Twice Cured

By Ed Kelly

Ever since Santander Bishop Juan Antonio del Val launched his new investigation of the Garabandal apparitions, there has been a great deal of interest in the outcome of this new inquiry which, from all reports, is just about complete. Among the criteria used for judging the authenticity of events such as these, are cures resulting from them. The following case bears a lot of weight in this regard since it happened right in Santander among members of the medical profession and consequently is well documented.

(This article is based on a 1978 interview conducted by Father Francis Benac, S.J., with Dr. Angelo Alvarez and his wife, Menchu.)

It was 1965. Menchu was just 15 days out of the hospital where she had undergone a terrible ordeal. Now she was determined to get the most out of life and was making the party rounds when she met the young doctor who was eventually to become her husband. Dr. Alvarez was interested in Menchu but she cautioned him that in the hospital she had been pronounced incurable, had been given the Last Rites but was somehow miraculously cured. He laughed it off. “Bah! They were mistaken.”

“Don’t say that Angel. Some day you might have to eat those words.”

The Cure

Menchu Mendiolera was a fun-loving 18-year-old with a lively sense of humor leading a normal life and happy finally to be out of school, where she was, in her own words, a “troublemaker, a real disaster.” One day upon returning to her home in Santander from Madrid, she began to feel ill. Spots had formed on her body so she went to see Doctor Tresmares. He diagnosed a disease called *thrombocytopenic purpura*. There was a diminution in her blood of platelets, colorless discs necessary for coagulation, so he put her on cortisone. It was serious all right but if she followed the prescribed treatment and took good care of herself she should recover, so said the doctor.

Menchu followed the doctor’s orders but saw that she was only getting worse instead of better. Hospitalized at Valdecilla, her condition became critical as she lapsed into a coma that was to last for 17 days. Blood transfusions proved fruitless and the hospital director informed the parents that there was nothing more they could do for her. A Carmelite priest was notified and administered Extreme Unction.

The day Menchu was anointed and still in the coma, a family friend brought a crucifix kissed by Our Lady at Garabandal with the instructions that it be venerated and the intercession of the Virgin of Garabandal be sought. At the same time, a nun brought some needles from one of the pine trees at Garabandal.

When the crucifix with the instructions was given to Menchu’s father, a pious man, her mother exclaimed, “Ah, Dios mio! Let’s see if this is true. Let’s pray.”

Mr. Mendiolera then asked everyone present, their family and the group of Menchu’s friends, all young people, to pray including the Carmelite priest, also present, who had been with Menchu every night.

At the conclusion of the prayers, Menchu opened her eyes and began to move. The doctors were immediately called. Blood samples were taken which showed the platelets had increased. The doctors suggested she be taken home to recuperate in familiar surroundings before returning to the hospital for an operation to remove the spleen.

Eight days later, Menchu was back at Valdecilla for a checkup to see if she had enough platelets and red cells in the blood for the operation to be performed. Tests showed some 300,000 platelets and it was determined that no operation was necessary. She was cured.

Ten Years Later

By 1975, the Álvarezes had two children and Menchu was in her eighth month expecting their third when spots again appeared all over her body. She became severely anemic and was admitted to the hospital and diagnosed as having very few platelets. The red cells were down and her anemia was more serious.

It was suspected that her illness was the same as the first but one of the problems now was to see if the pregnancy had to be terminated. It was feared that since she didn’t have sufficient platelets, the placenta could become dislodged in giving birth. There could be a massive hemorrhage and more complications. But there was the problem of delivering the baby. It was also decided to take out the spleen.

The surgeons were consulted and said it was technically possible.

While the doctors were still trying to decide the best course of action, Menchu was given cortisone and blood transfusions. Then what her husband, Dr. Álvarez, had feared the most, happened. While talking with a colleague he said, “I’m afraid she hardly has any platelets left. Only 300 or so were counted. I’m afraid the placenta will become dislodged and she’ll start to bleed.” The other doctor responded,
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"Don’t worry. You can leave now, with the assurance that every precaution will be taken."

Dr. Alvarez no sooner left the hospital than Menchu started to bleed, not much, but she started to bleed. The surgery planned for the next day had to be done at once. Platelets had to be prepared and friends had to be contacted to donate blood. Around midnight she was moved and made ready for the operation.

In the morning, after a coagulation count was found acceptable, she was taken to the operating room where a cesarean section was performed. (A baby girl was born premature and died shortly thereafter.)

Up to this point all had gone well but then after about an hour, Menchu took a sudden turn for the worse. Dr. Alvarez immediately informed his colleagues, the hematologists and the surgeons who performed the operation. Menchu’s condition continued to deteriorate and she went into shock. She was moved to intensive care but her condition remained serious. She went into shock again. The crisis passed but then came the worst part, the diagnosis. Dr. Alvarez was informed that his wife had acute erythremia, the equivalent of leukemia only it involved the red cells and thus the outcome would be fatal. Patients with this disease last no more than a couple of months or a year at the most.

Garabandal

Menchu had been operating on at the Residencia Cantabria but now in the post-operative state was back at Valdecilla. It was at this stage that Menchu’s parents started talking about Garabandal. Not much attention had been given to the first cure and the parents entertained thoughts that perhaps because due credit had not been given to the intervention of the Virgin of Garabandal, the disease had returned.

Dr. Alvarez had certainly not paid much attention to the first cure of his wife but now that the situation was hopeless from a medical standpoint, he was ready to try anything, "perhaps grabbing at the last thread," as he put it.

The entire hematology team as well as the pathologists and their assistants and the team of Dr. Garcia Conde, head of the department of internal medicine (also a hematologist), the doctors of general surgery and the obstetricians for the cesarean section plus the lab technicians were involved in the case. Every attempt was made to see that perhaps some other diagnosis could be given. But the consensus of the doctors was the same—acute erythremia.

The family decided to invoke the Virgin of Carmel of Garabandal. A medal kissed by Our Lady had been sent through Jacinta, one of the seers. Dr. Alvarez didn’t give it much importance but began to think to himself, "If this is true then perhaps there is a way... or maybe it’s nothing at all."

Everyone started to pray including Dr. Alvarez who had not practiced his religion since he was a schoolboy. One day while they were praying, Dr. Alvarez suddenly got the urge to go to Garabandal even though he didn’t know where it was. He asked his brother-in-law if he knew how to get there. When he answered, yes, Dr. Alvarez responded, "Well, I want to go."

Unusual Confidence

Before making the trip, an interesting thing happened. Dr. Alvarez recalled his conversation with his colleagues:

I spoke with a good friend of mine, Dr. Garrio, the chief of section, and said something like, "I don’t know why but this [invoking the Virgin of Garabandal] is going to change everything; that there is going to be a change for the better." Dr. Garrio responded, "Oh, if that were only true!" I asked him what he would think if it did happen and he said, "Well, either we’ve made a mistake [in our diagnosis] or it would be a miracle."

It couldn’t have been more than five minutes after this conversation took place when Dr. Zubizarreta, the chief of service, came by and Garrio said to him, "Listen to what our friend is saying," and he told him of my contention. I then told them both that very soon they would be in a surprise and I remember being very certain and calm despite the fact that this was no joking matter.

Ed Kelly, right, with Menchu’s father outside one of Mr. Mendolesa’s stores in Santander.
"There he was most impressed to find a man kneeling in prayer with his arms outstretched in the form of a cross."
While visiting his native country in 1979, Spanish Jesuit Father Francis Benac, right, national director of the Garabandal movement in India where he is a missionary, conducted the interview with Dr. Alvarez and his wife, Menchu. The interview was conducted at the home of Dr. Andres Garcia de Tuñon, left, who was working in the same hospital as Dr. Alvarez when Menchu was cured and who became a believer in Garabandal as a result of it. In the center is Placido Rulbba, great witness to the Garabandal events (he saw over 1,000 ecstasies), who was also present at the interview and gave Ed Kelly a copy of the audio tape that was used as the basis for this story.

Then Zubizarreta put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Well, it’s good that you have high hopes but it’s my duty to remind you again that your wife’s situation is very bad and that there is nothing we can do for her.” I answered, “Yes, yes, but it’s my duty to tell you that I believe there is going to be a great change. What would you say to that, Zubizarreta?” And he said, “Chico (my young friend), that would be a miracle.” I responded, “I believe you’re going to have to sign your name to that statement.” And I said it smiling and confidently.

The Trip to Garabandal
On December 7, 1975, Dr. Alvarez and Javier, his brother-in-law, left for Garabandal. It was a very cold, icy day, so cold that the doctor had trouble starting the car. Menchu knew nothing of all this.

When they arrived in Garabandal, Javier went into a little cafe to have some breakfast, but the doctor wasn’t interested in eating and went straight up to the pines. There he was most impressed to find, at 10:00 o’clock in the morning on this bitterly cold day, a man kneeling motionless in prayer with his arms outstretched in the form of a cross.

Dr. Alvarez began praying the rosary as best he could. He didn’t have the beads and had forgotten the mysteries so just counted off the ten Hail Marys of each decade on his fingers. When he finished, he went down to the village, picked up Javier and went to the car for the drive back to Santander. As they were driving down the mountain, he said to Javier, “Menchu is cured.” (In the 1978 interview, Father Benac asked him, “What did you feel up there to say such a thing?” Instead of answering, he buried his face in his hands and started to weep. The tape recorder was turned off momentarily to respect his emotion and secret.) Javier just looked at him as if to say, ‘this guy must be crazy. Perhaps living through this crisis was starting to affect his way of thinking.’

They arrived back at Valdecilla but Dr. Alvarez didn’t say anything to anyone. Every day Menchu was given a spinal tap so he wanted to wait until the following day to see the results. He was convinced the blood count would be good. On the previous day, tests showed 500 to 1,000 platelets.

December 8th, feast of the Immaculate Conception, is a national holiday in Spain and Dr. Alvarez couldn’t find anyone at the hospital. Finally he went to the cafeteria. There, he met the hematologist who was on duty. Confidently he asked, “And the analysis of my wife, what did it show?”

“Oh, yes. She is doing very well indeed. She has some 30,000 platelets.”

Dr. Alvarez said he was expecting that but wanted them to confirm it. With acute erythema there are malignant cells but from the moment the cure took effect they started to diminish, the platelets went up and “amen” the cancer was finished. He remembered the reaction of his colleagues.

Then I went to talk to [Dr.] Zubizarreta, the chief of hematology and said, “What do you say now.” He shrugged his shoulders not knowing what to say and stammered, “Well, well I, I don’t know what to say to you; if it weren’t your wife…”

They had analyzed the spleen and the blood, first the pathologist and then the hematologists and both of them by different means arrived at the same conclusion—acute erythema. People must realize all of these were my colleagues who went to great lengths for Menchu, that is, they all had analyzed her carefully doing everything to avoid coming to the conclusion that it was erythema, but that was the verdict. And now seeing her well, perplexed them. But I told them over and over again, “Don’t worry, you weren’t mistaken; what happened was that ‘somebody’ wanted to change the development of the case and that’s it, it’s that simple.”

Dr. Alvarez changed a great deal after his wife’s cure, returning to the practice of his faith and reciting the rosary every day. Menchu for her part, has been to Garabandal to give thanks on more than one occasion although she knows very little about the events and never became involved in any way. The times she has gone up to Garabandal were only to pray and then leave. She never met any of the seers or ever sat down to talk with anyone.

When Menchu and Dr. Alvarez first became serious about each other (after Menchu’s first cure), she gave him a medal kissed by Our Lady at Garabandal. At the time, he wore it only to please her. He is still wearing it today.