

GOOD FRIDAY 2019

HOMILY – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

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A VIA DOLOROSA...A WAY OF SORROWS



Good Friday...the ultimate test of Jesus' resolve...what he was willing to suffer and endure for us. This is the one day in the Church Year about which there is nothing humorous.

For one young Mexican boy who had his own resolve tested...suffering and endurance were transformed from the abstract into the all too real. He showed how far he was willing to go for Christ...and it cost him his life.

It's February 6, 1928 in the small town of Sahuayo, Michoacan State, Mexico. Christianity was declared illegal four years earlier. The parish church of Saint James the Apostle has been turned into a stable for horses. Soldiers have broken apart its ornate wooden altar into pieces to be used for firewood...the parish priest has gone into hiding for fear of his life.

Outside the desecrated church building, Jose Luis Sanchez del Rio, Aged 14, has been arrested by the Federal Police. His crime: fighting against the atheist government...and publically professing Jesus Christ as his King. Soldiers order Jose to renounce his faith in Christ...he refuses and is subjected to beatings and name-calling.

His own godfather...a political figure in the town...berates the boy but promises he will be released and able to go home to his parents if he will just say, "Death to the Christ the King." Jose responds, "Long live Christ the King!"

The soldiers attempt to break Jose's resolve by forcing him to watch as a classmate is hung from a tree for refusing to renounce his belief in God. Jose tells his friend to have courage...they will soon see each other again in heaven.

Jose is taken to a jail cell. Along the way the Federal Police and soldiers push and kick him and call him more terrible names. They curse the Name of Jesus...they are unable to break the boy's resolve. That night he is allowed to write a letter to his mother:

My dear mother:

I was made a prisoner in battle today. I think I will die soon, but I do not care, mother. Resign yourself to the will of God. I will die happy because I die on the side of our God. Do not worry about my death, which would mortify me. Tell my brothers to follow the example that their youngest brother leaves them, and do the will of God. Have courage and send me your blessing along with my father's.

Send my regards to everyone one last time and finally receive the heart of your son who loves you so much and who wanted to see you before dying.

Jose Sanchez del Rio

Perhaps Jose was thinking about the Blessed Mother...Jesus tried to comfort her as she watched the events of that first Good Friday play out. He told her to embrace John as her son...he told John to take care of his mother as if she was his own.

The following morning Jose is taken back to the desecrated parish church. Once again his godfather tries to get the boy to renounce his faith in God by offering him a place at a prestigious military school...Jose is offended at the offer and replies, "I'd rather die first. I will not go with those monkeys! Never with those persecutors of the Church!"

It's now February 10, 1928. Frustrated and angry...Jose's godfather orders the boy's execution. He wants it done quietly...but the soldiers want to make a very public example of Jose. They first tie him to a bench in the church sacristy...there they slowly cut the soles of his feet with a knife. And they continue to beat him. With each cut and blow Jose cries, "Long live Christ the King!"

Jose is forced to walk several hours through the town from the church to the cemetery. Jose has begun his own very real *Via Dolorosa...Way of Sorrows*. His feet bloodied...the soldiers continue to make fun of the boy...they shout out how much they hate God.

Jose's parents and some of his friends watch from a distance. His godfather makes one final attempt to get him to renounce his faith. Jose again shouts, "Long live Christ the King." The captain of the guard has had enough and plunges a knife into Jose's back.

As Jose lay bleeding and dying on the ground...a Federal Officer sarcastically asks him what he should tell his father. With his remaining strength, Jose uses his bloodied finger to draw a cross in the dirt. He can now only whisper, "Long live Christ the King." Furious at Jose's reply...the officer fires a bullet into the back of the boy's head...and then unceremoniously tosses his body into the grave.

Later that night some of Jose's friends locate the parish priest. Risking their own lives, they remove Jose's broken body from the grave and after giving it the final rites of the Church...rebury it in a secret location where they know it will be safe.

On November 20, 2005 Jose Luis Sanchez del Rio was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI. On October 16, 2016 he was canonized by Pope Francis I. Today the body of Saint Jose Luis Sanchez del Rio rests in a wooden tomb in the Church of Saint James the Apostle in his hometown of Sahuayo, Michoacan State, Mexico.

The story of this courageous Mexican boy named Jose is compelling...because of his young age...and his unwavering resolve and refusal to renounce Christ...and the courage he showed in facing eminent death. Consider the closing words to Hymn #70 with which we began today's Liturgy..."Learn of Jesus Christ to die." Jose exemplifies what those words mean.

It is unlikely any of us will face the kind of torture Jose Luis Sanchez del Rio endured because he proclaimed Jesus as his King. And that's precisely the point. We can come and go as we please...government officials didn't check our identification cards as we came into the church today...they didn't threaten us with arrest or execution. I didn't have to get approval from anyone to deliver this homily.

When the Church is openly persecuted and believers subjected to intimidation...the faith of those believers is strong and resilient. Persecution for Christ has never stopped the growth of the Church. The question we must ask ourselves is how are we supposed to respond when we find our faith ridiculed and mocked in more subtle ways. How do we respond when people shout, "Death to Jesus the King?"

We rake our religious freedom in this country for granted and in many ways we have it too easy. Following Christ isn't supposed to be easy...it requires commitment and determination on our part. It means we are to love others unconditionally and show compassion...while at the same time not back down when we find ourselves at odds with the normatives of the secular world. Saint John Paul II consistently said, "Be courageous. Do not be afraid."

Good Friday isn't supposed to be easy for us either. Our own *Via Dolorosa...Way of Sorrows*...has brought us to this very place as it does every year. And our parish church is dedicated to another Jose...our Patron Saint Joseph. He didn't hesitate to take action or risk his personal safety. He spent his life taking care of Mary and Jesus.

We're here today because this is the way we try to share in Jesus' Passion...although none of us can truly understand now during this lifetime what Jesus went through for us. But as we continue our journey to the foot of the cross...Good Friday must become for us more than an abstraction...it must become real...it must become the point that changes our lives forever.

Holy Week and the Church's Liturgies help explain why we are here...but for Good Friday to have a real impact on our lives it has to become for us more than a liturgical reenactment of the crucifixion. We have to experience Good Friday on a visceral level. We have to try to understand what it really meant on Palm Sunday when we proclaimed Jesus as our King...and what it means for us today as we watch our God and King die.

We confess our belief Jesus suffered, died and was buried in the Creed. How can God die? It is the *Divine Reversal* we often talk about on Good Friday. It is on the cross the suffering and endurance of all humanity and God's forgiveness come together. Jesus suffered and endured the humiliating execution of a common criminal...knowing it would ultimately lead to his resurrection...and our own. Our salvation is something only God himself could accomplish.

What do our hearts tell us? That's where we begin to get the real message of Good Friday. That's where we begin to understand...as Jose Luis Sanchez del Rio understood...the true message of the Gospel is hope for everlasting

life...the hope Jesus bought for us on the cross. Jose knew as Jesus showed us the *Via Dolorosa*...the *Way of Sorrows*...is ultimately the Way to Eternal Life.

It is that kind of intense visceral hope emanating from his heart that gave Jesus the courage and resolve to complete his mission. It is the same intense visceral hope emanating from our hearts that gives us courage and helps us understand Good Friday is about LIFE...not death...Jesus made certain of that when he died so we wouldn't have to stay dead. And hope defines our lives as followers of Christ.

Our Lenten Journey began on Ash Wednesday with ashes in the shape of the cross being placed on our foreheads. We remind ourselves that we are made from dust and we will return to dust...but through the cross we won't remain dust...we will be resurrected to eternal life. That's why in spite of the anguish and pain Jesus went through for us...we can continue to call Good Friday...GOOD!

Our spiritual *Via Dolorosa*...*Way of Sorrows*...is not yet complete. Jesus gave up his life for us but before he did that he gave us his Body and Blood in the Sacrament of the Altar...the giving of which we commemorated last night.

On the night before Jose Luis Sanchez del Rio was executed, the parish priest gave a consecrated host to the boy's aunt, who secretly passed it on to him in his prison cell. The boy died knowing he had one last opportunity during this lifetime to be united with Jesus in the Sacrament.

We will soon receive Holy Communion in one kind only...a reminder Jesus has given up the last drop of his blood for us...he has no more to give...he doesn't have to...his sacrifice is complete...once and for all time and for everyone.

If we find our faith and resolve tested we need to remind ourselves everything Jesus went through was for us. We must ask ourselves what more are we willing to do for him? We should be willing to do much more...and we must never be afraid of saying..."Long live Christ our King!"

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