

The Double Cure of a Doctor's Wife

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Excerpted from LOS MILAGROS O FAVORES DE NUESTRA MADRE DE GARABANDAL by Maria Josefa Villa de Gallego

Translated from Spanish by Dr. Edward Serrano

This is the story of Menchu Mendiolea's healing, as told by her husband, Angel Alvarez, M.D., specialist in gynecology, at Valdecilla Hospital in Santander (Spain) to Father Francis A. Benac, S.J.(+1994), a missionary stationed in Bombay, India, at the time who was visiting his native country. In this life, some people try to explain away inexplicable things using vague, confusing language. This case is so clear that there is no explanation but the pure and simple truth, and no one can twist things around and come to any different conclusions. The important fact is that all Menchu's attending physicians agreed her illness was incurable. The following is taken from the audio tape of the interview.

— Josefa Gallego

(Note: This case had a tremendous impact on Josefa since her husband was also a doctor and she knew the family.)

Father Benac: I have heard of something very special that happened in your family to your wife that seemed to be more than medical, but divine intervention. It would be of great importance for the future of Garabandal to have a detailed account of the case. Could you tell us what happened?

Dr. Alvarez: My wife was about eight months pregnant and one day began to feel sick; hematomas began to appear all over her body and she developed acute anemia. She was admitted to Valdecilla Hospital. Her platelets and red blood cells counts were way below normal. She had been diagnosed previously with thrombocytopenia purpura. A consideration was to take the baby, since she didn't have enough platelets and if the placenta separated she could have an acute hemorrhage. Perhaps the spleen could be removed. Technically, the surgeons said it could be done, and while they were debating this, she was treated with steroids and blood transfusions; but Menchu's platelets did not reach 500, and she began to bleed, and the placenta was separating.

The surgery that had been scheduled for the next day now became urgent. We called our friends and acquaintances and asked for help in getting the platelets. There was a huge uproar; the platelets had to be gotten and then prepared for the transfusions. All this began at 11:00 at night.

The next morning Menchu was taken to the operating room, her blood was acceptably coagulable. A caesarian section was performed, a baby girl was born and then Menchu's spleen was removed. So far everything appeared to be going well, but one hour later she began to deteriorate; she turned yellow and began to go into shock. The surgeons and hematologist were called. She was moved to intensive care, and there you can imagine what was happening: tubes everywhere, oxygen, blood transfusions, plasma, etc. In spite of all this, she continued going downhill.

Finally the shock was controlled, but the diagnosis was made of red blood cell leukemia (called also erythremia, or polycythemia vera, an incurable disease of the blood). Probably the longest she could survive would be a year. Her initial care was in Valdecilla Hospital, but for the surgery she was transported to the Residencia Cantabria. After being stabilized, she was returned to Valdecilla, but the diagnosis was still erythremia.

My brothers-in-law began to talk about Garabandal.

Father Benac: How many doctors were involved in her treatment?

Doctor: The hematology team with their leader, Dr. Zubizarreta, section chiefs and associates; the pathologists (the husband and wife team Drs. Val) and their associates; the team of Dr. Garcia Conde, head of internal medicine and also a hematologist, the general surgeons and an obstetrician.

Benac: How old was Menchu?

Doctor: She was 27 years old.



Benac: Was this her first baby?

Doctor: No, it was the third.

PHOTO: Fr. Benac with Jacinta. Jacinta provided medals and perhaps the crucifix kissed by the Blessed Virgin.

Benac: Please continue.

Doctor: Everything now was in a state of total confusion. My colleagues, the other doctors, told me they couldn't do anything more for my wife; our newborn baby girl died. Everyone was bringing medals, and this is where Jacinta, one of the girls who saw the Virgin at Garabandal, comes into this. It occurred to my sisters-in-law to ask Jacinta — I didn't know who she was — for a medal kissed by the Virgin Mary at Garabandal. Then they brought a crucifix kissed by Our Lady also. This crucifix was the same one they had brought during Menchu's first illness. I began to wonder if there was anything to all this. The only thing left to do was pray. Then I got the idea to go to Garabandal thinking: "I don't know where it is, but I have to go there."

Benac: What year was that?

Doctor: November, 1975. I then began taking Garabandal seriously. I asked my brother-in-law if he knew where the village was, and when he said he did, I told him I wanted to go. Here is where strange things began happening.

Before I left for Garabandal, I told Dr. Garijo, a great friend of mine and head of the department, "Garijo, I don't know why I feel this way, but I know something good is going to happen." Garijo answered, "Well, I certainly hope so."

I then asked him, "If it did, what would you say?"

'Well, I'd have to say either we were wrong or it's a miracle.'

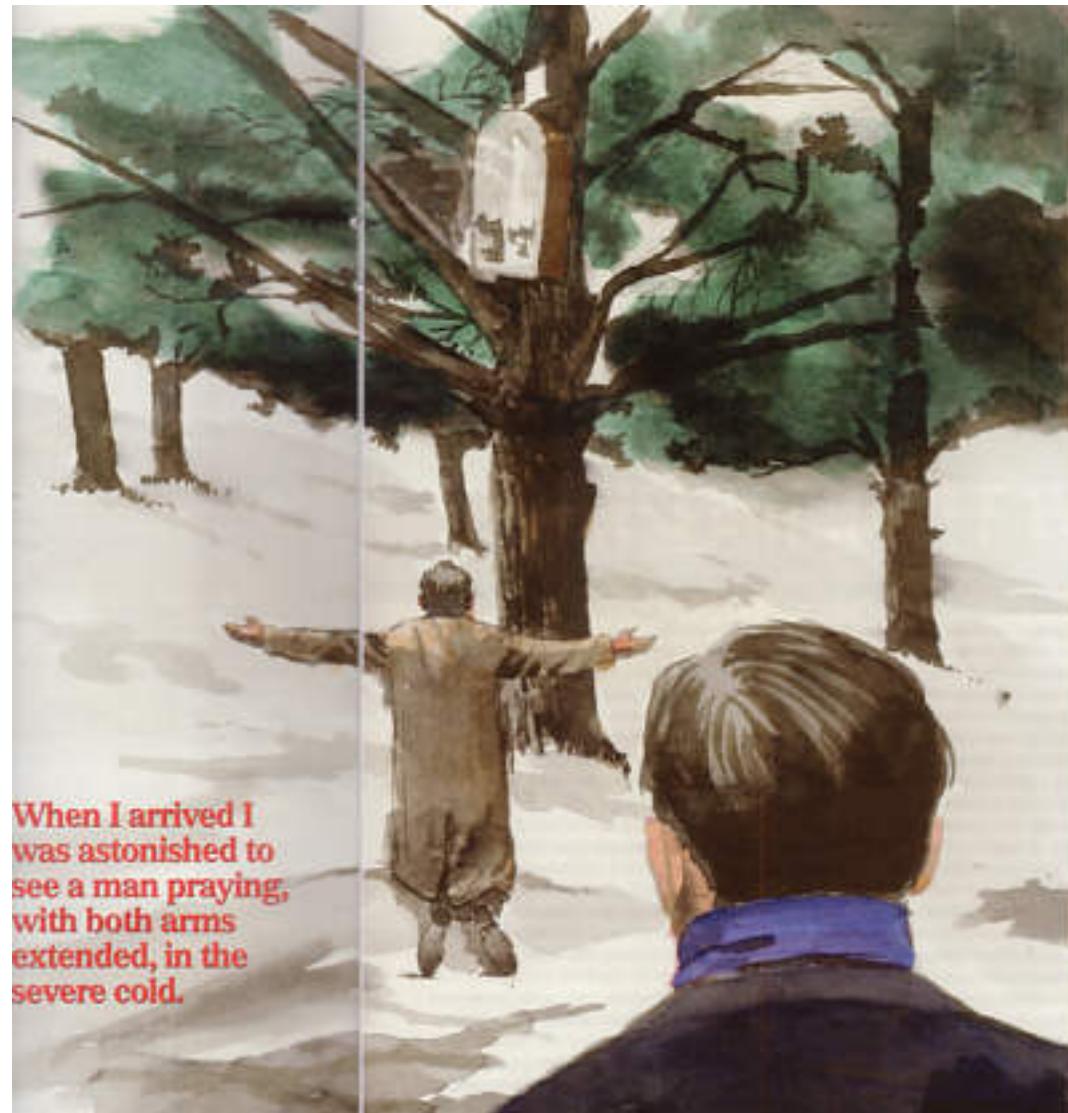
Not five minutes later Dr. Zubizarreta walked in and Garijo said to him, "Listen to this. He says we're in for a big surprise."

I was a bit irked because this wasn't a joking matter. Zubizarreta told me, "Look, I respect your beliefs, but my job is to remind you that your wife is very sick and there is very little we can do for her."

And I told him that my job was to tell him that there was going to be a complete change, and then, what would you say, Zubizarreta? He told me icily, "Well, that would be a miracle." I was smiling when I told him, "I think you're going to have to give signed testimony to that."

Next morning, December 7, I left with my brother-in-law for Garabandal. I remember it was very cold. We went to the only restaurant-bar in town where my brother-in-law stayed to have breakfast, but I was anxious to go to the Pines so I left him there. When I arrived I was astonished to see a man praying, with both arms extended, in the severe cold. This man did not acknowledge my presence. I began to say a rosary, as much as I could and counting on my fingers, as I had forgotten how, and couldn't even remember all the mysteries. I

prayed ten of them, returned to the village, and told my brother-in-law, "Menchu is cured."



When I arrived I was astonished to see a man praying, with both arms extended, in the severe cold.

Benac: What made you say that?

Doctor: When I told my brother-in-law that Menchu was cured, he gave me a very strange look, wondering about my mental condition because he knew I was under severe stress.

<> When I returned to Valdecilla I didn't say anything to my wife. I wanted to wait until the following day which was the feast of the Immaculate Conception, because I knew her platelet count would improve. Every day they were testing her blood and the previous day her platelets were 500. I spent that morning trying to find the doctor on call (who had always just left a step ahead of me) or my associates; but, because of the holiday, no one was around for me to ask about my wife.

By now it was lunch time so I went to the dining room. There I found the wife of Blanco, the hematologist on call, and I asked her about my wife's laboratory results. She said, "Your wife is really improving. Her platelets are over 30,000." Of course, I knew this was going to happen. But I just wanted her to confirm it.

Now, as for the other problem — the malignant red blood cells suddenly began to decrease. With this unexplainable sudden improvement of the disease I went to see Dr. Zubizarreta and he said to me, "We are confused; I don't know what to tell you." The spleen that had been removed was sent for analysis, and the pathologists on one hand and the hematologists on the other, by distinct routes came up with the same diagnosis of erythema. My brothers, without telling me, wanted another opinion. Sanchez Vega, an eminent hematologist who had treated Franco in his last days, could not leave his professorship but Garcia Conde offered to take him some samples. Another renowned pathologist, Oliva, also examined the spleen but gave no diagnosis only saying, "This is unique." And Sanchez Fallos said it could be one thing, or it could be something else. He didn't give a definitive diagnosis, but the doctors here all agreed it was erythema.

The pathologists here wanted to send the spleen to Hakerman, one of the best pathologists in the world, but he didn't want to cooperate; it seems he'd had a run-in with some Spanish doctors. But the spleen is still there, with some pieces missing, for anyone who wants to look at it and give a diagnosis. Menchu's erythema had disappeared.

You have to remember, all these doctors were my companions and friends, and were going completely out of their way trying to find out what the matter was, and what they could do to cure her, as they all knew how serious it was.

Benac: This is incredible. You have to be blind not to see the intervention of One Who knows more than all the scientists together. Menchu, what do you think about all this?

Menchu: When I realized I was pregnant I was terrified, and felt something was going to happen to me and that I was going to die and leave my three children alone. I suffered very much; I felt I did not have enough oxygen. No one would listen to me; they just told me I had low blood pressure.

<> I felt progressively worse and finally decided I'd had enough, and they took me to the hospital. I remember that was the day Franco died. They gave me some tests but did not admit me. The next day I got worse, and this time I was admitted to the hospital.

Benac: Was the baby girl stillborn?

Doctor: No, she was born alive but only weighed 2,500 grams. She died because she was premature, but did not have any other problems.

Menchu: I was in a terrible state. I couldn't feel the baby anymore and thought she was dead, although the doctors said she wasn't. After the caesarean and being in intensive care, I underwent all sorts of medical procedures. It was very painful, but I wanted to see the baby. But they lied to me, telling me the baby was doing well in an incubator. They didn't tell me the baby was already dead. Everything I went through with my illness, but especially the death of the baby, was horrible.

<> My husband's brothers, who were also medical doctors, and my father and my siblings came in and out of intensive care. It was strange that no one congratulated me on my new baby so I began to suspect she was dead. I began to rebel against everything, knowing I was sick again, and I believed I was dying and was going to leave my other children. I didn't see my husband anywhere and I thought he didn't want to see me because I was dying. I became angry with God and the Virgin and I called them a whole bunch of names. Don Ignacio, the hospital chaplain, was constantly in and out. I was terrified. He asked me, "Do you want me to bless you?" I answered, "No, don't give me any blessing."

That didn't sit very well with him. I had my own chaplain, a Carmelite, and he had given me the last rites during my first illness. He had told me at that time, "Don't be afraid. If you die pregnant you go straight to heaven." I was wondering if this was true, then I thought, "Well, he told me so and he couldn't have been lying to me."

I didn't believe in any priest, but this chaplain kept coming and going and his presence began consoling me. He told me, "I'm going to give you the blessing and this is all you need. You don't have to confess."

That was better. Once before he had begun to prepare me for death and he began to review all the Commandments, and I was overcome by fright and I told him, "No more! If they tell me I'm dying and you come to me with the Ten Commandments, I'm capable of killing you."

I was discharged from the residence and transferred to Valdecilla, where I found out the baby had died. This was heart-breaking. All I had suffered and gone through, the operations and procedures, had been for nothing.

First Illness

Menchu: I must talk about the first time I got sick before I got married and how I met my future husband, Angel Alvarez. I was 18 years old. I had returned from Madrid to Santander and began to feel ill. Hematomas appeared all over my body. I went to see Dr. Presmanes. He told me that he was going to give me steroids and that I had to be very careful; that my illness was called purpura and the treatment was going to take care of it.

I continued with my life, but I felt worse all the time. They admitted me to the hospital in Valdecilla and gave me blood transfusions, but everything happened so fast and I was so sick that the doctor told my father to take me home to die. My father talked to the director of Valdecilla Hospital (at that time it was a private hospital) who repeated what the other doctor had said, but my mother insisted they keep me and they finally agreed.

Since they were so sure I was going to die, they discussed the plans for getting my body back to my home. Although they felt it was a lost cause, they continued the transfusions. I went into a deep coma for 17 days, and the doctors said it was irreversible now. This is why I don't know how or why the rosaries kissed by the Virgin of Garabandal arrived the same day the Carmelite priest was giving me Extreme Unction. At that time someone, possibly one of my school friends, also sent me a crucifix and a piece of pine from Garabandal.

Before I go any further, I must say that my father prayed very much all his life, receiving daily Communion and saying eight to ten rosaries every day. He read the letter to my mother that came from Garabandal with the crucifix and piece of pine. He said, "Dear God, let's see if this is true; let's pray." He got everyone present to pray, including a group of my friends and the Carmelite priest (my confessor) that watched over me and prayed every night.

They had just started praying when they say I opened my eyes for the first time in seventeen days, and I moved. They called the doctor, who couldn't believe it, but came anyway. He ordered blood tests that showed my platelets count had climbed instantly. I was very agitated and my father and the doctors agreed to send me home so I would be able to calm down and gain strength for the operation to remove my spleen. Eight days later I returned to Valdecilla Hospital for my blood work. The plan to remove my spleen was abandoned, since my platelet count was now normal.

I had suffered so much all I wanted to do was have fun and forget this whole episode. I started to go out and fifteen days later I met this gentleman (she pointed to her husband). I told him I had been in the hospital in Valdecilla and explained to him my illness and I told him they had given me the last rites (this had left a deep impression on me). He laughed and said, "Bah! I'm sure they made a mistake." I told him, "Angel, don't say that, because someday you're going to have to eat your words." Soon we started dating and became engaged. I gave him a medal kissed by the Virgin of Garabandal during one of her apparitions. He put it on, but I think it was only because I was his fiancée, otherwise he wouldn't have done so; it is the one that he wears to this day.

People in Santander had heard about my cure. Everybody was talking about it and said it was a miracle from the Virgin of Garabandal. I told this to my fiancée and he didn't believe me.

That summer I went to Garabandal without saying anything to anyone. I went, prayed, and came home. I have never spoken publicly about this with anyone and don't even notice those who know who I am and are curious. I go about my business and come home.

Before all this happened I didn't know anything about Garabandal; I remember in school a nun forbade us to talk about Garabandal. I knew Garabandal existed but I never knew any of the girls or got involved in it in any way.

Benac: Did you ever have a sincere, profound devotion to the Virgin?

Menchu: Yes, I had much devotion but I was disillusioned, because in school I wasn't made a Daughter of Mary (it was my own fault.) At home, as a child, we always had novenas to the Virgin of Carmel, to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, to St. Francis Xavier, and to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. All this was sacred to my father, and I went to Mass frequently. I always believed very much, but I was not a model child in school.

In the last year of school the superior told us that she was going to make us Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, and I told her, "Look, I'm only the daughter of my mother and don't make me daughter of anyone else. I'm leaving now and I don't want to be daughter of the Sacred Heart because I have so many bad memories of this school that I'm not interested in the slightest." So they made me daughter of nobody.

<>**Benac:** Of course, you later gave yourself to the Mother of God.

Menchu: Of course.

Benac: Has the love of Our Lady influenced you in any supernatural Christian way? Are you conscious of a special relationship with Our Lady and do you express it in any way in your personal life?

Doctor: You have to know this; I studied with Jesuits and I was up to here (he lifted his hand over his head) with rosaries and Masses. When I got out I didn't practice any of these things for a long time and spent part of my life like that. But now I pray the rosary every day.

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See also: ["... for what she has done in Garabandal! For that, yes"](#)

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