



WEEK ONE

COLOMBIA: *St. Laura Montoya Upegui*

Pope Francis repeatedly reminds us to go out to the margins and live the Gospel. How appropriate it is, then, that he canonized St. Laura Montoya Upegui in 2013. We see in Colombia's first saint an example of what it means to be present to those who are forgotten and marginalized. She challenges us to reflect on our own prejudices and listen to the needs of others.

Laura knew what it was to be poor—both materially and spiritually. Her father was killed when she was only 2 years old and, although Laura remembered her mother as a woman of great strength and forgiveness, economic hardships forced her to send Laura to live with her grandmother. This was a time of great loneliness for the little girl, and at times she felt abandoned. But a growing reliance on God—especially in the Eucharist and Scripture—sustained her.

At the age of 16, Laura's mother asked her to become an elementary school teacher to help support the family. Though she had never gone to school, Laura became an outstanding teacher, passing along Gospel values to all her students. Yet, her ultimate calling was to enter religious life—and to serve the native communities of her homeland, communities that were looked down upon and ostracized by most Colombians.

With four other young woman by her side, Laura bravely set off from her home in Medellín, Colombia, for the community of Dabeiba. She desired "to become an Indian with the Indians," to live like and in solidarity with those in the community. With the assistance of a local bishop, the women formed the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and St. Catherine of Siena.

Though she and her fellow missionaries were ridiculed by many, Laura always emphasized the centrality of love—in her missionary work and in how she acted in community. It was love, she knew, that was at the heart of Christ's mission—and so it would be at the heart of hers.

In our own lives, we are called to respond to this same challenge. Who lives at the margins of our lives, and how are we able to best respond in love? What holds us back? And how might God be working within us?



WEEK TWO

LAOS: *St. Francis Xavier, SJ*

In the first chapter of the Book of Acts, we find this line: “But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” For many of us living in the 21st century, Jesus’ command to go to the “ends of the earth” to share the Gospel message is a sacrifice, but not an insurmountable one—after all, it’s just a plane ride away.

But in the 1500s, there were no airplanes—and a trip to the “ends of the earth” often meant you were going there to stay. That was the risk that St. Francis Xavier took to share the love of Christ with strangers in distant lands. Though he was born to wealth—he grew up in a castle in the Basque region of Spain—Francis would eventually commit to a life of poverty that would take him to the Far East. While studying at the University of Paris, he met Ignatius of Loyola—future founder of the Jesuits, and future saint. Francis followed Ignatius to Venice, where the two men were ordained to the priesthood. Just a few years later, Francis and Ignatius went before the pope in Rome and were formally recognized as members of the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits had been founded.

St. Francis Xavier embodied St. Ignatius’ original intention for the society—that of roaming missionary preachers. In March of 1540, Francis left Rome at the request of the king of Portugal to preach the Gospel in India. He made his way to Goa, India, where he preached, cared for the sick and taught children.

Over the next 10 years, Francis would travel throughout India, the Philippines and Japan—and a host of islands in between—preaching the Good News. He met and mentored numerous men and women in the faith, encouraging many to consider a religious vocation. Francis always sought to live among the people he encountered, to learn and respect their customs and culture.

St. Francis Xavier is rightly recognized as one of the patron saints of missionaries for the way he lived his mission, traveling and proclaiming the message of Christ through his words and actions. He challenges us to examine our own lives, to see how we proclaim that message of love, peace and justice. With whom might we share this message? From whom have we received it?



WEEK THREE

RWANDA: *Our Lady of Kibeho*

Do you ever wonder why bad things happen? Or why God allows evil to persist? When tragedy, hardship and suffering occur, we're often left feeling helpless and distraught—even angry. We cry out to our God who is love, and we wonder: Where is that love to be found?

In international law, genocide is considered the intentional targeting and killing of a specific group of people. The Rwandan Genocide stands as a stark moment in history, a moment of darkness and hatred that continues to trouble the hearts of those in Rwanda and those far from its borders. How is it that people could bring about such deadly violence?

But then we are reminded of the story of Kibeho, the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary to three high school girls. Mary first appeared to Alphonsine Mumureke on November 28, 1981, identifying herself as “Ndi Nyina Wa Jambo,” which means “Mother of the Word.” Mary would continue appearing to Alphonsine until 1989. Anathalie Mukamazimpaka and Marie Claire Mukangango also received messages from Mary, though over a shorter period of time.

The message of the Blessed Mother was mixed with joy and warning. She called for conversion, emphasizing the importance of prayer, penance and fasting. Through these spiritual pillars, peace would win out over division, both in Rwanda and beyond. The three high school students received a troubling vision of what would happen if peace was not achieved. They saw violence, destruction and death overtaking Rwanda—what many consider to be a foreshadowing of the Rwandan Genocide.

When St. John Paul II visited Rwanda in 1990, he too called for communities to pray for the healing of local divisions, reminding all Rwandans to turn to Mary as a guide. In 1992, construction began on a shrine at Kibeho, called the “Shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows.” And yet, in 1994 civil war erupted as Hutu turned on Tutsi and Tutsi on Hutu, leaving nearly 1 million people dead in the wake of ethnic division.

The spiritual pillars that Our Lady pointed to—prayer, penance and fasting—are still essential. And her call to peace in our world remains pertinent. Although we may never understand why chaos erupts within communities, we can trust that our God, who is love, cries out with us amidst such hatred. We can know that our God—who knows what it is to suffer, to be nailed to a cross—suffers with us. And we can trust that, if we have eyes to see, God continues to work through us to act upon the Spirit's call.

The people of Rwanda suffered greatly, as do so many in our world today—but hope and joy remain. The CRS Rice Bowl Story of Hope from Rwanda proves this. In reflecting on it, where do you find hope—both for the people of Rwanda, and for your own community?



WEEK FOUR

HONDURAS: *St. Anne, Mother of Mary*

The fourth commandment reminds us to honor our parents. Yet, how often we forget this amidst the busyness of our daily lives! It's easy to take the sacrifices of our parents for granted—in fact, we may hardly realize the scope of those sacrifices until we have children of our own.

And yet, in reflecting on our parents—our mothers, our fathers, perhaps even our grandparents or other guardians and mentors—what comes to mind? Were we given opportunities to succeed, even if our parents came from humble backgrounds? Were we provided with life's essentials, even when times were tough? Were we taught right from wrong, even in moments of hardship?

All families encounter challenges. Tradition tells us that St. Anne, the mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus, struggled to conceive a child. She and her husband, Joachim, thought they were destined to be childless. So, they devoted themselves to intense prayer and fasting, hoping that God would intervene. And God responded in ways they could never have imagined.

An angel visited Anne one night with this news: “The Lord has heard your prayer, and you shall conceive, and shall bring forth, and your [child] shall be spoken of in all the world.” When Mary was born, St. Anne was careful to keep her daughter safe, so she would grow in holiness and virtue.

In a homily given on the feast of St. Anne, Pope Francis offered this reflection: “When I was using the incense, I noticed something very beautiful: The statue of St. Anne does not have a crown, but her daughter Mary is crowned. St. Anne is the woman who prepared her daughter to become queen, to become queen of heaven and earth. This woman did a great job.”

We call to mind the story of Mayra, the CRS Rice Bowl Story of Hope from Honduras. We see in Mayra's grandmother something akin to what we glimpse in St. Anne: a strong, humble woman who is committed to seeing her granddaughter succeed, even if that means hard, thankless work. And this scene is not an uncommon one throughout the world.

This Lent, how might we honor our parents or caretakers while honoring hardworking parents that live all around the world?



WEEK FIVE

MADAGASCAR: *St. Josephine Bakhita*

We see in our Christian tradition a great concern for those bound in slavery. Through the leadership of Moses, God freed the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God wishes the “releasing [of] those bound unjustly” (Isaiah 58:6). And Jesus himself tells us that his mission includes the proclaiming of “liberty to captives” (Luke 4:18). Clearly, God is concerned for our freedom, desiring that we be released from the chains that bind us—whether they be physical or spiritual.

In St. Josephine Bakhita, we see a woman who, though forced to endure a period of slavery, cast off her shackles to serve God. Born in southern Sudan, Josephine was kidnapped and sold into slavery at the age of 7. Forgetting her birth name as a result of the traumatic experience, her captors dubbed her “Bakhita,” which means “fortunate.”

And fortunate, one might say, she was. She was bought by an Italian politician who treated her kindly. Although she missed her family, she found moments of real joy. When her owner moved to Italy, he brought Josephine along and gave her to his friend Augusto Michieli. She became a babysitter for the Michielis’ young daughter, Mimmina, and accompanied the girl to Venice’s Institute of the Catechumens, run by the Canosian Sisters.

Bakhita came to know God at the institute and felt drawn to enter the Catholic Church. When the Michielis returned to collect Mimmina and Bakhita, Bakhita refused to leave. She wanted to stay with the Canosian Sisters—and Italian law supported her desire, declaring her a free woman.

Bakhita, who took the name Josephine, soon consecrated her life to God, becoming a sister and serving in the Canosian community. She became a great source of comfort to children who came to the institute, and aided the poor and suffering who came to the sisters’ door. She was known far and wide for her caring nature and desire to spread the love of God. When she died in 1947, a crowd gathered at the convent to pray for her and to ask for her intercession.

We see in St. Josephine Bakhita a woman who struggled in distant lands, a stranger forced to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. We also see a woman who served God in all she did—even before she entered the Church—and who found the strength to release the chains that bound her and embrace God’s call.

What chains exist in our own lives? How can we work with God this Lent to free ourselves and others from whatever holds us captive?