

"He was a man of prayer"

In his 13 September general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about Blessed José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our catecheses, we continue to meet passionate witnesses to the proclamation of the Gospel. Let us

recall that this is a series of catecheses on apostolic zeal, on the will and even the interior ardour to carry forward the Gospel. Today we go to Latin America, specifically to Venezuela, to get to know the figure of a layman, Blessed José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros. He was born in 1864 and learned the faith above all from his mother, as he recounted, “My mother taught me virtue from the cradle, made me grow in the knowledge of God and gave me charity as my guide.” Let’s be attentive: it is the moms who pass on the faith. The faith is passed on in dialect, that is, the language of moms, that dialect that moms know to speak with their children. And to you moms: be diligent in passing on the faith in that maternal dialect.

Truly, charity was the north star that oriented the existence of Blessed José Gregorio: a good and sunny person with a cheerful disposition, he was

endowed with a marked intelligence; he became a doctor, university professor, and scientist. But he was first and foremost a doctor close to the weakest, so much so that he was known in his homeland as “the doctor of the poor.” He cared for the poor, always. To the riches of money he preferred the riches of the Gospel, spending his existence to aid the needy. In the poor, the sick, the migrants, the suffering, José Gregorio saw Jesus. The success he never sought in the world he received, and continues to receive, from the people, who call him “saint of the people,” “apostle of charity,” “missionary of hope.” Beautiful names: “saint of the people”, “apostle of the people”, “missionary of hope”.

José Gregorio was a humble man, kind, and helpful man. And at the same time he was driven by an inner fire, a desire to live in the service of God and neighbor. Driven by this

ardor, he tried several times to become a religious and a priest, but various health problems prevented him from doing so. Physical frailty did not, however, lead him to close in on himself, but to become a doctor who was even more sensitive to the needs of others; he clung to Providence and, forged in his soul, went ever more toward what was essential. This is apostolic zeal: it does not follow one's own aspirations, but openness to God's designs. And so the Blessed understood that, through caring for the sick, he would put God's will into practice, comforting the suffering, giving hope to the poor, witnessing to the faith not in words but by example. So, by way of this interior path, he came to accept medicine as a priesthood: "the priesthood of human pain" (M. YABER, *José Gregorio Hernández: Médico de los Pobres, Apóstol de la Justicia Social, Misionero de las Esperanzas*, 2004,

107). How important it is not to suffer things passively, but, as Scripture says, to do everything in a good spirit, to serve the Lord (cf. Col. 3:23).

But let us ask ourselves, though: where did José Gregorio get all this enthusiasm, all this zeal? It came from a certainty and a strength. The certainty was God's grace: he wrote that "if there are good and bad people in the world, the bad are such because they themselves have become bad: but the good are such with God's help" (May 27, 1914). And he considered himself first of all to be in need of grace, begging on the streets and in dire need of the love. And this was the strength he drew on: intimacy with God. He was a man of prayer – this is the grace of God and the intimacy with the Lord. He was a man of prayer who participated at Mass.

And in contact with Jesus, who offers himself on the altar for all, José Gregory felt called to offer his life for peace. The First World War was underway. So, we come to June 29, 1919: a friend comes to visit him and finds him very happy. José Gregorio has indeed learned that the treaty ending the war has been signed. His offering has been accepted, and it is as if he foresees that his work on earth is done. That morning, as usual, he had been at Mass, and now he goes down the street to bring medicine to a sick person. But as he crosses the road, he is hit by a vehicle; taken to the hospital, he dies pronouncing the name of Our Lady. So, his earthly journey ends, on a road while doing a work of mercy, and in a hospital, where he had made his work a masterpiece, as a doctor.

Brothers, sisters, in the presence of this witness let us ask ourselves: do I,

faced with God present in the poor near me, faced with those in the world who suffer the most, how do I react? And the example of José Gregorio: how does it affect me? He spurs us to engagement in the face of the great social, economic, and political issues of today. So many people talk about it, so many complain about it, so many criticize and say that everything is going wrong. But that's not what the Christian is called to do; instead, he is called to deal with it, to get his or her hands dirty: first of all, as St. Paul told us, to pray (cf. 1 Tim 2:1-4), and then not to engage in idle chattering – idle chatter is a plague – but to promote good, and to build peace and justice in truth. This, too, is apostolic zeal; it is the proclamation of the Gospel; and this is Christian beatitude: “blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt 5:9).

Let us go forward along the path of Blessed [José] Gregorio: a layman, a doctor, a man of daily work whom apostolic zeal drove to live performing charity throughout his whole life.

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