5. ‘*Quiero ser protagonista de mi vida*’: ‘I want to be the main actor in my own life’

Pursuit of the principle of social justice after Vatican II took the form, for many of the nuns, of what they called *inserción*: involvement in the world, taking seriously the moral imperatives arising from the bond of common humanity. This process itself, in a reversal of that affecting the Thai factory workers, led to their redefining of what they understood as a good life. Central to this redefinition was a profound shift in their understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular, brought about by a deeper engagement with social justice as human rights. In the process, the nuns’ deeply personal understanding of the relationship between ‘selfhood and the good, or…selfhood and morality’, ¹ underwent a transformation. After that, there could be no going back. These changes in traditional understanding and living proved too radical for some of the nuns and, ultimately, for the Roman Church itself. The return to conservatism under Pope John Paul II had repercussions for the Society of the Sacred Heart, exacerbating tensions within the Society and between the Society and Rome.

**Action**

The chicken served by María Ángeles for the main meal of the day was made tender by its cooking with lemon and white wine. Unlike members of many others of the *piso* communities, her small community worked close enough to their apartment to come together from time to time for the midday meal. Socorro Abel taught in one of the Congregation’s schools, but with flexible hours. Carmen Vega also taught, but in their local parish. María Ángeles herself undertook voluntary work in the parish. We sat around the circular table in what served as a dining room and chatted about the day’s events and the plans for a new building to replace the creatively improvised ground-floor space that served as the parish church. The scene of comfortable domesticity—so different from the formal asceticism of their earlier years in the convent—delineated the ease with which these women had made the transition from the austerity of

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¹ Taylor (2003: 3).
a monastic religious ideal to an affirmation of ordinary life. They had done this by shifting their understanding of the sacred and putting humanity at the centre of their lives.

This was a very different process from that of the Bang Khen factory workers. The links between the two groups exist only in the space created by modernity, and by modernity’s demand that people recognise their common bond as human, and that they re-evaluate their past in relation to the present. The nuns with whom I worked in Spain were very actively engaged in that process.

In Spain in the early 1980s, the number of nuns in the Society was just under one thousand. They were divided into two administrative provinces: the North and the Centre-South. The North, which had some 450 members, included the geographical provinces or regions of Catalonia, the Basque Country, Navarre, Aragon, Valencia, Almeria and Mallorca. The Northern Province, like its regions of Catalonia and the Basque Country in relation to the rest of Spain, had a reputation for progressiveness in relation to its sister province of the Centre-South. This latter province, centred in Madrid, numbered around 500 members, and united the geographical provinces or regions of Madrid, Soria, Eastern Andalusia, Western Andalusia, Galicia, the Canary Islands and Portugal.

Living as I did in Madrid, my main, though not exclusive, focus was on the Centre-South Province, particularly the 19 residential units or communities in Madrid itself. Those living in Madrid accounted for almost half—240—of the numbers in the province as a whole. By the time of our arrival in February 1981, the nuns had experienced a decade of the Society’s new directions. To some extent, therefore, the changes arising out of the General Chapters of 1964, 1967 and 1970 had been consolidated. Some of the nuns continued living in communities in their traditional convents, but in small rather than large communities. By 1981, there were seven communities in the Chamartin complex, four in the smallest community and 25 in the largest. Some of the nuns continued to wear the religious habit; many others did not. Some continued to teach in the Society’s schools; others were involved in parish, diocesan or secular work. There were six piso communities. At the same time, the province was again experiencing considerable tension in the face of a growing reaction, from within and without, against the form and extent of the changes.

**Reaction**

This reaction came from a number of quarters. One was a further General Chapter of the Society in 1976. This Chapter was seen by many as an opportunity to take
stock, to stop and reflect on what had happened in the previous decade and the implications of this for a redefinition of the Society’s own reality. Many in Madrid, however, saw the result as the beginning of a process of what they called ‘involution’. Secondly, in 1978 the Polish Pope, John Paul II, had succeeded Paul VI’s successor, John Paul I, whose brief papacy lasted a mere 33 days. John Paul II disapproved of many of the changes in women’s religious orders since Vatican II, a disapproval that was expressed most immediately in his pressure for them to resume the religious habit and to return to living in traditional hierarchical communities. Thirdly, also in 1978, a new Provincial was appointed to the Centre-South Province. One of the post–Civil War generation, Dolores Álvarez Román was nevertheless committed to reasserting and reinforcing an institutional model for the province that would allow for more centralised control.

Her concern for the future of the province, and more broadly for the Society of the Sacred Heart as a whole, was not without foundation. This was made clear when the nuns met in Rome for the 1982 General Chapter. In that year, the General Chapter was called to finalise the new constitutions of the Society that had been required by the Vatican Council. Because of the internationality of the Society, communities do not come directly under diocesan jurisdiction, but they are subject to Rome. The new constitutions had to be submitted to the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for Religious if the Society was to continue as a juridically constituted apostolic body. The delegates to the Chapter met knowing that the Sacred Congregation would not ratify the constitutions if they did not contain explicit provisions to matters such as the habit, a local Superior for each community, and at least one formal hour of daily prayer.

When the delegates arrived in Rome they found that, for the first time in the recent history of women’s religious orders in general, not just in the Society, the Sacred Congregation had appointed an observer to the Chapter. In fact, there were two observers, both priests. The first lasted only a matter of days, and aroused such hostility among the nuns that he voluntarily left and was replaced. The second proved a happier choice and, as the Chapter progressed, became a friend to many. Nevertheless, MariVí Muñoz, like the other delegates, was fully aware that this was a huge matter [jordisima]. It was as much as to say that the Sacred Congregation had thought: ‘They’re not sufficiently mature to form new constitutions, they don’t have enough [true] spirit. We must supervise them’…Honestly, they really hate us terribly [a muerte]…As we say in Spain, they have us already judged. I think that because we were among the first who perhaps broke many things, that that created an appalling image [imagen nefasta] of us in the Sacred Congregation: terrible, frightful. The priest who did come to the Chapter finally told
us, after we’d become friends—in fact, he turned out to be a really good and delightful person—he confessed that, of course, he’d come with an idea of us, that we were, that we had no spirit, that religious life didn’t matter to us at all, that we never prayed. That’s the idea that they have of us. So of course he was very surprised when he saw that we prayed, that we had spirit, that we had very good warm and fraternal relations amongst ourselves; when he saw that we respected each other very much, [and] saw the cultural level—these things left him very impressed.

But of course—and this is the critical point—I think that many of the things that weren’t discussed during the Chapter or that were accepted [were] with the understanding that we were in grave danger of dissolution. That’s to say, that the Sacred Congregation—I don’t know if the Church would actually dare to do it—but certainly, that they wouldn’t approve the Constitutions, or that they’d do to us, for example, what they did to the Jesuits: impose on us a Superior General. I don’t know, something dreadful—someone from Florence [an ultra-conservative community]! Or something like that—appalling. This was a condition that had enormous influence—including [with] the groups who’d arrived at the Chapter with a more critical attitude, from Latin America, for example. When they saw the situation, its effect was to make them say: ‘Look out, we’re at a very important point here, this is more serious than we thought, we can’t make judgments.’ Mind you, it united us very much, so that there was a kind of consensus not to create problems that were not, in the last analysis, fundamental, and in exchange, to leave the doors open. That’s to say, let’s pass over all those things that we wouldn’t have passed over in another moment, that we would have done battle over, but, given the gravity of the situation, that they’ve sent an observer, we’ll hold back.

The delegates also saw for themselves the personal cost to those who had been involved in the central government of the Society in Rome over the period since 1970. A number of the members of their General Council had become ill, and delegates to the 1982 Chapter saw Charo Galache, the Superior General, as under particular stress. This also influenced the deliberations of the delegates. They knew that John Paul II himself, on a number of occasions when he held an audience with nuns, had expressed his displeasure to the Superior General at the fact that these nuns of the Society no longer wore the religious habit. But people outside Rome had not realised the extent of the personal toll. MariVí Muñoz also commented:

The key to many things from the 1982 Chapter is the bad relation that we’ve had with the Sacred Congregation. It’s just terrible, the
persecution that Charo has suffered from them. It was a factor that had a lot of influence in making us tread carefully, to see Charo, whom everyone loved—I’ve never known anyone so universally loved as she was—under such pressure. We felt we couldn’t put those in government in such a confrontationist position with the Sacred Congregation. We felt that if, without closing any doors, or at least, trying to make things broad enough...

The 1982 Chapter was also influenced by the wish to accommodate those in the Society itself who, far from embracing change, had been scandalised and alienated. For them, the changes had been a denial of authentic religious values; reinterpretation was not renewal but rejection. The convent in Florence represented the most extreme position. The Florence community had gone into what might be called a gradual schism from the rest of the Society in the years after the 1970 Chapter. In order to distance themselves entirely from developments in the Society, they appealed directly to the Sacred Congregation for Religious for individual juridical status. In an ironic counterpoint to the Society’s own move to experimentation, the Sacred Congregation gave the Florence community permission to continue within the Society in a ‘mode [régimen] of experimentation’. Further, in order to promote the traditions that they saw as essential, they had asked for permission to open a novitiate. This was consistently refused under Pope Paul VI, but was finally granted by John Paul II. In the event, they only had two novices: a German who left after a month, and an Italian. John Paul II’s granting of this permission was indicative of the change for the worse in relations between the Society and the Vatican under this pope.

The developments in Florence had some repercussions in Spain. Two of the nuns from the Centre-South Province took refuge with the Florence community. On their return to Madrid, they asked for exclaustration from the province in order to depend directly on the Cardinal of Toledo. Two others afterwards joined them, and the four formed a community of their own. One of these was a widow who had entered the Society some years after her daughter had done so. The daughter was one of those who had left the Society during its period of most tumultuous change and had later married. Her mother blamed the Society for having ‘ruined’ (estropeado) her and chose to join the Toledo community as part of her continuing anger and hostility.

The status of exclaustration granted to the women in the Toledo community placed them outside the jurisdiction of the province but gave them the option of rejoining the Society if they ever so wished. It also meant that they continued to be nuns, with vows, but dependent upon the local bishop—in this case, the cardinal—rather than upon the Society. The province continued to support them by sending translation work from time to time, and by providing occasional
material help. One of the Toledo community acted as secretary to the Cardinal-Archbishop of Toledo and Primate of Spain, Marcelo González Martín, who was regarded as one of the most conservative in the country. Along with many of his fellow bishops, he strongly opposed the legalisation of divorce undertaken by the Minister of Justice in the post–coup Calvo Sotelo government. This was the Social Democrat Francisco Fernández Ordóñez. In response, González Martín forbade Fernández Ordóñez from taking his traditional place in the 1981 Corpus Christi procession. This annual procession itself represented the deep conservatism of Toledo. It was led by the widows and daughters of men who had been involved in the siege of the Toledo Alcázar (fortress) in the Civil War. This was a famous episode in which the Nationalists successfully held the Alcázar against much greater Republican forces. The relief of this siege was a great publicity coup for Franco, though it probably cost him the early conquest of Madrid.

**Practical transformations: From religious to political awakenings**

In a sense, then, the 1982 General Chapter was the moment that marked most clearly for the nuns the culmination of the Society’s own crisis of modernity. The documents of Vatican II were as revolutionary in their impact on them as Luther’s Wittenberg Theses had been for the Church in the sixteenth century. Vatican II also created an analogous fracturing of the nuns’ present from their past. It did so by transforming the meaning of ‘the world’ and the nuns’ relationship to it. The Council’s *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (*Lumen Gentium*: ‘The Light of the World’) placed the Church—bishops, clergy, religious and laity—at the service of the world, not at enmity with it. It redefined the Church as a pilgrim, not triumphant, Church, one that ‘takes on the appearance of this passing world’. It stressed service, not authority. In its section on religious women and men, the Constitution on the Church foreshadowed the later document dedicated specifically to the religious life (*Perfectae Caritatis*: ‘Perfect Love’): ‘Let no one think that by their consecration religious have become strangers to their fellow men or useless citizens of this earthly city’, and it spoke of ‘the work of building up this earthly city’. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*: ‘Joy and Hope’) built on and made even more explicit these radical shifts: for the ‘followers of Christ…nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts…This community realises

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5 ibid., *Lumen Gentium* VI, p. 46.
that it is truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history’. It shattered the justification for separation from the world and identified the task of the Church as scrutinising ‘the signs of the times... We must therefore recognise and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics’ as ‘mankind painstakingly searches for a better world’. *Gaudium et Spes* committed all the members of the Church to social justice: ‘it devolves on humanity to establish a political, social, and economic order which will to an ever better extent serve mankind and help individuals as well as groups to affirm and develop the dignity proper to them’.

These were the transformations in the Church to which the Society of the Sacred Heart was responding in the 1967 and 1970 General Chapters and which suddenly offered the nuns a myriad new opportunities for their action. Pope John XXIII had thrown open the windows not only of the Church but also of its convents. Vatican II invited the nuns to inhabit a new moral space and to ask new questions about ‘what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance and what is trivial and secondary’. Different groups gave different answers, resulting in a previously unthinkable diversity. Those in Florence and Toledo rejected change and sought refuge in the stern traditions of the past; but with a traditionalism that, as Morris suggests in relation to Thailand, is itself a discourse, elaborated around the fear of tradition’s loss. The two Spanish provinces took seriously the process of experimentation. This began slowly.

**Beginnings and transformation**

MariVí Muñoz described how change began for her as a young nun. It was a very unromantic encounter with the meaning of social justice within the Society itself, where the nuns were divided into two social classes: the choir nuns, who chanted the Divine Office every day and did the Society’s teaching and other professional work, and the Sisters, who did the domestic chores. The 1964 Chapter had suppressed the formal division between the two groups. In practice, the distinction lingered:

> For me, my first spark was the summer of 1967. I read, and I remember it perfectly, imagine it, a journal that the Jesuits published. I remember some articles on the religious life, and on the involvement in social life

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6 ibid., *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 1, p. 200.
7 ibid., *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 4, p. 203.
8 ibid., *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 9, p. 206.
[la inserción social] of religious life. That opened up new horizons for me. I went to the Superior—a woman who was very open for those times—and said that I wanted to spend a summer in social work [un verano social], to look for an experience of work. She said to me, ‘Very well. In the mornings, you can go to the kitchen, and in the afternoons, to the laundry.’ It was wonderful, because it made me understand the life of the Sisters. I realised what it was like, the whole morning in the kitchen and the afternoon in the laundry. On the first day in the laundry, when I arrived, the whole room was covered in red water, and I said, ‘What’s this?’ They told me that the washing machine had broken down and all the water from washing the [towelling] sanitary pads had come out. The first thing I had to do was clean it all up by hand.

Other changes from this period were more substantial. In 1967, a school was opened in Seville in a predominantly gypsy area (Torreblanca). In 1968, a small group moved at the invitation of the local parish priest to open a parish school in an outer industrial area of Madrid (Torrejón de Ardoz, then also an American base). Classes were held on the ground floor of an apartment block in which the nuns lived on a floor above. In the same year, a junior college (Colegio Menor) was opened in Santiago de Compostela as a residence for children coming to school from the villages of Galicia. In 1969, the former novitiate in Chamartín was turned into a residence for working women. In 1970, another junior college was opened, this time in Granada, again in a gypsy area (La Chana). There the nuns also used to go to the jail every Sunday with the wives of the prisoners, whom they also helped to find work or other means of support. In 1971, the more general move into pisos began: Hortaleza in Madrid and Zaidín in Granada, both dormitory or working-class suburbs. A childcare centre for working-class parents was set up in Vigo, in Galicia, and another junior college, with a primary school attached (Escuela-Hogar), in Priego, a village in the province of Cordoba. In 1972, a small group of four moved to one of the poorest areas in the Canary Islands, living in the pueblo of Castillo del Romeral in the south of the Great Canary Island and teaching in the state school. In 1973, a group of three nuns joined a mixed community in San Sebastian to work in a boys’ reformatory. In 1975, the community from a university college (Colegio Mayor) in Madrid moved to Moratalaz, popularly referred to as a barrio rojo (a red or Communist neighbourhood). And in 1976 and 1977, other communities rented or bought flats in Madrid.

These were also, as we have seen, the last restless years of el Franquismo, with strikes, student protests and the emergence of other, though still illegal, forms of political activity. Such activities often occurred in the guise of social engagement. One such form was the Neighbourhood Associations (Associaciones de Vecinos).
Daniel Maldonado, elected in 1977 to the Senate as a Socialist representative in the first democratic elections after Franco’s death, was one of those involved in setting up the Neighbourhood Associations in Granada:

The Neighbourhood Associations grew up after the Law of Associations was passed in 1964. They began in parishes: a little sitting room for old men, with a TV, or where they could play cards. The first ones were set up in Bilbao, and we got copies of the statutes here in Granada. The first childcare centres were set up by these associations. It was in the Seventies that they became very politicised. Because political parties still hadn’t been legalised, they used the Neighbourhood Associations as their platform.

Manu Negrín worked closely with Daniel Maldonado over this period:

The Neighbourhood Associations began precisely in order to change society, to make people aware [concientizar] of injustice. It’s for that reason that I think a lot of the young nuns, the ones who were questioning, got involved in the associations, because they were responding to the gospel. All the people working in the associations were working for the same objectives. I was living in the girls’ residence in La Chana, and I thought that to be a religious in a barrio either has meaning or doesn’t have meaning. If it’s to have meaning then it’s only because you live the life of the people in the barrio. That’s how I got involved in the Neighbourhood Association.

In theory the associations had a certain legality, but in practice, no. The committee met every week, the association every fortnight or so. They had to send the agenda beforehand to the governor, or the mayor—I don’t remember—with the date, the place, the time, and they couldn’t change anything important afterwards. The police always came to supervise the meetings.

What the associations tried to do was to improve the material and social conditions of the people. We began two childcare centres: one on another floor of the same building as the residence, and one other. They were begun to help mothers who had to go out to work. There are a lot of these, and there are a lot of gypsies in the barrio. We tried to help them by looking for work and getting them jobs.

As with MariVí Muñoz, however, Manu’s romantic notions were quickly put to the test through her involvement:

11 This concept and educational process were elaborated in the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.
One day I saw one of the gypsies, one of the mothers from the childcare centre, begging at the door of the church. I asked her why she was begging, and she told me she had no money. I said, ‘Come to our house. You can clean the things we never have time to do—the windows, and the curtains—and we’ll pay you.’ ‘How much?’ she said. ‘A thousand pesetas.’ ‘A thousand? I can get 3000 begging. And on top of it all, I’d have to work!’

At the same time, in moving out of their big convents in the main urban centres, some of the nuns made the connection between the social and economic disadvantage of rural areas and the political struggle for autonomy. Mari Carmen Jiménez Delgado was later described by Rosario León as ‘one of the most radical’ of the nuns. Mari Carmen explained:

When I arrived in Galicia in 1971, I came up against the reality of extreme underdevelopment, at all levels. I’d asked to be sent to the overseas missions, but I came to understand that my true mission was in Galicia, a world that had been abandoned by so many religious. Simply, I felt a vocation; I felt a personal call to work with people in the rural areas.

Rosario León remembered: ‘And Mari Carmen—I’ve seen her waving the flag of the most radical party in Galicia, surrounded by a circle of children and parents and other people from the region. That was giving people the service that they asked for.’

Perhaps the most dramatic initiative in these years was that in Castillo del Romeral, in the Canary Islands. For Paloma Morales, her experience there was ‘a conversion’ and she recounted it, and what it had meant, at length:

For me, what was fundamental was the Chapter of 1970. In 1970, I was sent to Las Palmas. I had a year in the school, as a class teacher. In the first Holy Week, two of us went to a pueblo in the south of the island. We got involved in a shanty settlement; we were in one of the shanties [chábolas]. For me, that was my major conversion. We stayed with a family, we had a room at the side, the roof was of that sort of paper, cartons, or paper of those bags of flour that has a very thick, strong paper. We had some mattresses, nothing else.

So there we were in Holy Week, in a shanty with some of the parents; we ate together, had dinner together, we spent time with the children, we prepared all the celebrations. They were wonderful days. Of course, there was no water, no toilets, no light, nothing. In the shanty we had nothing. And that really made me think a lot, really a lot, in actuality with how little it’s possible to live. And those people, even within the exploitation to which they have to submit, when they have what is
fundamental—that is, love—then they’re happy. The settlement is only a quarter of an hour by road, 12 or 15 kilometres, from the hotels, the swimming pools, the lights. And I said to myself, ‘We are educating the children of the exploiters.’ And that’s impossible, it’s a contradiction, it can’t be. I used to be happy and very committed when we were in the schools, with those other children; we didn’t know any other reality. But as soon as I went out of the convent—that great castle—and encountered another reality, knew another kind of necessity; it’s an irreversible process. So from that Holy Week, everything had to change.

We made inquiries, talked with people. We found that in the Canaries in the south there’s a great lack of schools, there are hardly any; teachers don’t want to go the pueblos, they’d rather stay in the cities.

So we began to organise our papers. Everyone told us we were mad. Even in the legal office [la Gestoría], they said to us: ‘What on earth are you getting involved in?’ It’s because the southern part of Las Palmas has the reputation of being very tough, very combative, aggressive. ‘You’ll be living like in a town of the wild west, with one gun to defend yourselves and the other to kill.’ We arrived, four of us, on 20 August 1972.

Close by, there was a settlement that was linked to the pueblo, with really foul shanties, absolutely foul. There was no school there. They had to come into our school by public transport, even the very little ones. In the beginning, they let us use some old army huts, as a loan, but there came a moment when they said no. We had to ask for prefabs, those that they make in three months. Fine, very good, the local council would make them for us, no problem. Everything was fine, everyone happy. But it turned out that the council decided not to set them up in the settlement, but in Castillo, the nearby town. We went to the bishop, not the present one, the previous one, who was useless. We got together all the small landholders, all the tomato growers, and said, ‘What are we going to do?’ And of course, we were still in Franco’s time, so that meetings were illegal. But we made a lot of fuss to the minister and to the civil governor, and to the mayor. But when the time came for school to begin, no prefabs. Right, we got together a big meeting, in the church in Castillo that’s the only place big enough, as well as the fact that it was possible to meet without danger, because it was a church. We called the mayor, asking for an explanation as to why they’d made the decision not to build the prefabs, without consultation with the people. In case he was engaged, we wrote a letter. Everyone was at the meeting, all the children—and, of course, the children surrounded by all the police that it was possible to see on the island. We called the mayor. We waited an hour, two hours. Since we were in the church, we read bits of the gospel,
we prayed psalms, we sang. It wasn’t to try to sublimate the situation, but to see what, in this situation, Jesus would do. What were the rights that we had to defend? Without violence, without aggression, but they are rights that belong to us. So, what should we do? Right, go and look for the mayor. But the parents said, ‘As we don’t want violence, or to act by force, let’s wait here another hour. If he doesn’t come, we’ll cut the highway, the traffic on the highway.’ You can imagine it, the main tourist highway, in the tourist area. It was the parents who decided it: ‘Come what may, our children come first.’ Honestly, it made us tremble. These were new situations for us, totally new. But obviously, just because you’re a nun, you can’t stay safely at home. If you’re with the people then you’ve got to go the whole way, no? In every situation.

Right, everything was organised for the big march to the highway. We knew that the mayor would come then, obviously. So we had to organise it very well. We had to think who would be arrested—so first, we were going to have the men on the outside, and the women and children in the middle, so they wouldn’t be hurt. But then we thought, no, it’s we who should protect the men, so they won’t be arrested. So the women and children went on the outside; there were the people from three settlements there. We’d begun the meeting in the church at four o’clock, and waited till eight. The mayor lived about a quarter of an hour away. The mayor at that time was a man manipulated by the Count who owned all that part of the island. And people who lived on that land couldn’t marry without the Count’s permission; and this is only 10 years ago, they couldn’t marry!

So off we went to the highway, singing as we walked. We had to walk two and a half kilometres, with the children as well. When we got to the highway, the police said, ‘Please, break up this meeting’. Our spokespeople were Elena, the school principal, one of the priests and one of the parents. They said, ‘No. We’ve come peacefully. What we want is to ask for a school. But we want the mayor to come. We think he ought to come, because we gave him plenty of warning. You must understand.’ Of course, the Civil Guard and the police, they said, ‘And if the mayor takes a long time coming?’ One of the parents said, ‘We’re not in a hurry. Let’s sit down here.’ So we began to sit down on the highway. You can imagine it, with all the cars honking. When we were just about all sitting down, the mayor appeared, I don’t know where from. He must have been waiting somewhere there, don’t you think? To see just how far we were prepared to go.

So there he was. He said, ‘Very well, here I am. And it’s night already. Why don’t we go to the church?’ The church was on land that belonged
to the Count. So we all went to the church. We were about 2000 people. The first thing that one of the parents said was, ‘We want to talk to you. But please, what we don’t want are the forces of public order. This is a matter between you and us. Be kind enough to leave, all the National Police, the Civil Guard, and the secret police.’ Because of course, we didn’t know which ones were secret police. But in the pueblo, everyone knows each other, and the schoolchildren were saying, ‘This one doesn’t belong to the pueblo, and this one’. So the children got rid of all those who didn’t belong to the pueblo. It was perfectly plain that they were secret police—we could see the handcuffs in their pockets.

We closed the door, and there we were, with the mayor—and of course, it was all very emotional. We said, ‘Señor Mayor, we want to know why you’re not going to make the prefabs. We want a date, and we want it within three months’—we gave him three months, because they can make prefabs in two and a half—and we want them in this pueblo.’ ‘Yes, yes, yes, yes, of course, of course, of course, of course. But obviously, I have to consult others.’ ‘You are the highest authority in the council, so you can agree. But let’s have it in writing’—off they went to find a piece of paper—‘We want to ask, first, that they’ll build the school in the pueblo; second, that there will be no repercussions in any of the families who are here, that there’ll be no repression. And thirdly, that we can leave here peacefully to return to the pueblo. We have two and a half kilometres to go, and it’s dark.

‘Yes, yes, yes, yes to everything.’ And that’s what happened: the mayor signed, the secretary signed—and the people, obviously, they knew that identity cards are very important, you always have to put your identity card number on everything—so they said to the mayor, ‘Put your identity card number.’ And that’s how things turned out. We left it like that and went. When we got back to the pueblo—think of it, such a wonderful, beautiful thing—when we arrived at the pueblo, on both sides, there was a crowd of people clapping us. They were the labourers who hadn’t been able to come with us. The next day, we went to school, and on every corner we saw the Pair—secret police—watching us. We had police for a month in the pueblo.

We cut the highway on the 14th of January. In three months, we had the prefabs. And we celebrated it properly, I assure you.

The aftermath of this incident, despite the (written) assurance of the mayor, was that two of the priests and the school principal, Elena, were fined. The people of the pueblo took responsibility for paying the fines, and collected the whole amount, some 600 000 pesetas (then about A$6000). The priests refused to pay
the fine, but before all the due legal processes had been completed, Franco died. Paloma Morales narrated the denouement, when the Civil Guard arrived with the news that Elena would not be fined:

This was funny. The Civil Guard arrived in the pueblo, but didn’t know where we lived. They went to one of the houses and asked, ‘Where is the school principal?’ The woman answered, ‘That depends. If you’ve come to fine her, I won’t tell you where she is. You’ve got no right, after all she’s done for us, how she’s helped the children. Here we manage as best we can. So if it’s something bad…’ The police answered, ‘Calm down, calm down, señora. It’s good news.’ ‘Well,’ she said, ‘you tell it to me first so I can decide.’

**Obedience and subjectivity**

By the time of Franco’s death in 1975 and the General Chapter of 1976, the Spanish provinces looked very different from the uniformity and stability that, despite the disruptions of the Second Republic and the Civil War, had been their hallmarks for more than a century and a half. The plunge into ‘the world’ had brought the nuns categorically into contact with secularity and altered the balance between the secular and the religious. Prior to Vatican II, the Society’s way of life had kept the secular firmly at bay. Static religious values and interpretations of the good dominated the nuns’ view of the world. This domination was maintained in many ways, but perhaps most importantly by the exercise of the vow of obedience. The practice of obedience informed every aspect of the nuns’ daily lives. In so doing, it maintained the sacred hierarchy of authority and subsumed the individual into the collective. Individuals constantly strove for subordination of the will, which was also the subordination of reason. They did this routinely from the time of communal rising at 5:20 am, as set down in the Rule, through the hour of meditation based on the Exercises of St Ignatius—whose *Rules* also contained much emphasis on the virtues of obedience over reason—until the final bell of the day sounded the ‘greater silence’ at 9:15 pm. Failures were subject to public self-accusation or, at selected times during the annual liturgical cycle, to public accusation by others. Penances were regulated and subject to permission from the Superior. Individuals resided and worked according to the ‘obedience’ they were given.

Such practices could only be maintained while the nuns remained cut off from the world and convents constituted true total institutions in Goffman’s sense of the term.¹² The Society’s commitment to *inserción* (involvement in the

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world) brought these practices, and much of the value attached to them, to an end. At the same time, *inserción* also brought about a number of fundamental reorientations. It removed the separation of the temporal from the sacred order. It reconciled the opposition between spirit and flesh. And it redefined the standpoint from which individuals interpreted the meaning of the good, shifting, in another echo of Luther's emphasis on individual conscience, from obedience to individual judgement and choice. This was within a context not of authority but of dialogue. In terms of agency, the individual subject moved from the margins to the centre, from a diffuse subjectivity to a centred one. This was as true for the nuns of Florence and Toledo as for those in the *barrio rojo* of Moratalaz; each asserted the centrality of her individual conscience and made her own decision in the face of what would previously have been unquestioning obedience to an unquestioned authority. Ironically, despite the apparent clinging to the past, the nuns in Florence and Toledo were in this sense even more fiercely modern than their sisters in the *piso* communities, though this is not a view that they themselves would have happily accepted.

The immediate consequences of these fundamental reorientations had been expressed in the rapid move to diversity in the Spanish provinces after the General Chapters of 1967 and especially of 1970. Everything was thrown into question. Concha Heredia was asked to reorganise even the program of training for the novices. She described that time:

> Everything was spring; everything was creativity. When the changes began, no-one knew what the novitiate should be. Everyone said to us, ‘We know very well what it shouldn’t be, but not what it should be’. From one point of view, I was very happy, because I love creating new things. They said to us in the 1970 Chapter, ‘Do whatever you think best’, and I thought that was marvellous.

**Obedience and the institution**

But the 1970 Chapter also introduced an unavoidable tension between the concept of dialogue and the vow of obedience, between the autonomy of the individual subjects and the collective purposes of the institution, between the secular and the religious. For those who chose to stay in the Society—and many made the choice to leave over this period—religious interpretation remained central, but it did so as a source of meaning, not as an imposition. The 1976 Chapter revealed how quickly the tension had begun to be felt. Rosario León, despite her age—she was one of the Civil War generation—struggled with it already in 1971 when she was appointed as Provincial:
After a year, I couldn’t go on. I couldn’t because, for example, for me, giving what we used to call an obedience is something so contrary to my way of looking at things, so contrary to my own conscience, that, frankly, I had a very bad time in this. The work itself I enjoyed—making plans, organising projects—but the point of obedience has always been for me a point that, in this day and age, I don’t see as many people see it. I don’t see why, because you’re the Provincial, you can say to me, ‘Listen, leave this place and go to that’. I see it in dialogue and it’s neither you nor I, but together, that we seek what God wants.

Very soon after, Concha Heredia, one of the post–Civil War generation, had similar problems with changing expectations for the novices:

I’ve never felt like a person who wanted to give formation to anybody, and I’ve always had a big problem with spiritual direction. I don’t believe in spiritual direction—maybe it’s because I don’t know how to do it. I really only believe in relation. It seems to me that it’s life that forms you.

But then everything began to develop. They began to talk a lot about the Mistress of Novices, and I began the fight against the idea of the Mistress of Novices. We had a meeting in Rome in 1975, and I could see that things were already changing. They were talking even more of the Mistress of Novices, and that was another thing altogether. I fought a lot there, but I realised that there was no point. There was a Frenchwoman there, very structured; we had great battles, we were the two who fought the most, but I realised that now there was a different option. She didn’t believe at all in working in a team, she talked always about there having to be a person with the final say: she was the Mistress of Novices. I was very amused; they presented us with plans of formation that were so complicated—all with circles, all coming and going, everything was regulated, everything was down on paper. As for me, I said, ‘I’m incapable of doing all this—I haven’t prepared anything, I haven’t presented anything—I don’t know’. It seems to me that every person is a world and that the year of the novitiate is a lost year; for some people it’s useless, they’ve been formed by other things, an important experience, or something else altogether. We had one novice who was experiencing a great crisis of faith. How could I read texts of the Mother Foundress to someone who didn’t even know if she believed in God? It was impossible. And that case proves to me that life has got nothing to do with what is put down on paper. I have very little faith in papers.

By 1976, the shock sustained by the institution and individuals as a result of the proliferation of challenges and activities caused the voice of caution to emerge more strongly. Manu Negrín was one of the Spanish delegates to the
1976 General Chapter. She went reluctantly, having spent the previous six years living and working in the gypsy quarter of La Chana in Granada and with the increasingly politicised Neighbourhood Associations. She experienced the 1976 Chapter as one that ‘did me much damage. The atmosphere of the Chapter seemed to me so different from the concrete reality of our work’. A year after her return from the Chapter, she was told by the then Provincial that she was to be moved to Galicia or Seville.

I told her that I did not want to do that, that I would only go if she sent me a letter ordering me to do so, for the sake of obedience. But by the time the letter arrived, I had decided that there are more important things in life than obedience. I have to be the main player [protagonista] in my life, my only life.

She left the Society in order to be so. Others remained, but struggled increasingly to resist the growing pressure to re-subordinate their subjectivity to an authority that attempted to reinvoke sacred legitimacy. Quite a large number negotiated this satisfactorily. Others exercised passive resistance and ignored it. For some, it provoked a crisis. By 1982, of the seven piso communities in Madrid, there were two types, as described by Rosario León: ‘those with the blessing of the provincials and those without that blessing’. To some extent, although not completely, the distinction was based on those who had agreed to choose a local Superior and those who refused. Other important factors were whether those in the community were engaged in work that also had the blessing of the provincials, and whether they participated in the broader activities of the province. And there remained a political dimension.

Vita Bandres lived in one of the piso communities that enjoyed provincial blessing. They were without a local Superior, but a number of them worked in a parish school that was run by the province. They also attended general meetings with other communities of the province, including the annual spiritual retreat. Vita, along with several others of the community, was one of the Civil War generation. The daily newspaper that the community continued to buy was the Catholic Ya. They also comfortably referred to themselves as las derechas (the right-wingers), as happened when all the copies of Ya were stolen from the local newspaper vendor during the election campaign in 1982. Vita complained, ‘I had to buy El País, because all the copies of Ya had been stolen. They don’t want us, las derechas, to read it.’ At the same time, Vita was one of the most wholeheartedly resistant to the imposition of a local Superior. For her, after a decade of living and working in a barrio and a parish school, the return to relations of authority represented a return to her earlier self, a self who could choose as a private motto ‘Disimular, sufrir, y callar, es a Jesús amar’ (‘To conceal, to suffer, to be silent, This is to love Jesus’). She rejected both that motto and that previous self with horror.
In contrast, those who lived in the *barrio rojo* both refused to have a local Superior and undertook work that they, rather than the Provincial, judged important. Nor did they normally attend official provincial reunions or activities. They maintained contact with other like-minded individuals and communities, but they were seen by many as very marginalised. Their political position was also frowned upon by many; Rosario León took the comment of one of her community of the Civil War generation to refer to Moratalaz. The comment was made on the morning after the Socialist victory in the 1982 elections: ‘Now those who voted for the Socialists will have to pay for it’.

**Balancing interpretations: The effects of the 1982 General Chapter**

After the 1982 General Chapter, these communities, as well as the nuns more generally, waited nervously to hear the outcome. They knew that the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for Religious had imposed an official observer and wondered what that portended about the increasing conservatism of Rome under Pope John Paul II. And they had seen the new constitutions considered at the 1982 Chapter that had required Vatican approval. These began with an affirmation of obedience to the Pope. They also knew, however, that, whatever else might change, the Society would not try to impose a return to the religious habit; as Ana María Argaya pointed out, this was a practical judgement based on the knowledge that such a directive would lead to ‘massive disobedience’. The accuracy of their fear was demonstrated during the Pope’s visit to Spain later in 1982. Despite the Pope’s well-publicised views on religious dress, and a directive from the Spanish hierarchy that all priests were to wear the soutane if they wished to participate in audiences with the Pope, none of the nuns who normally wore secular clothes was prepared to wear the habit. Only MariVí Muñoz made a concession, as she had been chosen to read the address of welcome on behalf of the Major Superiors of women’s congregations; she wore a skirt instead of her usual jeans.

By 1982, the nuns had also experienced four years of increasingly centralised provincial government under Dolores Álvarez Román. They feared that the new constitutions would reverse the direction that had been established by Vatican II and the General Chapters of 1964, 1967 and 1970. To their relief, and despite the pressure from the Vatican, this did not happen. Tere Ibarurri’s response was typical of many:

> It’s acceptable. It seems a bit subservient to the Sacred Congregation in legal matters, and there are things like having fixed hours for prayer. As
for Superiors, as far as I’m concerned, all Superiors are bad. But in small communities like ours, it can be someone from outside. Still, in general, it’s acceptable. The problem will be with those who will interpret them.

This was a far cry from the excitement generated in 1970, but it was also a measure of Tere’s previous concern. It also suggests that by 1982, as with the country as a whole, the Society of the Sacred Heart’s movement into modernity was irreversible. Individuals had changed to the extent to which they had absorbed and become part of the world of the new experiences to which they had been exposed. This did not prevent a resurgence of a more conservative interpretation and practice in the province, but it did define some limits.

Nevertheless, there continued to be anxiety about the way in which Dolores Álvarez Román appeared to be focusing on rationalising institutional matters, thereby reducing the level of creative improvisation and narrowing the choices made by individuals and by communities. She told a meeting of school principals that ‘the option for the poor is an option for the Society, not for each individual’. She reorganised the various financial arrangements that had developed out of the period of experimentation, specifically in the *piso* communities, where the income that the community members earned had gone primarily to support the community and its work. Instead, a limit was placed on the amount to be kept by the communities, with the rest going to the province’s ‘community of goods’. Individual communities would have access to this, but only by going through official channels. Despite the low-key requirement of the new constitutions that communities could choose as Superior someone from outside their own community, Dolores continued to put pressure on communities to choose a local Superior. Despite their general acceptability to the provincials, Vita Bandres’s community was threatened with a Superior every year. Inmaculada López, another of the older nuns, reported after a visit from Dolores:

We were telling her how well we get on without a Superior. Every person shares some of this responsibility, one person for spiritual matters, another for whatever. And she said that that was all very good, very good, and that as a reward for how good we were, she’d give us a Superior. After that, we’ve had a black cloud on the horizon, but no-one has said anything further. They wrote to me one summer and asked if I would be Superior. I wrote to them and said no. In the first place, it seemed to me disastrous to take this liberty of naming me without any consultation with the community; secondly, I didn’t agree with the line of government being taken; and I felt no call to take on this kind of official position.

More immediately, Dolores returned to the practice of giving people their ‘obedience’. Rosario León taught in the school at Chamartin but lived in one of
the communities in the other large convent in Madrid. This was a choice that she had made herself some years earlier, after the experience of living in two different *piso* communities. She explained her reasons for this choice:

In the *piso*, I was often tired in the evening and couldn’t continue working like the rest of the community. They accepted this, but it made me feel like the señora of the house. But where I am now, the community is full of old nuns, older than I am, so I can help them out in different ways. What’s more, I don’t mind that they’re conservative, because emotionally I still am of the old style in many ways too.

Her carefully worked out commitment to this community was shattered in five minutes over a lunch period in mid June 1983. We were chatting when Rosario was called out of the staffroom by Luisa Rodríguez, the regional representative on the provincial team, and given the obedience to change not only her work, but also her community. She returned stunned from this conversation:

They’ve given me my obedience. In this way! In the corridor, in a free five minutes! My work is to change schools. But they also want to change my community! It’s so totally unexpected, but—what can I say? That I don’t want to change? That I’m perfectly happy where I am? They want to change me to one of the Chamartin communities. They say that I can help a lot there. But I don’t know. The thing is, with the old nuns, I can respect them with my heart.

Rosario’s experience was not an isolated one. A number of the other nuns were given their obedience in similar summary fashion, creating an atmosphere of extreme nervousness. As a result, Concha Varela committed herself by mistake to giving a course in the summer of 1983:

Dolores called me a few days ago. When I answered the phone, she told me that she had a proposal for me. My hair stood on end! In this very dangerous period of obediences! When she only asked me to give a course in language to the young nuns, I was so relieved I said, ‘Yes, yes, yes!’ And I don’t want to give it at all!

Nevertheless, this confrontation with the authorities, while an important constant in people’s perception and experience, gives only a partial view of the situation by 1982. In the daily life of communities, especially of those in *pisos* and working outside the Society’s projects, the weight of the provincials usually rested quite lightly. Indeed, the more marginal the community, the less their presence impinged on their mundane routines, and was in general reduced to the one formal visit the provincial made annually. Luisa Rodríguez, the regional representative, was welcomed, except in the ‘dangerous period of the obediences’. She tried to visit each community every one to two months.
Other events also suggested that, in the wake of the 1982 General Chapter, most of the nuns had worked out their own terms for balancing the religious and the secular, the old and the new. They continued to negotiate their own terms for doing so, despite increasing pressure to return to a level of conformity that would be imposed through the vow of obedience. At a moment when people were seeking ways to maintain the diversity of chosen paths without overt confrontation, death became a powerful commentary on the concerns of the living.

**Death and transfiguration**

Early in the summer vacation of 1983, Teresa Vigón, one of the nuns from the *piso* community of Torrejón de Ardoz that had been established in 1968, died in the intensive-care unit of a Madrid public hospital. The funeral rituals contained many of the elements of both continuity and change that characterised the contemporary experience of the nuns. Teresa had suffered a heart attack three days previously during a visit to one of the Congregation’s long-established houses, Santa María de Huerta, in Soria. After her death, her body was moved to the side chapel of Chamartin. There, other nuns prayed beside her body throughout the whole day, just as they had always done in the case of deaths in the past. Some of these women came from the communities of Chamartin itself; many came from other communities in Madrid, especially from the smaller groups living in *pisos*.

Teresa’s death had particular significance; it was the first death of one of the members of a *piso* community and therefore, for Carmen Vega, ‘a moment for solidarity’. At this moment of sadness, the Society claimed its own; people turned for comfort to one of the places where the rituals of death, lovingly simplified as they were, could be performed with the beauty and grace that had always been marks of the ceremonial life of the Society of the Sacred Heart. The resting place for the body, the house of Chamartin itself, embodied the history of the nuns’ presence in Spain as well as the challenges, the dilemmas and the changes of more recent years. The convent of Santa María de Huerta where the illness first occurred was also one of the grand houses of the Society, but had become a meeting place for women from many of the widely dispersed communities. Especially during the summer, Santa María de Huerta also offered a place for spiritual withdrawal and reflection at the end of a demanding teaching year. Involvement in those activities by the nuns who participated was a way of reaffirming their commitment, not just to their particular work and individual communities but also to their common membership in the Society.
At the same time, Teresa was one of those who had seized the opportunities for change after Vatican II. She was not typical of many of the members of the Society; she did not enter the convent until she was forty-three years old and already held a doctorate in physics. In other ways she was representative of the experiences of her generation. Her family, of five brothers and four sisters, was from Asturias. In 1932, the year after the declaration of the Second Republic, she enrolled in the University of Oviedo. During the years of the Civil War, she left Spain to live with her emigrant grandparents in Buenos Aires, thus avoiding the immediate horrors, though not the ideological conflicts, of those years. Her contact with the Society of the Sacred Heart came about subsequently when she was working as a section head at the Institute of Scientific Research in Madrid and was asked to supervise the thesis of one of the nuns of the Society. She entered the Congregation in 1955, at a time when the meaning and forms of religious life seemed immutable.

These included a career path that was normal for members of the Society at that time, both in Spain and elsewhere. After two and a half years in the novitiate at Chamartin—a time when the novices numbered as many as 100—she made her first vows in 1958. She moved then through another stage of religious training—the juniorate—to take charge of the studies in the juniorate itself and of classes in the school at Chamartin. She was later sent to teach at Pío XII, another school in Madrid belonging to the Society. All these moves were undertaken within a framework of obedience.

Within this general pattern of religious development and understanding, Teresa Vigón made her final vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability at the central house of the Society in Rome in 1963. This, as was customary, was after a six-month period of reflection and spiritual renewal—probation—shared with a group of young nuns of the Society from around the world. Her period in Rome coincided with the sessions of Vatican II, and Teresa and her fellow probationists knew the considerations of the bishops.

Teresa herself described the changes then occurring as ‘turbulent’ (choquante). Nevertheless, in 1972 she chose, with the approval of the provincial, to join the community of Torrejón de Ardoz, an industrial area of high unemployment and, at that time, an American base. She explained her reasons:

It was work in the school in the barrio. But after a lot of hassles in planning a school, they took the site from us. This led to another situation and a moment of decision. Most of the community moved away, leaving only two of us. Eventually, others joined us and we are now five. At the beginning, we continued to give classes in Pío XII in the mornings. But after four or five years, they told us there that we would have to stay for the full day, so we resigned. Our struggle was for
evening classes for external students in Torrejón. Now we have them, from 5 till 10 pm... We began with morning classes with boys and girls who had completed EGB [Educación General Básica, the eight years of compulsory schooling] without graduating. But the school threw them into the street because there were no places for them to continue. In the evening, we ran literacy classes for adults. Our objective—in all of our work here—is to avoid people being marginalised.

Teresa’s own desire to undertake a particular kind of work with marginalised young people had led her to an understanding of what she saw as her own special mission within the Society and within the Church, a mission that was embodied for her in her community and work in Torrejón. This was carried out within the structures, including the exercise of obedience, that continued to operate in the province. At the same time, her option for this place and this community involved a far more direct choice on her part than her earlier assignments to teach in Chamartin and Pío XII.

As well as the Adult Education Centre, of which Teresa was principal at the time of her death, members of the Torrejón community were involved in a number of other programs. The Adult Education Centre had previously been a work belonging to the Society but was no longer so. One of the community’s other main responsibilities was a Special Education Centre. Queen Sofia officially opened its new building in 1983. The Special Education Centre was run mainly under the auspices of the Association of Parents of the Handicapped, with some involvement of the Ministry of Social Security. Teresa was involved as secretary of the centre. Her death, therefore, involved not just her own community and the other members of the province, but also people in the barrio with whom she had worked closely in her years in Torrejón. They held their own special Mass for her the day after her death.

I had visited the Torrejón community several times, talking, sharing meals and attending their places of work. I spent a morning watching Teresa teach maths to a class of children from the barrio. In Australia, I had been introduced to Cuisinere, a method using coloured rods of different lengths to teach mathematical concepts and skills to primary schoolchildren. I had been excited by its potential but disappointed at the failure by teachers to exploit it fully. Teresa used Cuisinere superlatively, and it was a revelation to observe the mathematical competence of the children.

The day after her death, I spent some time with the nuns who were keeping vigil beside Teresa’s body. For many, including me, it was the first time they had seen one of their members laid out for burial without being clothed in the religious habit. Instead, Teresa’s head and body were covered in a white shroud, leaving her face and one hand uncovered. Her hand was laid on her breast
and held her crucifix of vows, an ongoing symbol, within the radical changes that had occurred, of the religious commitment that Teresa Vigón had made and maintained as a member of the Society of the Sacred Heart to the person of Jesus Christ.

The requiem Mass was held on the following day in the main Chamartin chapel. I joined the large congregation of family, friends, nuns and students for a ritual that expressed both continuity and change. As had been the case since the implementation of Vatican II’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the Mass was in Spanish, not in Latin. Its basic form remained the same as it had been for centuries, though with greater participation by the congregation. But unlike the solemn rituals of earlier decades, there was no rehearsed choir intoning in Latin the stern warnings of the *Dies Irae*:

Day of wrath and doom impending,  
Heaven and earth in ashes ending!

Instead, the whole congregation joined in the vernacular hymns, chosen by Teresa’s community to reflect her own understanding of her religious commitment in the world. The Mass began with a hymn, ‘We are a people on a journey’ (*un pueblo que camina*); the last expressed the new meaning of the relationship between earth and heaven:

Towards you, holy dwelling,  
towards you, land of the Saviour,  
pilgrims, travellers, we journey towards you.

Afterwards, I drove with Socorro Duarte and others to the Cemetery of San Justo for the burial. Originally, Chamartin had its own cemetery but that had long been closed and the Society owned plots in a number of different public cemeteries. In a simple ceremony, Teresa was buried in one of these. There were fewer nuns present at the burial than at the requiem mass; their presence marked their personal friendships with Teresa and their sorrow at her loss—‘one of the really good ones’. Carmen Vega, who saw herself as ‘not someone who cries easily. I cried’.

Teresa’s death and burial not only combined the religious and the secular. They also made clear the extent to which the religious meaning of both, and of her life as a religious, had changed since she had entered the Society. She had shared the ‘religious awakening’ of others in the province in the wake of Vatican II. She had translated that religious awakening into a social and political awakening in her choice to join the Torrejón community and work. She had maintained the personal commitment to social justice that she shared with the rest of her
community, as well as the internal democracy of the group: they were one of the *piso* communities who refused to appoint a local Superior. She explained on one of my visits to Torrejón:

Our purpose in coming here was in order to live community life with a small group. But this ended up being not the most important thing of all. The most important thing of all—and this is incredibly important—was that the reality of the *barrio* took hold of us. It was the people who took hold of us, their problems. It was a political moment, with the Neighbourhood Associations [Asociaciones de Vecinos], before the death of Franco, and we became involved.

**Autonomy and modernity**

As in the rest of the province, Teresa’s journey to personal autonomy was inextricably joined with political developments in Spain, with the dictatorship of Franco, its opposition and its end, with the country’s program for modernisation, and with the transition to democracy. The impetus for change had certainly come from within the Church, but its realisation was also political and secular. As with her sisters’, Teresa’s development as an autonomous subject did not happen in isolation. It took its place and shape in relation to others. Habermas suggests that subjectivity alone is not the key principle of modernity, but rather subjectivity in communication—what he calls communicative action. He argues that the knowing self finds its place not in abstract consciousness but in mutual interaction and understanding. The encounter of the subject with the other is fundamental; ‘one is a self only among other selves’. As Teresa made clear, the definitive change for her, as for many of the nuns, arose from her encounter with different others: the working class, the poor, the marginalised, but also with the politically active. As Teresa was changing, so too were the conditions of those others with whom she was engaged. The same can be said for Paloma Morales in Las Palmas, for Mari Carmen Jiménez Delgado in Galicia, for Manu Negrín in Granada. But it can also be said of those whose transformation was less obviously dramatic but no less fundamental: Rosario León with her openness to new challenges, Socorro Duarte in her willingness to recognise the need to change, Marta de Vera in her resistance to the re-emerging regime of obedience and of greater provincial control.

By 1983, it was no longer possible for these women to sacrifice their autonomy without challenging the core values that they had come to embrace, just as

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it was no longer possible for Spain to return to military rule or dictatorship. The worlds of the nuns and of Spain were no longer separate worlds, and the world had moved on. The failure of Tejero’s attempted coup of 23 February 1981 had proved that the country was finally on an irreversible path to democracy and modernity. King Juan Carlos had used his position and his power to define the monarchy as modern rather than traditional and to ensure the transition to democracy. Spain’s residual tensions remained, with nostalgia on the right for the certainties of the past, and ETA continuing its violent campaign for Basque independence. Sections of the military continued to work for the resuscitation of their coup, but in the years following 23 February most of the officer corps had shifted to what was known as the ‘prudent sector’.16 And of course older generals finally retired and died, including failed coup plotter General Jaime Milans del Bosch, who died in Madrid in 1997.

For the nuns, too, there remained tensions between the religious and the secular interpretations of the good. These were exacerbated by the conservatism of the Church under Pope John Paul II, and by the attempts under Dolores Álvarez Román as Provincial to reimpose a narrower religious meaning on the nuns’ understanding of the good. But the attempt was based on the invocation of obedience in a form that required an unquestioning submission of personal autonomy and, for some, of individual conscience. For most, this was unacceptable. It was unacceptable because they saw it as once again attempting to divorce their understanding of the good from their commitment to achieving a good society. Their belief in the possibility of a good society was founded in their religious understanding of the world, but their vision was shaped by a secular understanding of social justice. For them, a good life was no longer possible if it did not include working for a good life also for the poor and the marginalised.

Perhaps the most important achievement for these women was to integrate consciously their striving for a good society with their search for spiritual perfection. In so doing, they gave a more complex meaning to one of the key criteria of modernity: that is, that modernity ‘has to create its normativity out of itself’.17 In drawing on their moral source, the nuns refused to make a distinction between their religious beliefs and their belief in social justice and in the fundamental bond of common humanity. They had inserted themselves into the secular world in order to make it sacred.

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17 Habermas (1990: 7).