Teen, martyred while protecting the Eucharist, beatified in Barcelona Spain

By Courtney Mares

Beatification Mass for Joan Roig Diggle in the Sagrada Família Basilica in Barcelona Nov. 7, 2020.

A 19-year-old Spanish martyr who gave his life while protecting the Eucharist was beatified Saturday at a Mass in the Sagrada Família Basilica in Barcelona.

“Yesterday in Barcelona Joan Roig Diggle, a lay man and martyr killed at the age of 19 during the Spanish Civil War, was proclaimed Blessed,” Pope Francis said in his Angelus address Nov. 8.

“May his example arouse in everyone, especially the young, the desire to live the Christian vocation to the full,” the pope said.

Blessed Joan Roig Diggle was killed “in hatred of the faith” in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War. The young man was known for his devotion to the Eucharist at a time when churches in Barcelona were being closed, burned, or destroyed, so a priest entrusted Joan Roig with a ciborium containing the Blessed Sacrament to distribute Holy Communion to those most in need in their homes as it was not possible to attend Mass.

During one of these visits, Joan Roig told a family that he knew that red militiamen were trying to kill him. “I fear nothing, I take the Master with me,” he said. When those seeking his life knocked on his door, the young man consumed the hosts he had been guarding to protect them from potential desecration.

The Libertarian Youth patrol then took him to the Santa Coloma cemetery where he was killed on Sept. 11, 1936 with five shots to the heart and one to the head. Blessed Joan Roig’s last words were: “May God forgive you as I forgive you.”

At Joan Roig’s beatification on Nov. 7, Cardinal Juan José Omella, archbishop of Barcelona, said in his homily that the young man was an “ardent defender of the Social Doctrine of the Church” and provides youth today with a “testimony of love for Christ and for his brothers.”

The apostolic nuncio in Spain, Bishop Bernardito Auza, and the archbishop emeritus of Barcelona, Cardinal Lluís Martínez Sistach, concelebrated the Mass, which took place with a limited attendance to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Joan was born in Barcelona on May 12, 1917. His father was Ramón Roig Fuente and his mother, Maud Diggle Puckering, was from England.

He studied in schools run by De La Salle Brothers and the Piarist Fathers. His family experienced economic difficulties, so Joan worked to help cover expenses while he was pursuing his studies. Among his teachers were Fr. Ignacio Casanovas and Blessed Francisco Carceller, who would also go on to become martyrs.

His family moved to Masnou and the young man joined the Federation of Young Christians of Catalonia (FJCC), created in 1932 by Albert Bonet and which had 8,000 members before the Spanish Civil War. He wrote about social issues in the FJCC newsletter and was appointed to lead the catechesis of children between 10 and 14 years old.

“When he came to Masnou no one knew him, but his piety and ardent love for the Eucharist soon became evident. He spent hours before the Blessed Sacrament without realizing it. His example converted more than his words,” the president of the FJCC youth branch wrote in 1936.

Fr. José Gili Doria, the vicar of Masnou, wrote in 1936: “One day Joan said to me: 'I normally dedicate at least two hours a day to spiritual life: Mass, communion, meditation and visit to the Blessed Sacrament; it is little, but my work and the apostolate do not give me more.”

In July 1936, Joan told some of his fellow members of the FJCC they should all be preparing to receive martyrdom with grace and courage, as did the first Christians.

In the intense persecution that followed, it is estimated that some 300 young people from this organization were killed in Catalonia, including some 40 priests. The headquarters of the FJCC was burned.

Joan's mother said that in those days her son "was relieving sorrows, encouraging the timid, visiting the wounded, searching hospitals daily among the dead to find out which of his own had been killed."

"Every night, at the foot of the bed, with the crucifix clasped in his hands, he implored for some clemency, for others forgiveness, and for all mercy and strength," she said.

Cardinal Omella said: "Joan teaches us that all Christians are called to live our faith in community. No one builds his own faith alone, the Christian faith is essentially communal."

Blessed Joan Roig Diggle is currently buried in a side chapel at the parish of St. Peter in El Masnou in Barcelona.

"He can be a model of Christian life for young people and adults in our society, his testimony can arouse the desire to follow Christ with joy and generosity. The deep friendship with God, prayer, the Eucharistic life and the apostolic ardor of the young blessed unites us to Christ and his Gospel," the cardinal said.

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