

An Argentine woman's choice to go against the current

Mama Antula

Maria Antonia de San José, or Mama Antula as she was called, is Argentina's first woman saint, and was canonized on Feb. 9, 2024. After the Jesuit expulsions from Latin America, she organized clandestine St. Ignatius Exercises for thousands of people from all walks of life. She also worked for the poor, the indigenous and those enslaved. Like Mama Antula, Pope Francis invited us in his canonization address that day to "not to give up in the face of adversity" and "not to desist from our good intentions of bringing the Gospel to everyone, despite the challenges this may represent." ([20240209-canonizzazione.pdf](#))

Carlos Mana

It was the year 1767, and the region of Santiago del Estero, the "Mother of Cities" and the oldest in Argentina, was living out its days in serenity. But during a partial lunar eclipse on the evening of August 9th, Judge Juan Martínez burst into the college of the Society of Jesus, escorted by armed soldiers. He was to execute the decree drafted a few months earlier in distant Spain. It ordered the expulsion of every Jesuit priest, collaborator and non-consecrated brother from all "the dominions of Spain and the Indies, the Philippine Islands and other neighboring possessions". All Jesuit possessions were taken and the next day, at two in the morning, like prisoners with a large escort and in old, battered wagons, they began the long journey of exile, to the port of Buenos Aires.

"Among those gathered to greet the Jesuits for the last time was Mama Antula. One banished missionary ignored the guards' prohibition, approached her and handed her his cloak. With this gesture, Mama Antula received a solemn investiture. This last symbol of the Jesuits was in a woman's hands."¹ After 200 years of Jesuit presence there, the consequences of that expulsion of 2,630 Jesuits soon become visible. Without the presence of the Jesuit fathers, so many in this land were left spiritually orphaned.

Prioritizing a life of poverty in service to the neediest

Maria Antonia de Paz y Figueroa (known as *Mama Antula*, which in the native *Quechua* language means Antonia) was nearly 40 years old, an advanced age for that time. She had a happy childhood in Silipica, in central Argentina, where she was born on the lands owned by her father, who was a well-to-do *encomendero*². She grew up in contact with the natives,

slaves, and the poor and their customs. Her nanny was an indigenous woman who was with her from her birth, and whom the girl called, *mamita silípica*.

At 15, when Maria Antonia became aware of the torture of indigenous people and slaves, the idea of a personal rebellion grew. "To absolve the guilty and condemn the just: these are two things that the Lord abhors" (*Prov 17:15*) . This biblical passage dispelled any of her doubts. She could not continue to consent, even as an external witness, to so much mistreatment and loss of dignity of the natives. Gathering her courage, she went to her father and said: "My heart can no longer bear the mistreatment that Indians receive in the *encomienda*. I feel they are brothers and their pain is mine." As she said these words her inner strength increased. And she added: "Father, I must give you news that will disappoint you, because it is not what you have always planned for me. I will not marry nor become a nun. I will live in the '*beaterio*'³ of the Jesuits to serve the most needy. I will choose to be poor."

It was a powerful blow for her father, who could not conceive that his daughter, to whom he had given a solid education, did not follow either of the two possible paths for women of the time. After several attempts to convince her, he finally ruled: "If this is your decision, the doors of this house are closed forever to you."

Maria Antonia traveled 38 kilometers to reach the church of the Society of Jesus in the city of Santiago del Estero. She was directed to the *beaterio*, right in front of the temple and welcomed by the eldest, who had been waiting for her for some time. She attended church every day to meet the Jesuit fathers, listen to Mass, and receive the Eucharist. She was sure of the step she had taken, which was completed at the moment when, kneeling before the altar in solitude, she promised to live an austere life in poverty and offered her chastity to the Lord. Unlike the nuns, she did not promise obedience to any religious order, and also stripped herself of her name. She decided to call herself Maria Antonia de San José.

The *beaterio* became her home. "Attentive to the organization of the community and receptive to new things, Maria Antonia also learned to organize the Exercises [...]. Dozens of people gathered to discover this beneficial spiritual practice, in the quest to renew their lives and relationships with others and God. The news spread among the lords and ladies of good society, and also among slaves and Indians. All were welcomed with great kindness by the Jesuit fathers"⁴.

Spiritual Exercises for everyone

Many years passed. Mama Antula, now older, had traveled her own path while remaining faithful to that initial drive. But with the Jesuit fathers gone, God did not want her to remain a spiritual orphan. And the Spirit moved, enflaming her with a burning desire to make up for the loss in some way. Thus a crazy dream blossomed within her: restore the spiritual exercises of the Jesuits, despite the risks involved.

She confided in her confessor who listened and recommended her to the bishop and magistrate of Santiago del Estero. Then, a few months after the 1767 expulsion, Maria Antonia involved the Mercedarian Friar, Joaquín Nis, as the first preacher after the prohibition. Thus the practice of the spiritual Exercises managed to resume. Meanwhile, she saw to all the organizational aspects with her friends of the *beaterio*, even finding a large house that was then prepared to receive the first small, courageous group of participants in the Exercises. Everything had to be meticulously organized, such as the preparation of enough food for the eight-day duration, and the clandestine invitation of participants in that period after the prohibitions. As when the Jesuits were still present, these Exercises were attended by lords and well-known people in the city, as well as by local natives and slaves. In fact, among them one could not decipher the background of each one. The Exercises were so well received that the house was soon too small.

Commitment to social initiatives

Mama Antula had started a race that could not be stopped. She traveled by foot for two years through the northern and central regions of present-day Argentina, organizing spiritual exercises in the cities of Tucumán, Salta, Valle de Catamarca and La Rioja. Then, while in the city of Córdoba, where she stayed for two years, she was repeatedly invited to go to Buenos Aires. She saw in this a sign of God's will, arriving in Buenos Aires at the end of 1779, barefoot and carrying a crucifix.

In the capital of Buenos Aires, she did not rest until managing to build the *Santa Casa de Ejercicios (Holy House of the Exercises)*, where an estimated 70 thousand people participated in the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius in its first eight years. Mama Antula would also eventually reach Montevideo, Uruguay.

Deeply in love with Christ crucified, alive and present in the Eucharist, Mama Antula nourished a special devotion to the Child Jesus, whom she affectionately called "Manuelito". Throughout her apostolate she was accompanied by special graces. Some women, who shared in her work and ideals, began a *beaterio* that would ensure continuity in the work of the spiritual exercises. She died in Buenos Aires on March 7, 1799.

Mama Antula is Argentina's first woman saint. She walked more than 5000 kilometers to bring the Good News to as many as possible. Speaking to the richness and timeliness of this woman's heroic life, Argentine theologian and secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (PCAL), Emilce Cuda, said: "At a time when identity struggles have called into question the 'feminine', Mama Antula shows that the Church also has courageous women, women who intervened in political processes from the beginning of our country's history, women who reacted courageously to the expulsion of the Church and the Jesuits, also for political reasons"⁵.

- 1 N. Locatelli - C.D. Suárez, *Mama Antula, la fede di una donna indomita*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Roma 2020, p. 55.
- 2 A lord to whom the Spanish Viceroyalty offered a concession of a territory, the *encomienda*, and who used slaves brought from Africa and Indians who were generally exploited and lacked rights to cultivate it and raise livestock.
- 3 Communities of women in Latin America who led community life and dedicated to prayer and charity. Institutes similar to the religious communities of *beguines*, widespread in northern Europe.
- 4 N. Locatelli - C.D. Suárez, *Mama Antula*, cit., pp. 41-42.
- 5 Interview by O. Elizalde Prada | ADN Celam, pubblicata il 10 febbraio 2024 su [vaticannews.va](https://www.vaticannews.va) (in spanish).