

Viva Christo Rey

As he walked with bloodied feet toward the cemetery, they pressured him to give it up, but those three words rang with great clarity over and over again in his heart...

Thousands upon thousands had converted to Catholicism following the miraculous intervention of our Lady of Guadalupe in the 1600s, but in the early twentieth century of Mexico's history, the Catholic faith was beginning to dwindle. The government at that time had seized churches, religious schools were shut down and they even exiled or killed priests. A group known as the Cristeros fought to defend their religious liberty and their Catholic faith, and this little 14 year old boy, Jose, was part of the movement.

As a young adolescent, he tried signing up several times, but his persistence paid off and he was installed as the flag bearer. As time went on, during a small battle, he gave up the horse he was riding so that the general could escape, then looked for cover, but he was eventually captured.

Once captured, the government officials repeatedly demanded that he deny his faith. "Say, 'death to Christ the king' and we will let you go." Over and over again they pressured him to deny his faith, but over and over again he would not. Eventually, they cut the skin off the bottom of his feet and made him walk through the city towards the cemetery. Once more they asked him to say those words: 'death to Christ the king', yet with a loud voice he exclaimed those three words: VIVA CHRISTO REY! (Long live Christ the King!) Those words sealed his fate and he gave up his life for Christ.

Although bound in chains and subjected to cruelty, St. Jose and all the saints we celebrate today remind us: it is only the saint who is truly free.

How can someone who was bound and imprisoned be free? According to our world, freedom is seen as the absence of restraint. Especially, after Halloween, many of your children or grandchildren are probably screaming out for freedom to eat all the candy they want!

As result of this commercial, consumeristic view of freedom, especially during Halloween, we have forgotten the true origins of this solemnity and the TRUE freedom which it proclaims.

Some have associated Halloween with the pagan Celtic feast of Samhain which was the celebration of the New Year. The cold, dark atmosphere of that time of year prompted the Celtic peoples to associate that time with death and they believed that the souls of the dead were allowed to return to their homes at that time.

However, this is not the origin of Halloween. Halloween is our modern English rendering of 'All Hallows Eve' or 'All Hallows Even' meaning the day or the eve before the solemnity of all saints. Halloween was meant to be a time when we venerate, we honor the saints. This has its roots even in biblical times when the early Christians venerated the cloths that touched St. Paul or when the bones of St. Polycarp were gathered in the early 2nd century.

Eventually the early Church instituted a special feast for all saints in the 4th century because there were literally too many saints and martyrs to celebrate especially after the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian. Although All Saints was celebrated on different days in the early Church, Nov 1st was eventually chosen for the Church by Pope Gregory IV in the 9th century.

Clearly this shows that the origins of Halloween are profoundly Christian and so we need to reclaim the meaning of All Hallows' Eve. But why do we celebrate it?

This man suffered tremendously his whole life. By the age of eight, he came home from school to find that his mother died of kidney failure and heart disease. Three years later, he would lose his brother who died from contracting scarlet fever from a patient he was caring for and nine years later he came home with medicine to find his father's cold body slumped over. He cried to his friends: "I'm all alone...at twenty I've already lost all the people I've loved!" Not only that, one by one his friends and classmates were being captured by the Nazi's and his country was being torn apart by war.

In the midst of so much suffering and loss he could have folded, he could have given in, but he embraced his suffering, allowed the cross to transform him, and became truly free to be a great saint. Many years later, he became an instrumental player in the fall of communism; it was because of him that millions of youth would travel from all over the world to be reinvigorated in their faith and it was because of him that we have one of the greatest popes of all time: St. John Paul the Great.

Why do we honor the saints on this day? St Bernard would respond:

“I tell you, when I think of them, I feel myself inflamed by a tremendous yearning. Calling the saints to mind inspires, or rather arouses in us, above all else, a longing to enjoy their company, so desirable in itself.”

Every year when we celebrate the feast of all saints we are reminded again of our destiny, of our calling to be united to God, to have the true freedom of the saints. Only the saint is truly free because only the saint knows how to love God in every moment of their life: in the midst of tragedy, suffering, war, persecution, sickness, the loss of family members or even death itself, nothing can take away the freedom of the saints because nothing can separate them from the love of Christ.

This is the path of the beatitudes whether we are poor, or mourning, or persecuted for righteousness' sake or for the sake of Jesus, we can still choose to live for the kingdom of God. This is not just hopeful optimism, but our freedom is built upon the belief that Jesus is the King, that he is Lord of the universe, that we are worth more than many sparrows to this God who has already conquered the world.

And so brothers and sisters I implore to choose sanctity TODAY. The greatest tragedy in life is not to be a saint; the greatest tragedy is to not live life empowered and transformed by grace to be a light in the darkness of this world and to experience a foretaste of the happiness that awaits us in heaven. Choose TODAY to imitate the lives of the saints, to give your life completely, to entrust all of your freedom to the Father who will return it again to you in an even greater measure.

Choose TODAY to let nothing separate you from the love of Christ, but use all the circumstances of your life to become holy whether it is sickness, health, poverty, riches, life or death. You may even say, 'I am too weak to be a saint', so let your weakness be a source of sanctity for as St. Paul says: gladly therefore, will I boast of my weaknesses that the power of Christ may remain in me.

As we now turn toward the liturgy of the Eucharist, we hear at the end of the preface: “and so we glorify you with the multitude of saints...” Let us be reminded that in the mass this is where heaven kisses earth, where all the saints from every tribe, nation and tongue are truly present with us as together we praise the

majesty of His glory, as together we say: Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might be to our God forever.

By their heavenly intercession, may the saints who praise him eternally in heaven show us how to praise him at all times on earth so that with the freedom of the saints we may always proclaim: Viva Christo Rey!