the work of Don Manuel and be his constant companion and collaborator. They were joined, besides, by a common secret. Lazaro accompanied him on visits to the sick and to the school, and he put some money at his disposal. It wouldn’t have taken much more for him to reach the point where he was ready to help him say Mass. And he was able to enter more and more deeply into the bottomless depths of Don Manuel’s unfathomable soul. “What a man!” he said to me. “Yesterday, while we were walking on the shore of the lake, he told me: ‘This is my greatest temptation.’ And since I looked at him questioningly, he continued: ‘My poor father, who died when he was about ninety, told me he had struggled all his life with the temptation of suicide; he said he remembered having had this feeling ever since he was born so that he always had to defend himself against it. And this defense became his life. He told me about the extreme measures he had to take, in order to resist this temptation. It seemed to me like a madness. And now I have inherited it. And how this water calls me! My life, Lazaro, is a kind of continuous suicide, or a battle against suicide, which is the same thing. But let the others live, let our loved ones have life!’ And then he added: ‘There, the river forms a lake which flows down to the level land with cascades and waterfalls, passing through gorges and canyons near the city, after which it forms a pool here in the village. But the temptation to suicide is greater here, near this pool that reflects the stars at night, than it is next to the waterfalls that make us afraid. You know, Lazaro, I have assisted in the death of these poor, ignorant, uneducated villagers, who have hardly ever left the village, and I was able to learn from their lips, and guess it when they were silent, what it is that kills them, and there next to their death bed, I was able to see all the blackness of their difficult struggle to live. A thousand times worse than hunger! So, Lazaro, let’s go on committing suicide for our people, so they may dream their life, like the lake dreams of the sky.’ Then, on another occasion when we were out there,” my brother added, “we saw a shepherdess standing on a ridge on the side of the mountain, who was singing with a voice that was fresher than the waters of the lake.

Pointing in that direction, Don Manuel said, 'Look, it's as if time has stopped, as if she has always been there since my consciousness began, and she will be there until it stops. This shepherdess is part of nature, along with the rocks, the clouds, the trees, and the water.' How deeply Don Manuel was aware of nature! I will never forget the day when it snowed, and he told me: 'Have you ever seen a greater mystery, Lazaro, than the snow falling into the lake where it dies, while it covers the mountain with its bonnet?' "

In the days that followed, Don Manuel had to try and control my brother's zeal, due to his lack of experience as a neophyte. And when he learned that he had gone around preaching against some common superstitions he warned him:

'Just let it go! It's impossible to make them understand where orthodox belief ends, and where superstition begins. The same, as it is for us. So let them go on, as long as it consoles them. It is better for them to believe everything, even certain things that are contradictory, than not to believe anything. This idea that the one who believes too much ends up not believing in anything is just a Protestant prejudice. So we must not protest. Protesting destroys happiness.'"

My brother also told me that one night, when there was a full moon, they were coming back to the village from the lake while the moonlight was reflected on the ripples in the water caused by a breeze over the mountain, and Don Manuel said to him:

"Look! The water is praying a litany, and now it says: '*anua caeli, ora pro nobis*', door of heaven, pray for us!"

Trembling, they fell to their knees on the grass while their tears, like the drops of dew, were bathed in the shimmering light of the moon.

Then, some time passed and my brother and I noticed that Don Manuel's strength was starting to weaken, as though he was no longer able to contain the deep sadness that was consuming him, and we wondered if some serious illness was affecting both his body and his soul. And Lazaro, perhaps in order to distract him, proposed that if he was not feeling well, in the church they could set up something like a Catholic agricultural consortium.

"A consortium?" Don Manuel asked sadly. "A consortium...?, what is that? I don't know of any consortium except the Church itself, and you already are familiar with the words, 'My kingdom is not of this world.' Our kingdom, Lazaro, is not of this world..."

"And the other?"

Don Manuel lowered his head:

"The other, Lazaro, is also here, since there are two kingdoms in this world. Or rather, the other world... Oh, I don't know what I am saying. And as for this business of the consortium, it is only a degraded custom from the era of progressivism. No, Lazaro, no; our religion is not to resolve the economic and political problems which God has inserted into the disputes of mankind. Let men think, and let them work however they want, so they are happy to be born, so they can be content with the idea that all this has a purpose. I have not come to make the poor submit to the rich, nor to try and convince the latter that they must bow to the former. May there be love and kindness in everyone, and for everyone. Because the rich must also resign themselves to their richness, and the poor must feel love for the rich. Social problems? Forget that; that does not concern us. Just imagine that they create a new society in which there are neither rich nor poor, in which all riches are shared equally, so that everything belongs to everyone, and then what? Don't you realize that the result of this universal well-being, would cause an even stronger feeling of tedium? Yes, I know that one of those leaders from what they call the

Social Revolution has said that religion is the opium of the people. Opium... Yes, let's give them opium, so they can sleep, and so they can dream. With all the crazy things I am doing, I am also administering opium to myself. Although I'm not able to sleep well, or even less, to have good dreams... Oh, this terrible nightmare! And I can also say, like our Lord Jesus Christ, "My soul is sad until death." There can be no consortiums for us. If they should form one themselves, that would be just fine, since it would distract them. Let them entertain themselves with a consortium, if it makes them happy.

The whole village eventually realized Don Manuel was growing weaker and weaker. His voice, that voice which was like a miracle, had acquired a certain intimate fragility. The slightest thing made him tearful, for no apparent reason. And especially, when he talked about the other world or the next life, he sometimes had to stop and close his eyes. "That is what he is seeing," people said. And when that occurred, it was Blasillo the Fool who cried the hardest. Because Blasillo was crying now more than he laughed, and even his laughter sounded like weeping.

By the time the last Holy Week that Don Manuel would celebrate with us arrived, the whole village sensed that the end was coming. And how deeply we were affected by his, "My God, My God!, why hast thou forsaken me?" which was the last time he said those words to us! And when he came to the part where our Lord Jesus said to the good thief, "all sinners are good," Don Manuel would say: "And tomorrow you will be with me in Paradise." And then, there was the final communion that our saint delivered! This time, when he gave it to my brother, his hand was quite steady, and after saying the liturgy, "...in vitam eternam", he leaned over and whispered in Lazaro's ear: "There is no eternal life but this one... and may they always dream that it is eternal... eternal, at least, for a few years..." And when he gave it to me, he told me: "Pray, child; pray for us all." Then, he said something so extraordinary that it will always be a great mystery for me; and he said it with a voice that seemed to come from another world, "...and also pray for Our Lord Jesus Christ..."

I rose up feeling weak like a somnambulist, and everything around me seemed like a dream. Then, I thought to myself: "I suppose I must also pray for the lake, and for the mountain." And then I wondered, "Can I be possessed by the devil?" When I got home, I took up the crucifix that Don Manuel used when he delivered the soul of my mother to God, and seeing it through my tears, I remembered those words: "My God, my God!, why hast thou forsaken me?", said by our two Christs—the one of this world, and the one of this village—and I prayed: "May your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." and then, after that: "and let us not fall into temptation, amen." Then, I turned to the image of Our Lady of Sorrows with her heart pierced by seven swords which had once helped to console my poor mother, and I prayed: "Holy Mary mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death, amen."

After I had prayed, I thought to myself, "sinners?; we are sinners?; and what is our sin, what can it be?" The next day I went to see Don Manuel, whose demeanor was starting to acquire the solemnity of a religious service, and I said to him:

"Do you remember, Father, that several years ago, when I asked you a question, you answered me: "Do not ask me about that, I, who am ignorant; there are wise men in our Holy Mother Church who will know what to tell you about things like that"?"

"Yes, I do remember!... and I also remember that I told you questions like that were dictated to you by the Devil."

“Well, Father, today I, your demonized disciple, have come to you to ask another question which my demonic guardian has given me.

“Go ahead, ask.”

“Yesterday, when you gave me communion, you asked me to pray for everyone and even for...”

“Yes, forget that..., and go on with the rest of what you were going to say.”

“Well, after I got home I started to pray, and when I began to say: ‘pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death,’ an inner voice asked me, ‘sinners?, are we sinners?; but what is our sin?’ What *is* our sin, Father?”

“What is our sin...?” he repeated. “A well-known authority of the Spanish, Catholic, Apostolic Church has already answered that. The renowned author of “Life is a Dream,” Pedro Calderon de la Barca, has informed us: ‘the greatest crime of man is being born.’ And so is it, child; our sin is having been born.”

“And can that be cured, Father?”

“Go back and pray once more! Pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death... Yes, the dream is finally cured..., life is finally cured..., the cross of being born is finally ended... And as Calderon said, doing well, and deceiving well, is something that is never lost, not even in dreams...”

Then, the hour of his death was finally approaching, and with it, his most important lesson. He did not want to die alone, nor idly. His death came while he was preaching to us in church. But first, before asking someone to come and take him there, since he was paralyzed and could not walk, he asked Lazaro and me to come to his house and see him. And there, while the three of us were alone, he said to us:

“Listen: take care of these poor sheep, so that they can live contentedly, so they can believe what I was not able to believe. And you, Lazaro, when it is time for you to die, die like me, like our Angela will also die, in the bosom of our Holy, Apostolic, Roman Catholic Mother Church, in the Holy Mother Church of Valverde de Lucerna. And do all this until the end, since this dream of life does come to an end...”

“Oh, Father, Father!” I moaned.

“No, don’t be upset, Angela; and keep on praying for all the sinners, for all who are born. And let them dream, let them keep on dreaming. And now, how I long to sleep! To sleep forever, to sleep for an eternity, without dreaming, forgetting about the dream! When they bury me, let it be in a casket made with the six boards I made from the old walnut tree, poor thing!, in whose shade I played when I was a child, when I was just beginning to dream! And then, I did believe in life everlasting. At least, now I think I believed then. For a child, believing is nothing more than dreaming. And for our people also. You will find those six boards I cut with my own hands at the foot of my bed.”

He struggled for a moment, and then he continued:

“You will remember when all of us said the Apostle’s Creed in unison, as one people, that when we came to the final words, I was silent. When the Israelites were about to arrive at the end of their pilgrimage in the desert, the Lord said to Aaron and Moses that, because they had not obeyed Him, He would not lead them to the Promised Land, and He made them climb Mount Horeb, where Moses stripped Aaron of his clothes, who died then. Now Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is across from Jericho, and the Lord showed his people the Promised Land, telling Moses, “you shall not cross over there!”; then he also died and was buried in an unknown

grave. This left Joshua as leader. Now, Lazaro, I want you to be my Joshua, and if you are able to hold back the Sun, do it, and don't worry about progress. Like Moses, I have seen the Lord, our Supreme dream, face to face and, as you know, the Scripture says that those, who see the face of God and look into the dream of the eyes that see us, will die forever, without fail. So as long as they live, do not let our people see the face of God, and after they die, it won't matter since they will not see anything..."

"Oh, Father, Father!", I moaned.

He continued:

"And you, Angela, keep on praying; keep on praying that as long as they live, all the sinners will continue to dream of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting..."

I expected him to go on and say, "and who knows...?", but Don Manuel struggled again for a moment.

"And now," he added, "in the hour of my death, it is time for you to have me carried to the church in this chair, so I can say goodbye to my people, who are waiting for me."

He was carried to the church, and his chair was placed in the chancel, at the foot of the altar. He was holding a crucifix in his hands. My brother and I went to stand next to him, but it was Blasillo the Fool who was the most eager to approach him. He wanted to give Don Manuel his hand so that he could kiss it. And when people tried to stop him, Don Manuel admonished them, saying:

"Let him approach me. Come here, Blasillo, give me your hand."

The Fool cried happily, and then Don Manuel continued:

"I will say very few words, my children, because I feel like I now have just enough strength to die. And besides, I have nothing new to say to you. I have already said it all. So live in peace and happiness, waiting for the day when we shall all see each other again in the Valverde de Lucerna which is there among the stars that shine over the mountain, which at night are reflected in the lake. And pray to the Virgin Mary, and to Our Lord. Just try to be good, and that's enough. Forgive me for any wrong I may have done to you without meaning to, and without realizing it. And now, after I give you all my blessing, everyone must say the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria, the Salve Regina, and finally, the Apostle's Creed."

Then, with the crucifix still in his hand, he gave them his blessing, while the women, the children, and quite a few men, were weeping, and then they immediately began to say the prayers, which Don Manuel listened to in silence, still holding the hand of Blasilio, who was beginning to fall asleep while they were praying. First, the Lord's Prayer, with its "your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," then the Ave Maria, with its "pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death," followed by the Salve Regina with its "weeping and moaning in this valley of tears," and finally, the Creed. And by the time they had gotten to the "resurrection of the body and life everlasting," everyone knew that their saint had offered his soul to God. And nobody had to close his eyes, because he died with them already closed. And when they went to wake up Blasilio, they found that he had also gone to rest with the Lord forever. So, it was necessary to bury two bodies. Immediately after that, people went to the Saint's house in order to recover his relics, and then, to divide the remains of his clothing in order to have a remembrance of their blessed martyr.

My brother kept his breviary, and in its pages he found the dried up remains of a pink carnation stuck to the pages, where there were also a date and a cross.

Nobody in the village wanted to believe that Don Manuel was dead; everyone expected to see him all the time, that perhaps they would see him walking on the shore of the lake, with the outline of the mountain in the background; they all kept on hearing his voice and they went to visit his grave, around which a cult was forming. Those who had committed some sin went to touch the cross made by his hands from the old walnut tree, the same tree out of which the boards were cut to make the casket in which he was buried. Those of us who were the most reluctant to believe that he had died were my brother and I. He, Lazaro, wanted to continue the tradition of our saint, and he began to write down the things he had heard him say, which has provided me with the notes that have helped me write this memorial.

"He made me a new man, a true Lazaro who was brought back from the dead" he said. "He gave me faith."

"Faith?" I asked.

"Yes faith, faith in the joy of living, faith in the happiness of life. He cured me of my progressivism. Because, Angela, there are two kinds of dangerous and harmful men: those who believe in an afterlife and the resurrection of the body, who like the inquisitors they are, torment the rest of us, so that we will scorn this transitory life, in order to gain the other; and then, there are those who, not believing in more than this one..."

"Like you perhaps...?" I said.

"Yes, and like Don Manuel. And not believing in more than this life, they expect some unknown future, and do everything they can to deny people the consolation of believing in another one..."

"So for that reason..."

"So for that reason, it is necessary to let them believe in an illusion."

The poor priest who came to take Don Manuel's place in the parish was overwhelmed by the memory of the saint, and he came to my brother and me for guidance. He wanted nothing more than to follow in the footsteps of Don Manuel. And my brother told him: "Very little theology, right?; little theology; just religion, religion." And I couldn't help but smile, thinking that in spite of what he said, this was actually our theology. But then, I began to fear for my poor brother. Ever since Don Manuel had died, you could scarcely say that he was living. He visited his grave every day, and he spent hours doing nothing more than contemplating the lake. He seemed to feel a longing for real peace.

"Don't look at the lake so much," I said to him.

"No, sister, don't worry. It is another lake that calls me; it is another mountain. It's difficult to live without him."

"And the joy of living, Lazaro..., the joy of living?"

"That's for other sinners, not for us; for those like us, who have seen the face of God who has looked back at us with His eyes during the dream of life."

"What..., are you getting ready to go and see Don Manuel?"

"No, sister, no; but now that we're here at home, for both of us, it's time for the truth, no matter how bitter it is..., as bitter as the sea into which the waters of this beautiful lake will finally empty; the whole truth, for you who are defended against it..."

"No, no, Lazaro; that is not the truth!"

"It is for me."

"For you, but what about for...?"

"For him too."

“Not any longer, Lazaro, not now! Now he believes something different; now he believes...”

“Look, Angela, Don Manuel once told me there are some things that, though you think of them to yourself, you should not say to others, and I told him he was saying that to me as a way of saying it to himself; then, after that he confessed that he believed some of the greatest saints, perhaps even the greatest, died not believing in the afterlife.

“Could that even be possible?”

“Yes, quite possible! And now, sister, be very careful that no one here in the village ever suspects our secret...”

“Suspects it?” I told him. “Even if, out of madness, I tried to explain something like that, they would never understand it. Our people here don’t understand words; they only understand actions. Trying to explain something like this to them would be like trying to read passages from Saint Thomas of Aquinas to them... in Latin.”

“Good, so when I am gone, pray for me, and for him, and for all the others.” And not long after that, his time would also come. A sickness that had been slowly destroying his robust health seemed to become even worse after the death of Don Manuel.

“I don’t really mind having to die,” he told me during his final days, “though with me, another piece of the soul of Don Manuel will die. But the rest of him will continue to live with you. Until one day, even those of us who are dead will die completely.”

When he was close to death, as was the custom in our village, people came to be with him when he died; and they entrusted his soul to Don Manuel, to the Good Saint Manuel, the Martyr. My brother never said anything, since he had nothing more to tell them, and he left them with what had already been said. He was one more link between the two Valverde de Lucernas, the one at the bottom of the lake, and the one that is seen on its surface; he was another one of our dead and, in his way, he was also one of our saints. I was disconsolate, but I was still in my village, with my people. And now, having lost my Saint Manuel, the father of my soul, and my Lazaro who, even more than physical was my spiritual brother, now is when I realized that I had grown older, and how much I had aged. But, have I really lost them?...; have I really grown older?...; is my death approaching?...

Still, one must live! And he taught me how to live, he taught us all how to live, to feel alive, to see the meaning of life; to immerse ourselves in the soul of the mountain, in the soul of the lake, and in the soul of the people of our village; to lose ourselves in them, in order to remain with them. With his life, he taught me how to lose myself in the life of the people of my village, and I learned not to feel the passing of days and years, any more than the passing of the waters from our lake. It seemed to me that my life would always be the same. I did not feel I was growing older, because I was no longer living in myself, but in the life of my people, and my people were living in me. I wanted to say what they, my people, had said without realizing it. I went out into the street, which was the main thoroughfare, and since I knew them all, I lived in them and forgot about myself; while in Madrid, where I once was with my brother, since I knew no one I felt terribly alone surrounded by so many people I did not know.

And now as I write this memoir, this intimate confession of my experience of another’s sanctity, I have come to believe that the good Don Manuel, that my Saint Manuel and my brother Lazaro, died thinking they did not believe what matters most, but not thinking they believed it, believing it, with an active and stoic resignation. But why—I have often

asked myself—didn't Don Manuel also try to convert my brother with some deception, with a falsehood, pretending to be a believer, without being one? And I have realized it was because he understood that he could never deceive him, that for him, a deceit would not work, and that only with the truth, his truth, could he convert him; he knew he would never achieve anything with him, if he tried to present a comedy—or rather, a tragedy—in which he acted to save the people. And in this way, in fact, he won him over to his pious fraud; in this way, with the truth of death, he won him over to the reason for living. And in this way he won me over, so that I never told anyone else about the sacred and divine game he was playing. And it is because I believed, and still believe, that for some sacred and mysterious reason Our Lord God made them think they did not believe. And perhaps, when they came to the end of their journey, their blindfold fell off. So, do I believe?

And now, as I am writing this here in my old childhood home, when I am more than fifty years old, when both my memories and my hair are whitening, it is snowing, snowing on the lake and on the mountain, snowing on the memories of my father, the outsider, the memories of my mother, and my brother Lazaro, of my people, of my Saint Manuel, and also on the memory of Blasilio, of my Saint Blasilio, may he assist me from heaven. Because this snow removes the lines and the shadows, and even the night is illuminated by the snow. Now I no longer know what is true and what is false, nor do I know what I saw and what I dreamed—or rather, what I dreamed I only saw—or what I knew I only dreamed. I don't know if I am transferring my consciousness to this paper as white as the snow, and if it will remain there till I am no longer aware of it. Why should I try to hold on to it...? Do I really know anything? Do I really believe anything? Has what I am talking about really happened, and has it happened like I have described it? Can these things actually happen? Or is this only a dream that I am dreaming in another dream? Is it I, Angela Carballino, a fifty-year old woman, who is the only person in this village, who is caught up in these strange thoughts? And the others, these people around me, do they believe? And what does it mean to believe? At least, they are still living. And now they believe in the Good Saint Manuel, the Martyr, who without believing in immortality, helped them maintain their hope of it.

Now it appears that the distinguished Lord Bishop, who has initiated the process of beatification for our Saint of Valverde de Lucerna, wants to write some kind of a guide based about our devoted priest, so he is gathering facts about his life. He has asked me more than once for information, and I have had several meetings with him; I have told him about many different things, but have never revealed the tragic secret of Don Manuel and my brother. It is strange that he has not suspected it, and I trust that he will never see what I have revealed here in this memorial. I am afraid of the authorities, the secular authorities and, especially, those of the Church.

But this is what I have written, and what becomes of it is now up to fate.

How did this document, or this memorial, of Angela Carballino come into my hands? That, dear reader, is something that must remain a secret. But I am giving it to you here, as it was when I received it, except for a very few peculiarities in the wording that I have corrected. The fact that it is similar to other things I have written does not prove anything which contradicts its objectivity, and its originality. And besides, how do I know if I may

not have created, outside myself, real beings with immortal souls? How do I know whether that Augusto Perez, from my novel *Niebla*, might not have been correct when he claimed that he was more real than I myself, who thought I had created him? As for the reality of Saint Manuel Bueno, the Martyr, as he was described by his spiritual disciple and daughter, Angela Carballino, that reality is something I could not think of doubting. I believe in her, even more than she believed in her saint; I believe in her, even more than I believe in my own reality.

And now, before I conclude this epilogue, I want to remind you, patient reader, of the ninth verse from the little-known Epistle of Saint Jude the Apostle—names can be quite important!—where he tells us how my celestial patron, Archangel Michael (in this case Michael means “Who, like God?” and Archangel means distinguished messenger) argued with the Devil (here Devil means ideological judge) over the body of Moses, because he did not want him to be condemned; and instead, he told the Devil: “God chastises you.” And whoever wants to understand this, let them. And since Angela Carballino mixed her own thoughts with the rest of her story, which is understandable, I also want to agree with her claim, that if Don Manuel and his disciple Lazaro had ever tried to reveal to others their true state of mind, they would never have understood them. Nor, I add, would they have believed them. They would have believed their actions, but not their words; words are not necessary to support actions, since actions are enough. And for people like those of Valverde de Lucerna, one’s conduct is the only real confession. Most people do not have a good idea of what faith is, nor is it likely that it matters to them. I am well aware that what is said in this story, or if you prefer, novel—the novel can be the most intimate and most accurate story, so that is why I have never understood why people are upset when the Gospel is called a novel, which gives it more value than any ordinary chronicle—I am well aware, as I said, that in this narrative nothing is concluded; but I hope that is because everything in it endures, like lakes and mountains endure, like the blessed and simple souls of people keep on enduring, beyond faith and desperation, in the lakes and mountains outside of the narrative, in the divine novel of our existence.

The End