

Homily given at No Greater Love Festival
Bishop Felipe J. Estévez
Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche
St. Augustine, Florida
March 4, 2017

Last Wednesday, the cross was formed on our foreheads as a sign to begin our Lenten journey.

Each one of us experienced within ourselves a movement of repentance as we heard, “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” Perhaps we also felt a sense of vulnerability. And for probably most of us, that sign of the cross remained throughout the day. It was an opportunity to witness our pride for being Christians.... disciples and missionaries at all places.

Here today, right under the shadow of the Great Cross of St. Augustine, we are gathered for the No Greater Love Festival and the Great Cross presides over this outstanding event with great musicians of national reputation, honoring the first Christians in La Florida. We especially remember 86 martyrs who laid down their lives on account of their faith and culture. As Dr. Mary Soha has written, seven of these Christians were killed right here in this holy acre of the state of Florida. Isn't it true that the Great Cross on this campus honors each one of them? We joyfully anticipate the day when the universal Church will recognize them in our liturgical calendar.

The Great Cross faces the east and today we also embrace the multitude of persecuted Christians suffering from the violence of ISIS for no other reason than simply being Christians, specifically in Syria and Iraq.

As the President of the Catholic University of America, Dr. John Garvey, expressed in his *Lamentations for the Christians of the Middle East* column, “It is hard for us in the west to imagine how difficult it must be to maintain hope in a place where justice is so distant. Where persecutions are about exile and bloodshed. Not just about courts and rights.”

In our condition of disciples and missionaries, we are put down by others, we are at times ignored or marginalized by peers and secularists and even by family members on account of the values of the Gospel. Witnessing the Gospel is at times countercultural. As Jesus said, “be not afraid”. The Lord accompanies you on the way which is His way.

Today's reading of the prophet Isaiah 58, 9b-14, is meant to console you, “the light shall rise for you in the darkness and the gloom shall become for you like midday. Then the Lord will guide you always and give you plenty even on the parched land.”

It is a great grace and privilege to celebrate this mass at the Shrine of our Lady of La Leche of St. Augustine. The first Christians of La Florida loved to pray to her. So much so that the Shrine was

known then in 1600s as the Chapel of the Indians. The nursing mother of Bethlehem is the Mater Misericordia whose sight inspires in us what Pope Francis calls “a revolution of tenderness”.

Let us lift high the Cross. As the song says, “the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his Sacred Name. Each newborn servant of the Crucified bears on the brow the seal of Him who died.” Lord Jesus, our beloved Savior of the entire world draws the world to Thee!

Lift High the Cross toward the East today!