

Obituary: Francisco Sánchez Martínez (1936-2025)

José Franco 



Francisco “Paco” Sánchez. Photo: Pepe Franco

Francisco Sánchez Martínez - Paco Sánchez, as known by friends - was born on 16 May 1936 in Toledo, Spain, and died on 21 October 2025 in Madrid, Spain. Paco was a key player in the flourishing of modern astrophysics in Spain, and his main legacy in the field was twofold. First, he carried out magnificent scientific diplomacy to rally the support of several European nations for scientific projects in the Canary Islands, thereby establishing, as his second legacy, a world-class astronomical infrastructure in Spain. He was the founder of the *Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias* in 1975, as well as the two major international observatories that are now operating in the Canary Islands: the *Teide Observatory*, inaugurated in 1964 on the island of Tenerife and dedicated primarily to the study of the Sun, and the *Roque de los Muchachos Observatory*, inaugurated in 1985 on the island of La Palma, where telescopes from several European countries and the 10.4 m *Gran Telescopio Canarias*, currently the largest in the world in the visible and infrared ranges, were installed. These two observatories now make up the so-called *Northern European Observatory*.

Paco earned his bachelor’s degree in Physics from the *Complutense University of Madrid* in 1960. The following year, and recently married, he traveled to Tenerife for the first time, hired by the *Universidad de La Laguna* (ULL) to work on the development of the Teide Observatory (which had existed only on paper since its creation decree in 1959) and to support the *Izaña Atmospheric Observatory*, which belonged to the *Ejército del Aire* (Spanish Air Force). His work at the ULL and the Izaña Observatory allowed him to measure the transparency and stability of the Canary Islands sky, which in turn allowed him to promote it to governments and astronomy centers in Spain and the rest of Europe. In 1964, he reached an agreement with the *University of Bordeaux*, France, to install the first 30-cm telescope dedicated to observing zodiacal light, thus officially inaugurating the Teide Observatory. This led to his doctoral thesis, a study on the interplanetary medium and zodiacal light, directed by Rene Dumont and presented in 1969 at the *Complutense University of Madrid*.

His results showed the excellent quality of the sky in Tenerife, allowing him to attract more telescopes, which led him to create the *Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias*. In the late 1970s, construction work on the *Roque de los*

Muchachos Observatory in La Palma began, where, beginning in the early 1980s, a series of important European telescopes were installed. In 1988, to preserve the quality of the sky at the observatories, he persuaded the Spanish Parliament to pass a Law for the Protection of the Canary Islands Sky, limiting the impact of public lighting on the darkness required for astronomical research. The most recent and largest-aperture telescope at the site, the *Gran Telescopio Canarias*, inaugurated in 2009, was built by a consortium of institutions from Spain, Mexico, and the United States¹.

Paco's relationship with Mexico began in the early 1980s, when he visited the *Observatorio Astronómico Nacional* in San Pedro Mártir, Baja California, to learn from its experiences. The visit also allowed him to learn about the culture and development of astronomy in Mexico. Later, in the 1990s, he established collaborative projects with researchers from the Institute of Astronomy at UNAM and the National Institute of Astrophysics, Optics, and Electronics in Puebla, Mexico. This led to Mexico's participation in the construction and commissioning of the *Gran Telescopio Canarias*, as well as in the design and construction of several of its instruments. Moreover, to strengthen collaboration between Spanish and Mexican groups, he and Alfonso Serrano Pérez-Grovas signed an agreement for the simultaneous use of the *Gran Telescopio Canarias* and the *Large Millimeter Telescope* in joint projects. Also, in 2004, together with José Franco, he created the *Encuentros de Astrofísica Avanzada Blas Cabrera*, a series of international conferences to define scientific and instrumentation projects for the *Gran Telescopio Canarias*. In addition, several Mexican universities were visited to encourage the creation of astrophysics departments, which led to the creation of the astrophysics groups currently in existence at the *Instituto Politécnico Nacional* and the *Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León*. Thus, Paco Sánchez's influence is felt to this day in the astrophysics currently being developed in Mexico, and we will also remember him fondly as a generous and warm friend with a great sense of humor.

¹An autobiographical account of the science diplomacy and construction periods can be found in his book *Soñando Estrellas, así nació y se consolidó la Astrofísica en España* (Sánchez Martínez, F. 2019, Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias)