

John of Capistrano 2003

Saint John Capistran takes his surname from the town in the Abruzzi where he was born of a German father and an Italian mother. This month's issue of MAGNIFICAT describes an image of today's saint that Blessed Junipero Serra had commissioned in Spain. It stands now in the mission church that he founded in 1776 at what is, today, San Juan Capistrano, California. We don't know whether the events in Philadelphia of that same year had any influence on the choice that Serra made. It may have, however. John of Capistrano, Franciscan friar and Christian warrior, won freedom for a continent.

The first Christian converts at mission San Juan would have learned immediately what is special about this Franciscan saint. The image of their patron is dressed in a Franciscan habit made entirely of chain mail; he ports an armored breastplate and brandishes in one hand a bloodless sword, and in the other, a red banner with the emblem of the Holy Name of Jesus. They must have thought of the Spanish soldiers who had accompanied the missionaries.

John himself was a missionary. He had served prominently in politics before a conversion experience, as we would say today, drew him to the Franciscans. The first half of the fifteenth century was a period of tumult in Europe. John chose a reform movement, the one launched by Bernardino of Siena. Observants, they were called. Franciscans, as you know, aim to imitate the poverty of their holy father Francis. Poverty unlike many religious charisms can be measured materially. This explains why branches develop easily within the Franciscan family. Each one distinguished according to the degree of poverty practiced. The phenomenon continues in our own day.

Capistran followed a strict and serious path, and his preaching bore rich fruit. Like his mentor, he spread devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus. Don't assume that this choice represented just another pious and safe undertaking. At one point, our saint was obliged to defend Bernardine of Siena, who had been charged with heresy precisely because he preached devotion to the Name of Jesus.

What lesson is there for us? Preaching the truth about Christ is never an easy task to accomplish. Then, Jesus never promised that it would be. "Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth?" Gospel preachers should beware when people too much like their homilies, unless the pleasure accompanies a conversion of heart in the hearers. John was given this grace. "Massive conversions," report the chronicles. He later addressed the clergy; there are no reports. The saints comprehend that one has to do battle in order to spread the truth of the Christian religion. Justification is never cheap grace.

The fifteenth century witnessed some unhappy events in Christendom. In 1453, Constantinople fell to the forces of Mohammad II, who afterwards rode his horse into Hagia Sophia. Europe was threatened, and the Pope announced a crusade. It would not be the last time that a Pope would have to attend to the political order. Although 70 years of age, John of Capistrano, lawyer,

friar, preacher, reformer, now became a crusader. He mustered troops. By preaching! And although his forces were outnumbered ten to one, they successfully repulsed the Turkish army. The decisive battle occurred in 1456, when John himself led the Christian forces in the Battle of Belgrade. Of course, he himself did not engage in battle, a task judged incompatible with the priest's status. As the image in California clearly shows, John's sword remains without blood.

The *lectio continua* proceeds through the Letter to the Romans. That "the wages of sin is death" is a reminder that preachers of all stripes like to repeat. The Catholic priest however repeats this warning with a special appreciation for the justification that has been won for us by Jesus Christ. In short, the whole of the priestly ministry aims to implement the central message of the Letter to the Romans. Teaching, governing, and sanctifying occupy the priest. These are the works of justification.

Even first year theology students recognize that some Christians commit errors when they talk about justification. There are those who think that God's righteousness is something that doesn't touch them on the inside. That justification more affects God than the sinner. The example of John of Capistrano reminds Catholics that God's righteousness sinks down deep into the fabric of the human person, head, heart, guts There remains no part of us that escapes the effect of the sanctification that faith in Christ generates. No part of our world, in fact, that does not belong firstly to the commonwealth of Christ.

Each of us will be best prepared to meet the challenges of evangelization to the extent that we have ourselves adsorbed the Catholic teaching on justification, and what is more important, have internalized its graces. For this to happen, and only God can make it happen, it is not uncommon that reform is required. This was the case in the fifteenth century, and so likely to happen also in the twenty-first century.

There are many, many Franciscan saints. More than there are Dominican. I wonder whether Juniper Serra had something in mind when he chose John of Capistrano for California. Perhaps he realized that the new world would one day face its own battles for the truth of the Gospels, and that Catholics of subsequent generations would take inspiration in the man who stood up fearlessly for the truth both within the Church and before the world.