

Jesus Christ the King of Our Hearts
by Father Arturo Viguera

Today the Church celebrates the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. This important feast day in the Church calendar concludes the liturgical year. The Church, in her wisdom, has placed today's feast day at the end of the liturgical calendar to remind us that all the prayers of the Church, ultimately, not only move us to claim Jesus Christ as King of the Universe, but also, as King and ruler of our hearts. Today's feast day also serves as a preface of the new liturgical year, as next Sunday, the church will begin the season of Advent characterized by a two-fold movement of remembering the nativity of Jesus Christ and of preparing with joyful expectation for the second coming of Jesus Christ.

In today's first reading from Ezekiel, we hear the Lord telling the prophet that "I myself will look after and tend my sheep. As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among the scattered sheep, so I will tend my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they are scattered" (Ez 34:11-12). This description of Kingship is paradoxically different from the warrior kings who come to power as result of war or another violent event. The kingship of Our Lord is different, as it is characterized by love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and a complete trust in God's divine providence. In today's gospel reading, Jesus further defines the type of king He is and how He expects us to respond to His Kingship. This final discourse recorded in the Gospel of Matthew is the last will and testament of Jesus in which He lays down the fundamental manifesto of God's kingdom consisting of feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and imprisoned (Matthew 25:35-37). Jesus ends his last will and testament by telling us that He will never be the King of our hearts unless we serve those who live on the fringes of society. "Truly I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:45).

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 who, with a prophetic vision, was seeing that turbulent times were leading to the rise of secularism and various dictatorships in the world. People were abandoning their faith in Jesus Christ, and instead following the political dictatorial ideologies of the time. Pope Pius XI instituted this solemnity to get countries to respect the freedom of the Church and wanting leaders of nations to see that they were bound to give respect and honor to Christ (*Quas Primas* 31). The most important reason for Pope Pius the XI's in establishing this solemnity was to encourage the faithful, and to remind them that Christ must reign in their hearts, minds, wills, and bodies.

Shortly after the official declaration of the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, God providentially starts raising examples of holiness that give us a concrete example of what it means to allow Christ to reign in our hearts, minds and bodies. This happens literally in our front yard in Mexico. In the first two decades of the 20th century, the Catholic Church in Mexico begins a long period of persecution and suffering by the communist-leaning government who saw the Church as a threat to their political ideology and as the main culprit of all of Mexico's misfortunes. By 1926 the Mexican government intensified its attacks against the Church by shutting down Catholic schools. Church buildings and gathering halls were destroyed, public school attendance became mandatory, atheism was officially taught and religious insignias such as crucifixes, medals, statues, and pictures of Catholic saints were forbidden, even at home. God was also kicked out of the language by the government forbidding expressions such as *Adios* ("to God" and which also means "goodbye"), *si Dios quiere* ("if God wills"). People were fined if they used these types of expressions that had an implied reference to God.



Blessed Miguel Pro (1891-1927) moment before his martyrdom.

Priests were forced to register with the state and to swear an oath not to evangelize to prevent new converts to enter the Church. The faithful of the Mexican Church did not just sit idle as the Church was being persecuted. They responded by going out into the public square and by boldly proclaiming the universal teachings of the Catholic Church. On July 26, policemen in civilian clothes struck down a shopkeeper because he had committed a crime when posting a sign in the front of his shop that read "*Viva Cristo Rey!*" ("Long live Christ the King!"). Shortly after this incident, Mexico was crisscrossed by gigantic penitential processions, as big as 10,000 or even 15,000 faithful barefooted: some wearing crowns with thorns, imploring God's help for their country. The government did not tolerate these types of religious acts and met the pilgrims with machine guns and other violent means to disperse the processions. The first martyrs went to their heavenly home as the crowds peacefully carried on with numerous religious banners joyfully shouting and singing "Long Live Christ the King!". There were different periods of

active persecution and killings of Catholics in Mexico. By 1929 the Catholic Church had become an "underground" church where priests escaped persecution by going into hiding, protected by families who would help them to get to neighborhoods where they could celebrate the Mass for the faithful. One of these priests, who would wear different disguises in order to go about the neighborhoods to care for the faithful was Blessed Miguel Pro (1891-1927). Padre Pro was a Jesuit priest that was sent to study in Belgium in the early 1900s as Mexico was undergoing a revolution and things were starting to get dangerous for the Church. Miguel Pro was ordained a priest in 1925 in Belgium, and shortly after his ordination he requested to be sent

back to Mexico. In 1926 Fr. Pro arrived in Mexico City during a time when churches were being closed and priests were going into hiding as the persecution of the Church had become an official government policy.

Fr. Pro used different disguises to move about inconspicuously allowing him to conduct his ministry and to tend the troubled sheep who were being scattered among the wolves. Fr. Pro celebrated the Mass and administered the sacraments secretly in people's houses, and he was even able to bring new converts into the persecuted Church. Despite all the hardships that Fr. Pro faced, he maintained a joyful disposition and fully lived out the virtues of faith, hope and love in his underground ministry.

In 1927 Fr. Pro was falsely accused by the police of a bombing attempt and he became a wanted man. Shortly thereafter, Fr. Pro and his brother Humberto were handed over to the police. On November 23, 1927, they were taken from their jail cell. As Fr. Pro was walking toward the execution site holding his crucifix in one hand and a rosary in the other, one of the policemen who had helped to capture him a few days earlier, broke ranks and approached Fr. Pro in tears, begging the priest for forgiveness. Fr. Pro reached out to his betrayer and said, "Not only do I forgive you, I also give you thanks." When Fr. Pro along with other prisoners reached the place where lives would be taken, he asked permission to pray. Fr. Pro knelt before the wall riddled with bullet holes from previous executions. Claspings the crucifix and rosary next to his heart, Fr. Pro asked God for the grace of a holy death; he rose, kissed the crucifix, extended his arms in the form of a cross, and facing the firing squad said "May God have mercy on you. May God bless you. Lord, you know that I am innocent. With all my heart I forgive my enemies." Finally, as the firing squad began to take aim, Fr. Pro said in a calm and steady voice "*Viva Cristo Rey!*" ("Long live Christ the King!").

The bodies of Fr. Pro and his brother Humberto were collected by their family and brought to a family friend's house where a wake was held. Throughout the night people came from all over the city to pay their respects to the new priest-martyr. Eventually the bodies were moved to a church where crowds continued to gather to pay their respects. A procession from the church to the final resting place of their beloved priest grew as thousands of people lined the route to the cemetery.

The story of Father Miguel Pro is one of many like other priests who were killed for their faith. There were also many

lay faithful who died a martyr's death because they refused to push God out of their hearts, boldly proclaiming Jesus Christ as ruler of their lives. Another beautiful story that embodies what it means to allow Jesus to be the ruler of our hearts is that of a young man named Jose Sanchez del Rio who was only 15-year-old at the time of his martyrdom (Feb. 10, 1928). St. Jose Sanchez del Rio was arrested and imprisoned in the church that had been turned into and used as a jail. The government soldiers had put several expensive fighting roosters in the church for safekeeping. This sacrilege troubled the future saint in such a way that he caught all the roosters and snapped their heads as he said, "This [church] is not a barnyard! This is a place for God!"

Before St. Jose Sanchez del Rio's execution, soldiers cut off the soles of his feet and forced him to walk on salt because he refused to deny Christ and the Church. On the way to the execution, the soldiers struck him savagely with their sharp machetes and with every blow Jose unceasingly cried out, "Viva Christo Rey!" On the way to his death, Jose would scream with pain as soldiers would taunt him telling

Jose to shout, "death to Christ the King" in order that his life would be spared. Amid all the pain, Jose would answer back to the soldiers, "Long Live Christ the King! Long Live Our Lady of

Guadalupe!" Jose was killed over his grave. On November 20, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI recognized the heroic virtues of this young man elevating him to the honor of a Saint.

Servant of God, Maria de la Luz Camacho also died a martyr's death by embodying for us what it means to allow Jesus to be the King of our hearts. Maria de la Luz Camacho died in the atrium of St. John the Baptist Church on Sunday, December 30, 1934. She died with open arms in the form of the cross, while she boldly faced her executioners shouting, "*Viva Cristo Rey!*" (Long live Christ the King!) Maria de la Luz was a catechist and a member of the third order of St. Francis. On December 30 when she attended 10:00 am Mass with her little brother, the priest made an appeal for help and to let others know that the government soldiers were on their way to desecrate the church. Maria de la Luz and others were organized to help protect the church. As Maria de la Luz was leaving her house wearing her best dress, her sister asked her "Why are you so elegant?", to which Maria de la Luz responded, "When you have to go and defend Christ the King, one has to go well dressed and ready for combat."

Blessed Miguel Pro, St. Jose Sanchez del Rio, and Servant of God Maria de la Luz are prime examples of what it means to allow Jesus Christ to be the King of our hearts, minds, and bodies, to the point that one gives up everything, even one's life. The martyrdom of these individuals and of many others in Mexico and other parts of the world during the 20th century, illustrates for us that "neither suffering, nor serious illness, neither exhausting ministerial activity, frequently carried out in difficult and dangerous circumstances could stifle the radiating and contagious joy which He [Jesus] brought to [their] lives and which nothing could take away. Indeed, the deepest root of self-sacrificing surrender for the lowly has [their] passionate love for Jesus Christ and [their] ardent desire to be conformed (united) to Him even unto death" (John Paul II, Homily on the Beatification of Bl. Miguel Pro).



Saint Jose Sanchez del Rio 1913-1928



Servant of God Maria de La Luz Camacho (1907-1934)