

*In Memoriam*

**Mercedes Sanchez (1912-1999)**

by Boris Handal

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(Sept 11, 1912 – Aug 3, 1999)

We are grieved to learn of the passing of the much loved, staunch maidservant of Bahá'u'lláh Mercedes Sánchez. Her many decades of selfless, consecrated service in the teaching and administrative spheres are exemplary. Present and future generations of Peruvian believers will warmly remember her kindness, her love, and her nurturing spirit. You are urged to hold memorial meetings in major centres of your country.

Be assured of our ardent prayers in the Holy Shrines for the progress of her radiant soul in the worlds to come. Kindly extend our heartfelt condolences to her family.

The Universal House of Justice

Mercedes (Meche) Sanchez joined the Faith in Lima, Peru, on Christmas Eve 1946. Having been a staunch Catholic believer, Meche's journey towards embracing the Cause was a hard, but worthwhile, spiritual battle. Divine intervention came through Eve Nicklin, the first American pioneer to settle in Peru in 1941. Eve Nicklin, known as the Spiritual Mother of Peru, had established the Universal Friendship Club at her place to attract people to the Faith. The club consisted of firesides where topics like unity and brotherhood were discussed along with social activities such as picnics, games, sports and other outdoor activities. Most early Peruvian Bahá'ís had been students of English and were confirmed through the love that Eve instilled in those gatherings.

Meche's encounter with the Faith happened at a time when the legacy of the Second World War had left a thirst for knowledge of other countries, whose news had come around during the conflagration like an informal geography lesson. Many enrolled in English classes, particularly young people, wishing one day to taste fortune in the great Republic of the North. That was the period of the beginnings of commercial aviation, the atom, the radio airing new ideas such as world peace, religious tolerance, unity of nations, freedom and democracy.

A successful dressmaker for Lima's upper class society, Meche had decided to take English lessons so that she could undertake a correspondence course to improve her dress design expertise. She then approached a German, teacher of English, who after considering Meche's work schedule too complex for arranging lessons, referred her to Eve Nicklin. Meche was warned, however, that Eve Nicklin had a "strange religión". In Meche's words:

When I met her [Eve Nicklin], she was forming it [the Universal Friendship Club] and her Local Assembly was elected two years earlier. I got invited to that club. She said: "Well, I hope to see you here on Wednesday, we have a club." Well, I was not a Bahá'í and I had difficulty understanding alien things. I saw the pictures and just asked, "Who is the man on this table?" which was 'Abdu'l-Bahá. There was a young interpreter, Manuel Vera, who explained it to me ... Then I went on Wednesday and there was an American, Gwenne Sholtis, who was en route to Bolivia being a pioneer there, and then she played a game, where we were all sitting on the carpet on the floor. We were all young and the questions and answers were all in English. It was very simple and nice which I seemed to like. Eve then asked me to read from her worn out book *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* a passage about equal rights for men and women. I read it and she told me, "Ah, you read very well Meche. Do you not want to come on Saturday to talk about this point?" "What happens on Saturday?" I said. [Eve replied]: "The youths meet and we all read from that book. You will read and Manuel Vera will give the explanations that I am going to give in English because he is the translator." All this was in English. "Perfect," I said.

I went and told a close friend who I knew since we were children. His name was Demetrio ... and he worked with me. I said, "Demetrio, you know, I have been invited by a lady Eve Nicklin. She is nice and gives classes on Saturday. I will read this paragraph from this book and then we will comment, but you know, I am a bit scared because I do not know what it is, whether it is political because it [the book] speaks of rights of men and women and I have also heard about a universal currency." And he told me: "But Meche, why do you get involved with those things? You do not know." "Well," I told him, "but we must also have new experiences in our lives. And that's why I invite

you because you are my friend. I will invite my brother Enrique and a few of his university friends and some other people. It would not be that they will throw tomatoes at me [laughing]." "Well," he said, "let's go together".

Saturday came and I had already read and prepared myself on that book. I went with my brother, my brother-in-law and some friends of my brother. When I finished reading the book I gave my opinion, because I was always concerned with achieving justice, social justice, but not through religion but by other means. Then Eve Nicklin explained and gave me an account of what the Bahá'í Faith is.

I was astonished when Demetrio raised his hand and said: "What do I have to do to join this movement?" "Well, you have to read such and such book" said Eve. On Monday, when he came to my house I told him: "But Demetrio, what have you done? Belonging to this movement? If here it says that this movement is religion." "Yes Meche [he replied] because I have always been a free thinker. You've never seen me going to Mass or having Communion. You are the fanatic that always takes the Communion every first Friday, going to Mass and all those things. But my mind is completely different"

So, for almost a year I was bothering the Bahá'ís, sometimes mocking at them within myself because I thought, "These four people, what do they think? Jesus Christ is the Son of God ... and how can they say that Bahá'u'lláh is the return of Christ". And then I went through my internal strife, my spoken confessions with Father Fordín, who had been my spiritual guide since I took communion at the age of seven years. And I explained to him that they [the Bahá'ís] forbid nothing to me. He, a very intelligent man, said: "We have to be careful because they may be the false prophets who will come ... But anyway, if they do not forbid you anything, keep investigating" And so, after a year in December, I said "I want to belong to this Faith".

By that time the Lima Bahá'í community had no more than thirty members. The following year she was elected to the Local Spiritual Assembly and also chosen by the community to represent Peru at the Second South American Bahá'í Congress to be held in January 2008 in Santiago, Chile. Meche and Eve embarked on a small ship that stopped at every port en route, taking fifteen days to reach their destination. The only people on the ship were the captain, his wife and a few women to whom the Faith was delivered. They also taught the Faith at each port along the way.

This congress which was followed by a summer school had a great impression on Meche and on the other native believers. There, these few early South American believers, armed with a very basic knowledge of the Faith and scattered through the vast subcontinent, realised that they were part of a major brotherhood linking them, despite the tyranny of the distance. There were delegates from Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay and Chile. Their inspiration and guidance came from the beloved Guardian Shoghi Effendi who through personal correspondence from Haifa was lovingly guiding them step by step. The delegates also realised that they were all learning, asking simple questions, focusing on teaching methods to expand their Faith. As a result, a public talk was held and an article on the Faith appeared in *El Mercurio*. The beloved Guardian sent also a special message for the event.

Meche's participation in the Santiago Congress enhanced her capabilities and enthusiasm to serve the Cause of God at the local, national and international level. Being a successful business woman, she offered a rented flat where she used to rent night dresses, to serve as the Lima Bahá'í centre for many years. It is in this venue where CEBSA, the Bahá'í Teaching Committee for South America, after transferring its seat from Santiago to Lima, began an intensive publishing program producing Bahá'í literature in Spanish such as *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, with the assistance of an old mimeograph and the local youth. Her house was also a place where both international and national visitors were generously accommodated.

In 1951 Meche was elected to the first Regional National Spiritual Assembly for ten South American countries (Perú, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Colombia and Argentina). Such a body was later re-arranged into two regional national assemblies each with five countries under their jurisdictions where Meche also served with great devotion, frequently travelling overseas for institutional meetings and other events. She made innumerable teaching trips to the interior of the country and served as homefront pioneer to help establish the Local Spiritual Assemblies required by the goals of the Ten Year Crusade. In 1961 the National Spiritual Assembly of Peru was formed and two years later Meche had the privilege of being present at the first election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963. Some few years later, Meche was appointed a member of the Auxiliary Board to the Hands of the Cause, continuing her teaching trips to the interior of the country and encouraging the friends in summer schools and other events.

The 1997 National Convention of Peru paid a beautiful homage to Meche when she, for health reasons, was released from her almost forty-year long services as Auxiliary Board member. At the closing of the event, someone asked that all those who served as Assistants to Meche should stand up. It was emotionally overwhelming to see that almost all attendants, including all attending Auxiliary Board and National Spiritual Assembly members, instantaneously rose to their feet. There were dozens of friends that during decades and under various circumstances had served under her loving guidance and care, and now were paying tribute to her work whose loving education was later affectionately known as "Meche's School".

She was the embodiment of love and affability, always wise and tactful. She could easily solve any dispute, cure the hurt soul and bring conciliation back again. Of frail health - she had poliomyelitis as a child which left as sequela a limp and tachycardia - her radiant presence filled any meeting immediately with encouragement and affection for one another. Her extreme positive outlook was present even in the worst circumstances, an attitude that very often was hilariously celebrated by the friends. Although never married, her spiritual children were many, with one youth writing of his sorrow at her passing: "Dear Meche, from your nearness to God, together with other angels like you, you can see this community raised for the most part by you. God willing, we will be worthy of your pride..."