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## De Gracia, Máximo Palacio (1913–2014)

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Máximo De Gracia Palacio was a pioneer, an evangelist, an outstanding preacher, and the founder of more than 12 churches in Panama.

## Early Years

Máximo De Gracia Palacio was born on October 15, 1913, in the community of Tijeras in the province of Chiriquí in the Republic of Panama.<sup>1</sup> His parents were Faustino Palacio and Antonia De Gracia. He was the youngest of the four children--Francisca, Querubín, and Sara.

## Education and Youth

At first, he attended elementary school. However, as soon as he learned to read and write, he dropped out of school--at that point, he was eight years old. From then on, his time was spent next to his father on "the farm," a plot of land of 11 acres where they planted rice, corn, yucca, beans, and watermelons, or in the carpentry shop where they made tables, beds, and countless pieces of wooden furniture for their home. Both activities also provided the financial means for family sustenance.

One day, taking advantage of his father's absence, he saw the old guitar that a neighbor had brought to have repaired. He took it in his young hands, looked it over, checked it out musically, and fell in love with it. In a short time, he had completely disassembled it and concluded that it was extremely easy to make a new one. That was the beginning of their factory that produced excellent handmade guitars, and they were characterized by the incomparable sound they made when someone was playing them.<sup>2</sup>

Not content with just making guitars, he made the decision to learn to play them as well, and so, in every free moment, you could find him practicing chords, rhythms, and cheerful sounds. After talking with his cousin Ángel De Gracia, who played the mandolin very well, they both agreed to form an ensemble that played dance music. From that moment on, they played night after night, from party to party, from dance to dance. Days, months, and years went by from the farm to the carpentry and from the carpentry to playing, from winter to winter, and from summer to summer.

## Marriage

In 1937, at the age of 24, he met a very beautiful young woman in his community. He began to court her and promptly proposed that she would "go with him." That was the custom of the time. Everyone all around him had done this, including his grandparents, parents, friends, and neighbors.

It seemed they couldn't wait, though. On the agreed night, while everyone slept, they agreed that this young woman would leave her house with her belongings and move into her young husband's house. The next day, it surprised all their relatives to see that the fiancée had left the paternal house, thus indicating the beginning of a new family. That's exactly what happened. Isabel Gonzalez became the faithful and selfless woman who accompanied him throughout his life.<sup>3</sup>

## Studying the Bible

With the new responsibility of taking care of his young bride, Máximo's evening outings with his cousin quickly reduced in number. For cousin Angel, this became very boring, so he decided to move to La Concepción, a center of commerce and a place with many people.

On one occasion, he heard in the central park someone announcing that a preacher would be speaking in the Adventist Church. Since it was boring because now at night there was nothing interesting to do, he decided to listen to the preacher. He did not miss a single night! What he heard he found was incredible for they were things that, until then, were unknown to him!

Astounded by what he heard, he decided to visit his former "teammate." Ángel was excited, not by the dance music, but by the music the good news of salvation produced in his ears. After much searching, they found an old, dusty Bible in a trunk. That night, they lit the kerosene lamp and together began the exciting journey of reading the Word of God, learning about sacrifice, forgiveness, and the soon return of Jesus.

They found out what the days of worship were and very soon Máximo, Elizabeth, and Ángel, the cousin, were attending the Adventist Church at Conception every Sabbath. The guitar and the old mandolin now changed the stage they performed on, and instead of dancing, they were encouraging those in the singing services and all the activities that the church held.

In 1940, being aware that only the truth would make them free from sin, Isabel and Máximo formally joined their lives in marriage and were later baptized by Pastor Christianson in the Adventist Church of La Concepción, Chiriquí.

In 1948, leaders arrived from the Pacific Press publishing house that was located in the province of Colon in Panama. They were looking for workers to help in the process of compiling the books that were produced there. Shortly thereafter, Máximo, Isabel, and cousin Ángel traveled some 500 kilometers to work for this publisher.

In 1953, this prestigious publishing house moved to the United States. All three of them were selected to be part of the staff that would move to North America. Although the financial offer was very attractive, Máximo did not accept

this proposal. He confidently decided to return to Chiriqui, his hometown, to his people, to preach!

Upon returning to Chiriqui, he served in the church as a deacon, group leader, treasurer, elder, Bible instructor, and evangelist. Together with José Del Carmen Santamaría, Clemente Castillo, Raúl Quintero, and cousin Ángel, they began to visit different communities and hamlets, giving Bible studies in the homes of interested people. Whether there was rain or sunshine, Máximo was there. During cold or heat, in dust or mud-- nothing stopped him. He preached with love and passion.

During that time, the community consisted mostly of Catholics. Although not all were practitioners of this religion, they heard these three men saying these "strange and different things." On several occasions, several locals armed themselves with stones and attacked them. Instead of frightening and discouraging them, these incidents encouraged them more. Fire and passion were their lives--fire for preaching, passion for sharing their new faith.

One night, when they had finished their Bible studies, they found to their unpleasant surprise that the seats of the bicycles on which they were riding had been soiled with feces. That night, men from the village hid behind trees and bushes to enjoy the spectacle, watching three preachers pushing the bicycles without being able to ride them.

They also had "encounters" with the leaders of different churches, where each person professed his or her beliefs. Verses came and went. The tones of voice sometimes were raised. The faces of the participants reddened, causing a real spectacle since many people gathered to see who "won."

The principal character of this story, "Don Man" what Máximo's friends called him, was invited to these "religious duels." Máximo's great ability to memorize biblical texts and quotations was noteworthy; he was also able to give excellent biblical interpretations since he was an assiduous reader of Ellen White's books. He "won" these debates several times because of the many texts he could recite from memory. One of the most outstanding presentations was when he confronted the people's priest, and they debated about "Sabbath or Sunday." Having nothing in the Bible to support him, the priest soon became very angry and, rising abruptly from his chair, he said, "Let's leave this here...let's leave this here." Thus, little by little, he earned his reputation as a man who knew the Bible.

De Gracia preached his message to Laureano Martínez, Basilio Hernández, Arístides Gonzáles and, as a result, more than 1,000 people were baptized by his ministry. Laureano Martínez excelled at preaching in the area where he lived, from the community of La Estrella to the border with Costa Rica. Mr. Basilio Hernandez taught and preached in Volcán and Cerro Punta.

By visiting, encouraging, and preaching, Máximo gained the respect, admiration, and affection of those who knew him. He was the founder of the Adventist churches in San Pablo, Macano, Cerro Cabuya, Cerro Colorado, Boquerón, Vitalac, Tijeras, Tres Ángeles, El Tejar, Alanje, and Guarumal.

## Later Life

On his 100th birthday, his voice continued to be easily heard and very audible, his mind was clear, and he could tell stories with extraordinary detail. He never retired from preaching. He witnessed to everyone who visited him at his home. His dedication and voluntary missionary work were recognized by the Church. On April 30, 2009, he received a tribute and a plaque thanking him for his work from the Panama Adventist Conference.

Máximo De Gracia died in the same community that saw him grow and that heard him preach for more than 100 years on January 13, 2014, surrounded by family and friends.

## Legacy

Máximo De Gracia is recognized as one of the pioneers of the West Panama Conference. As a result of the Bible studies he gave, the visits he made, and the evangelistic campaigns he held, today there are 12 congregations, and they have almost 1,000 members.

When he worked at Pacific Press in Colón, he dedicated himself to preaching in Cativá. Five families were baptized. Today, a beautiful church with more than 800 members is there. The Boqueron II district has 12 churches started by Máximo De Gracia: Alanje, Tijeras, Tres Angeles, Tejar de Alanje, Guarumal, Varital Este, San Pablo, Cerro Cabuya, Cerro Colorado, Macano, and Boqueron.<sup>2</sup>

## SOURCES

Secretariat Report, 2017. West Panama Conference office, David, Chiriqui, Panama.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. Information in this article was obtained in interview with Máximo De Gracia's wife Isabel González De Gracia, and his son, Pastor José De Gracia

González, who was the president of the Panama Union in 2018.?

2. Secretariat Report, 2017. West Panama Conference.?

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