



# The Holy See

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POPE FRANCIS

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 13 September 2023*

**[Multimedia]**

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**Catechesis. The passion for evangelization: the apostolic zeal of the believer. 20. *Blessed José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros, doctor of the poor and apostle of peace***

*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 time I was in a crib, made me grow in the knowledge of God and gave me charity as my guide”. Let us take note: it is moms who pass on the faith. The faith is passed on in dialect, that is, in the language of moms, that dialect that moms use to speak with their children. And to you, moms: be mindful 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 joyful person with a cheerful disposition, he was endowed with a marked intelligence. He became a physician, a university professor, and a 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. José Gregorio saw Jesus in the poor, the sick, migrants and the

suffering. And 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, a kind and helpful man. At the same time he was driven by an inner fire, a desire to live in the service of God and neighbour. Driven by this ardour, he tried to become a religious and a priest several times, but various health problems prevented him from doing so. Physical frailty did not, however, lead him to close in on himself, but rather to become a doctor who was even more sensitive to the needs of others. He clung to Providence and, forged in his soul, he 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 good-naturedly, to serve the Lord (cf. *Col 3:23*).

But let us ask ourselves however: 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 (27 May 1914). And he considered himself first of all to be in need of grace, begging on the streets and in dire need of love. And this was *the strength* he drew on: *intimacy with God* . He was a man of prayer — there is the grace of God and 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 Gregorio felt called to *offer his life for peace*. The First World War was underway. It was 29 June 1919: a friend came to visit him and found him very happy. José Gregorio had indeed learned that the treaty ending the war had been signed. His offering had been accepted, and it was as if he foresaw that his work on earth was done. That morning, as usual, he had been at Mass. He went down the street to bring medicine to a person who was sick. But as he was crossing the road, he was hit by a vehicle. He was taken to hospital and died saying Our Lady’s name. This is how his earthly journey ended, on a road while performing 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: How do I — face-to-face with God present in the poor near me, face-to-face with those in the world who suffer the most — react? And how does the example of José Gregorio 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 them, so many complain about them, so many criticize and say that everything is going wrong. But that

is not what Christians are called to do. Instead, they are called to deal with it, to get their hands dirty: first of all, as Saint Paul told us, to pray (cf. *1 Tim 2:1-4*), and then, not to engage in gossip — 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 press on along the path of Blessed [José] Gregorio: a layman, a doctor, a man of daily work, who was driven by apostolic zeal to perform charity works throughout his whole life.

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### Special Greetings

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s Audience, especially the groups from England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Senegal, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you all!

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### APPEAL

My thoughts go to the people of Libya, hard hit by violent rains that have caused flooding and inundation, causing numerous deaths and injuries, as well as extensive damage. I invite you to join my prayer for those who have lost their lives, for their families and for the displaced. May our solidarity with these brothers and sisters, tried by such a devastating calamity, not fail. And my thoughts also go out to the noble Moroccan people who have suffered these movements of the earth, these earthquakes. Let us pray for Morocco, let us pray for the inhabitants. May the Lord give them the strength to recover, to recover after this terrible “ambush” that has taken place in their land.

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Lastly, my thoughts turn to *young people*, to *the sick*, to *the elderly* and to *newlyweds*. Tomorrow the Church celebrates the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Let us not tire of being faithful to the Cross of Christ, a sign of love and salvation.

And please, brothers and sisters, let us continue to pray for peace in the world, especially in tormented Ukraine, whose sufferings are ever present in our minds and hearts.

I give my Blessing to all of you.

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## Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on apostolic zeal, we have been reflecting on the spread of the Gospel through the witness of men and women of every time and place. Today we turn to Latin America and the example of Blessed José Gregorio Hernández. Born in Venezuela in 1864, José Gregorio was unable to pursue studies for the priesthood for reasons of health. Accepting this as God's will, he studied medicine and devoted his life to the care of those in need. Because of his deep devotion to Christ, expressed in charitable service to the least of our brothers and sisters, he became known as the "doctor of the poor". His apostolic zeal was born of a personal experience of God's mercy and daily union with the Lord in Holy Mass and personal prayer. At the outbreak of the First World War, he offered himself as a sacrificial victim in union with Christ, interceding for the dawn of peace, and died shortly after learning of the end of the war. The life of Blessed José Gregorio Hernández can inspire us, in the concrete circumstances of our own lives, to draw closer to the Lord in prayer, to serve him in the poor, and to work for the spread of his Gospel and the growth of his Kingdom of holiness, justice and peace.