

**Homily by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez for the
Mass of the Shrine of the Florida Martyrs, Tallahassee, Fla.
October 15, 2012**

Feast of St. Teresa of Jesus-Texts: Rom 8, 22-27; Jo 15, 1-8

Introduction:

It is a great honor to concelebrate this Mass with you, Bishop Gregory Parke at the beginning of your episcopal mission as the Bishop of Pensacola/Tallahassee and also to join the Bishop of Phoenix, Arizona, Bishop Thomas Olmsted. I greet the members of the board, friends, and benefactors here present, especially Lynn Mangan and Heather Jordan and their collaborators who, day by day, serve the Shrine with total dedication.

In the context of the celebration of the Synod on the New Evangelization, this shrine is the most visible focus in Florida of the first evangelization of “La Florida” taking place at the end of the 1500s, during the 1600s and the early part of the 1700’s. Today we honor those first evangelizers of this land who, throughout El Camino Real mission trail, founded approximately 50 missions. How can we forget the stories of the first nation of Appalachian Christians who encountered Jesus as their Way, Life and Truth and became his disciples? They loved the most Blessed Virgin Mary under the title of Nuestra Señora de la Leche. They were most ingenious in developing a Marian piety that attracted many.

The majority of the first evangelizers of Florida were Franciscans coming from Spain. They left the best practices of evangelizing at the time. Above all, their communities witnessed the depth of their faith to the point of giving their life in fidelity to the Lord in heroic love for the enemy. We draw such inspiration from the Patate and Ayubale martyrdoms, which took place in the surroundings area of the capital of the State of Florida—Tallahassee in the early part of the 1700s.

Last Tuesday, Oct. 9, Benedict XVI gave a reflection to the XIII General Assembly of the International Synod on the New Evangelization. He said: “In every time and place, evangelization always has as its starting and finishing points Jesus Christ, the Son of God (cf. Mk 1:1); and the Crucifix is the supremely distinctive sign of him who announces the Gospel: a sign of love and peace, a call to conversion and reconciliation.” This call to confess Christ is what one finds in Romans 10, 10: **if your lips confess that Jesus is Lord and if you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved.** There is an element of martyrdom in confessing the faith. One gives witness to the enemies of the faith, witness even in danger of death. Confessing the faith implies a readiness to suffer, giving one’s life, which, in turn, gives credibility to one’s life.

How could Florida schools forget the great contributions of the citizens of past centuries? How could the faithful of Northeastern Florida remain indifferent to the heroic stories of faith in which Our Lord Jesus Christ was boldly proclaimed as Savior? A profound debt of gratitude is owed to them for they are our “first Christians;” they built “the first parishes” where pastors and faithful were challenged by atrocious

violence, intolerance, and prejudice, which was disruptive of a peaceful way of life. I salute the visionaries making the idea of the shrine closer to reality.

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Teresa of Jesus. St. Teresa is a Doctor of the Church to teach us how to reach the next level in our prayer life. For her, prayer was the expression of friendship with Christ. In the *Book of Her Life*, she recognizes that **He helps us, He is a true Friend who is always there...with Him we can suffer everything. Love engenders love.** (*Book of her Life*, # 22) Teresa reveals her spontaneity, her candor, and her freedom of relating to Jesus. For her, prayer is not a technique, a method that one learns, but an encounter with the person who loves us unconditionally. She tells us: **“mental prayer is nothing else, in my opinion, but being on terms of friendship with God, frequently conversing in secret with Him Who, we know, loves us” (ibid. #8).** Pope Paul VI, in his homily at the Mass when he proclaimed Teresa, Doctor of the Church, on Sept. 27, 1970, he called her Teacher of Prayer.

St. Teresa died almost 20 years after the foundation of St. Augustine of la Florida. She was a true Spaniard: a passionate woman with a strong determination, deep mystical inclinations, sincerity of heart, and love for the Church who was able to exclaim at the end of her life: “I die a daughter of the Church.” Are not these same elements present in the missionaries-martyrs of Florida?

Most of the attention to Jesus’ last supper is focused on the mystery of how the signs of bread and wine are transformed by his saying: this is my body, this is my blood. In a wider sense, there is another truth in this sublime mystery of faith. Jesus celebrates his meal in anticipation of the great suffering of the passion. For Aquinas: the Eucharist is the sacrament of the passion. The last supper reveals his love to the extreme of death out of humble service (*lavabo*) for all (*pro multibus*). It is the transformation of the passion by the Eucharistic love, his life freely given. As we celebrate in deep continuity this same mystery of faith in the site of the shedding of so many innocent martyrs’ blood, we join their *confessio fidei*, with the hope that we follow Jesus’ way of **loving to the end.**