

The Coronavirus has forced the temporary closure of churches in Nome in the interest of public safety. When closures are uniform among churches and businesses, this makes sense to stop the spread of the virus. However, in some parts of the country, there are severe restrictions on churches while declaring bars, tattoo parlors, and dens of iniquity essential businesses that may remain open. There are always forces at work to suppress freedom of religion. History teaches that efforts can be much more severe than anything we have heard about related to the virus.

John wrote the Book of Revelation to strengthen the faith at a time when the church was under severe persecution. From the very beginning, the church has always honored martyrs who were willing to die for their faith. As in the past, the 20th Century was a particularly bloody century.

Under the Mexican socialist revolution of 1917, “churches were destroyed, desecrated, confiscated, and turned into army barracks; religious items were profaned by soldiers drinking from chalices, chopping up statues for firewood, and using religious art for target practice.”ⁱ Teaching religion was prohibited. “Bishops, priests, and religious were rounded up for deportation or imprisonment, and those caught trying to elude capture were shot. The celebration of the sacraments was punishable by imprisonment or death, and the Church was driven underground.”ⁱⁱ Private homes were often confiscated if religious activities were suspected.

A young Jesuit Priest, Miguel Pro, finished his studies in Belgium and asked his religious superiors to return to his home country of Mexico. Aware of the public prohibitions of practicing the faith, he did everything as secretly as possible. He traveled in disguise and quietly entered Mexico City. The people had a great hunger for the sacraments and immediately Father Miguel began celebrating Mass. Every clandestine act endangered his life and those worshippers who gathered to practice their faith.

As a child, Miguel had seemed to be very reckless and often found himself in death defying circumstances. While his parents tried to instill with him a more cautious approach to life, his bravado served him well in the face of the persecution of the church. Father Miguel “became known throughout the city as the undercover priest who would show up in the middle of the night dressed as a beggar or a street sweeper to baptize infants, hear confessions, distribute Communion, or perform marriages.” The Holy Spirit bolstered his natural courage and sometimes he would impersonate a policeman to gain entry to the jail in order to bring the sacraments to Catholic prisoners before execution. “Using clandestine meeting places, a wardrobe of disguises and coded messages to the underground Catholics, Father Pro carried on his priestly work for the Mexican faithful under his care.”ⁱⁱⁱ

After two years of death-defying ministry, the authorities were looking for any excuse to arrest him. Father Miguel and his brothers Humberto and Roberto were thrown into jail and held without trial being falsely accused of an attempt on the life of the President of Mexico. In July of 1928, President Calles ordered Father Miguel’s execution. The official charge was the bogus assassination plot. The truth was he was a good shepherd willing to lay down his life to serve the spiritual needs of his flock. When Jesus was crucified, he prayed, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Father Miguel blessed the firing squad and prayed silently for a few moments. “With a crucifix in one hand and a rosary in the other, he held his arms outstretched in the form of a cross and in a loud, clear voice cried out, ‘May God have mercy on you! May God bless you! Lord, you know that I am innocent! With all my heart I forgive my enemies!’” His final words were “Long live Christ the King!”^{iv} A well-known saying in the church is that “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church” (Tertullian). Legal or not, 30,000 people attended his funeral procession. Religion can be outlawed, but the faith of the people cannot be suppressed. “Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face” (Ps 24:6).

ⁱ <https://www.lewrockwell.com/1970/01/lew-rockwell/martyrs-of-the-20th-century/>

ⁱⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/saint/blessed-miguel-pro-juarez-397

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid