

Homily for the feast of Blessed Juan María de la Cruz

First SCJ to be named blessed

Given by Fr. Jim Walters, SCJ, during a bilingual Mass celebrated at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology on September 22, 2016

“El rey Herodes se enteró de todos los prodigios que Jesús hacía y no sabía a qué atenerse...Y tenía curiosidad de ver a Jesús.” (“Herod heard about all that was happening and he was greatly perplexed...and he kept trying to see Jesus.”) Herod’s questioning has a much deeper significance than simple curiosity. Jesus and his disciples challenge Herod to examine the meaning of his own life and to recognize what is lacking.

Today we commemorate Blessed Juan María de la Cruz, SCJ, one of the 233 who were martyred during the years of civil strife in Spain and beatified by Pope St. John Paul II. ¿Qué significa hacerse mártir? ¿Cuánto le cuesta a uno? What does it mean to become a martyr? The martyr is called, in the words of Bishop Richard Sklba, “to offer a counter-cultural critique, a cultural “revolution” of values from within, not by violence from without.” This witness will perplex many and make them uncomfortable as the example of Christ and his disciples did to Herod.

Fr. Juan García Méndez who took the religious name, Juan María de la Cruz because of his devotion to the Blessed Virgin and St. John of the Cross, a native of his own city of Ávila. He was a Priest of the Sacred Heart and a martyr long before he was executed for the crime of being a priest. From 1931-36, the Catholic Church in Spain suffered one of the most difficult persecutions in its history. With the support of the Communist government in Catalonia, churches, seminaries, rectories, monasteries, and convents were sacked and destroyed. 13 bishops, 4, 184 priests, 2,365 religious brothers, 282 nuns and thousands of lay Catholics were murdered.

Fr. Juan was a person who trusted not so much in his own strength but rather in the strength of the Lord, a strength he discovered as a child growing up in a simple family deeply rooted in their faith. His deep and trusting love of the Sacred Heart led him to our Congregation. His devotion to the Eucharist and Eucharistic Adoration nourished his life of faith. On July 23, 1936, Fr. Juan witnessed men desecrating the Iglesia de los Juanes in the center of the city of Valencia. He shouted in protest. When the men heard his shouting, they said to each other, "he is a reactionary." He responded, "No. I am a priest." He was taken to the Modelo Jail in Valencia and subsequently, on August 23, 1936, together with nine other prisoners, was taken south of Valencia to be executed.

Fr. Juan's life and those many who were martyred with him challenge each of us as did the witness of Jesus and his disciples in today's gospel to rethink our baptismal call in radically different terms. Martyrs are ordinary men and women like us who are so convinced and deeply moved by the message of the gospel that they are willing to put their lives on the line. They are the ones who challenge us to reexamine our values in light of the gospel. They are the ones willing to risk their reputations and public opinion to speak and live the truth. Los encontramos en todas partes; aquellos que nos desafían a reexaminar nuestros valores en relación al evangelio, aquellos que no tienen miedo arriesgar su reputación hablando y viviendo la verdad. Their lives challenge us to examine the fears within us that hold us captive and prevent us from witnessing to the truth of the gospel wherever we find ourselves. We may rationalize our fears, convincing ourselves that it might not be prudent, it might make things worse, never realizing the great price we pay for our fear. No nos damos cuenta que el miedo nos esclaviza y no nos permite vivir y proclamar la verdad.

Hoy el evangelio y el ejemplo del Beato Juan María de la Cruz nos recuerdan que todos somos llamados a testimoniar la verdad por nuestras vidas, sea con la sangre o con el testimonio de nuestro vivir cotidiano, lo que proclamamos en cada celebración eucarística: "Cristo ha muerto, Cristo ha resucitado, Cristo de

Nuevo vendrá.” Today the message of the gospel and of the life of Blessed Juan María de la Cruz remind us that all of us are called to be martyrs, who, although we may never shed our blood, will daily be called to witness to the truth we proclaim at every Mass: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”