Blog
Spirituality



Br. Luis David Perez, a Discalced Carmelite friar, speaks to a group of mostly women at Casa Santa Teresa retreat center April 7 near San Ramón, Costa Rica. The friar made a special plea to recognize the role of women in the church and society, while also pointing out rising levels of violence against them in Costa Rica and around the world. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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It seemed like an apt thing for a spiritual son of St. Teresa of Ávila to say, "The history of the church has been made by you, women, and while you suffered."

It still was a surprising thing for me to hear from a man at the ambo. But this was a Discalced Carmelite friar in Costa Rica who is originally from Nicaragua, a place where, in less than a year, the government has expelled two communities of women religious.

Br. Luis David Pérez addressed the small group of mostly women gathered at a chapel in the new retreat and prayer center Casa Santa Teresa in the mountains north of the capital of San José. Coming from a family with a "strong matriarchy," and belonging to a religious order founded by women, namely St. Teresa, led him to value every day the presence of women and what they represent in the Catholic Church, he said.

While his words stemmed from a Good Friday reflection April 7, on the fidelity of the women who remained with Jesus at the foot of the cross, he made a special plea to remember Mary, whom the church celebrates in the month of May, along with all the other important Marys throughout church history.

"That is where you are, accompanying the Lord in his pain, in his death, his calvary and his passion," he said. "You have understood the mystery of salvation."

The friar also addressed a growing "wave of violence" against women, including many who are beaten and murdered.

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In Costa Rica, where he serves, the Observatory on Gender Violence against Women and Access to Justice receives an average of 136 requests a day from women seeking orders of protection. The small country of 5 million, considered one of the

most stable in Central America, is averaging daily two femicides, described as killings of women by a current or former intimate partner. Worldwide, violence against women has risen exponentially during the coronavirus pandemic, according to figures from the United Nations, prompting the agency to call it "the shadow pandemic."

According to the global agency, "one in three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence mostly by an intimate partner."

Recognizing the trend in his midst, Pérez said, “This spiral of madness infecting our society must stop," and the belief in the church's protection of human life must also include protecting the life of women.

"May our lives of faith put a stop to the assassination of so many women in our society," he said. "May our lives as Christians be a voice for women who don't have a voice."

Accompanying Jesus, walking with Jesus, means also lifting up the lives of women, recognizing that they have sustained Christianity in its more than 2,000 years, he said. At Jesus' side, women felt welcomed, understood, healed and saved, he said, and they practiced and carried this lesson of love into the world.

"Thank you because you have understood better than us [men] the life and love of Jesus Christ," Pérez continued. "How many of you have cared for your homes? How many [women] are not even here because they have to take care of children? They are not only to be admired but appreciated. That is why they have a special place in the heart of Jesus and in the heart of the church, and in ours, and in mine, in my heart."

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Women, at the beginning of Christ's ministry were close to Jesus, so it was not surprising that they were entrusted with the announcement of the resurrection, Pérez said, adding that he found it tasteless when he'd heard some priests, in years past, "joke" that Jesus appeared to women first after the resurrection so that the good news would spread fast in their "gossip."

It reminded me of a passage from St. Teresa's writings that another Carmelite friar once read to me, explaining that it had been taken out in its most read version: "Since the world's judges are sons of Adam and all of them men, there is no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect."

Women are still making the history of the church while suffering, as the friar said, and as news about the women religious expelled from neighboring Nicaragua point to. It reinforces St. Teresa's views that women are held suspect even for their virtue, even today. But only with women, Pérez said, "we can build the church and society that Christ Jesus wants."