Pope Francis Reflects on Three Young Jesuit Martyrs’ Lessons for Serving the Poor Today

By Elisabeth Kress, Ph.D., J.D.

In 1625, three young Jesuits were killed in rural Paraguay by the warriors of a neighboring indigenous community. These Jesuits were, Saint Luis González Castellanos, Saint Roque González, and Saint Alonso Rodríguez. They were sent in 1624 by the Bishop of Paraguay, Fr. González, to the Guarani region to live with them. Their deaths, these three young men provide a template for how to serve any group of people who have been the passive of the Guaraní – poor, dispossessed, and oppressed.

Genuine Love

First, Pope Francis argues that we engage with the poor and those who are different from us, so our approach needs to begin with genuine love. He underscores this requirement of love in his essay, when he repeatedly refers to this love as both a “principle” and a “project” in the world.

“With faith and charity, and to saw in this person, we human beings are with a diginity identical to our own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father: an image and a likeness of God. For this reason, the respect and love we have to others is of our dignity.”

Exemplifying this love in his own life, Pope Francis demonstrates its liberating love not only in the soul but also in the body. It is love for the other and compassion for our suffering brothers and sisters, not with a spirit of respect and openness. All of these efforts need to be accompanied by prayer and meditation to see the ways in which Pope Francis’ concept of living a holy and transformed life in the service of others.

A Spirit of Openness and Respect

While engaging in loving and liberative acts, we are also called to approach those whom we serve – the poor, the oppressed, those in prison – with a spirit of openness and acceptance. All of these efforts need to be undertaken as a journey in community, by “being side by side with the poor.”

In the accounts of the activities of these Jesuit missionaries, Francis (then Bishop of Paraguay) is adamant that this transformation does not require a repudiation or rejection of the culture into which they entered to proclaim the Gospel. Rather, these Jesuit missionaries saw their role in proclaiming the Gospel as protecting and defending the Guarani from the depredations of the European colonists. Francis testifies to these points in order to teach, in both his life and in their deaths, the young Jesuit’s three point principle: how to serve any group of people who have been the passive of the Guaraní – poor, dispossessed, and oppressed.

Conclusion

We need to recall that when teaching the Gospel, providing services, or advocating for justice with poor and oppressed people, we are not resilient, but rather these encounters will often be painful. Saints Luis González Castellanos, Roque González, and Alonso Rodríguez, by involving their compassion and liberating mission work with community to those who served, have shown us the way.

Dr. Ananda in the Vaticano St. Giovanni Battista of the Council of Rome at the Vatican.

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