

AN ASSASSINATION THAT SPEAKS OF RESURRECTION

Funeral Mass for Fr Octavio Ortiz Luna¹
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 21, 1979

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Matthew 1:14-20

Before the Archbishop of San Salvador delivered his homily, Dr. Jorge Lara Braud, representative of the World Council of Churches located in Geneva and representative of the Nation Council of Churches in the United States, offered his condolences to the people of El Salvador. Among other things he said: *I am able to listen to the priest, Octavio Ortiz Luna, speak from eternity, from the place where there is no more weeping or mourning or death. He speaks to each one of us, his sisters and brothers who continue to journey here on earth: "Now I rejoice in what I have suffered for you and in my flesh I complete what was lacking in the afflictions of Christ, afflictions that were offered up for the good of his body: the Church." As a representative of my adopted country, the United States, and as a representative of the Christians in my adopted country, I ask pardon of you, my sisters and brothers of El Salvador, because my country has supported a social order that creates more poor persons and rewards oppressors. The World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches is united with all of you at this time of mourning. We unite with you in this subversive joy that is able to proclaim: they have not killed Octavio Ortiz Luna and his brothers; they have not assassinated them; they have given them eternal life.*

Then the Archbishop proclaimed the following words:

My beloved priests:

Thank you for coming here because you sacrificed your time and yet by your presence you express your solidarity which at this solemn moment enables us to experience ourselves as intimate brothers. Thank you also for the ecumenical voice of our brother, Pastor Jorge Lara Brund, who with his brief message gives us great encouragement in our pilgrimage that profoundly unites all persons: Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic --- all people who try to be faithful interpreters of the gospel that can be difficult to live at this time when so many responsibilities are placed upon us.

The Catholic people that gather around the body of our beloved priest, Father Octavio Ortiz and the four young men who died with him and were also riddled with bullets, Angel Morales, Jorge Alberto Gomez, Roberto Orellana and David Alberto Caballero --- this people, present here today, gather with an ecumenical and an eschatological perspective. This multitude that fills the Cathedral and the park cannot be confined in this place. Through our radio transmission we reach out to the whole Republic. We move out beyond the boundaries of the Diocese and the nation and we become united in faith and hope with the People of God who are on pilgrimage throughout the world.

My sisters and brothers, there are very few times that we experience the celebration of Sunday Mass as we do today. The Second Vatican Council speaks about our Sunday celebration: *By a tradition handed down from the apostles which took its origin from the very day of Christ's resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every eighth day; with good reason this, then, bears the name of the Lord's Day or Sunday. For on this day Christ's faithful are bound to come together into one place so that, by hearing the word of God and taking part in the Eucharist, they may call to mind the passion, the resurrection and the glorification of the Lord Jesus, and may thank God who "has begotten them again, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto a living hope"* (1). This hope and participation in the death of Christ becomes painfully alive as we gather around the bodies of our brothers who proclaim to us the meaning of the three readings that we have just heard.

Before reflecting on the readings I want to speak to you who form this multitude. You are members of different communities who have come from every part of the Diocese and nation. We experience here this earthly liturgy, this celebration of the Eucharist in the Cathedral (the Cathedral that seems so small in light of your faith and love that has forced us to go out into the street) a communion that unites us --- all of this is a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy. We question ourselves as we gather in the presence of these bodies that are not dead but are journeying to true life so that we, the community that is still on pilgrimage, might become more secure in the hope that is so alive in the hearts of all of you. You are an ecclesial community that is able to speak about events like those that we refer to every week.

Life of the Church

Our continent is experiencing great expectation as the journey of the Pope to Mexico and the meeting in Puebla draw near. My heart is divided before these expectations. I have a sincere desire to go to meet the Pope and my brother bishops from all the different parts of the continent. This is not a time of vacation or rest but a time during which I search for ways that will enable me to serve you better. I want to share the unfathomable wealth of our Archdiocese, a wealth that is so great. When I speak about this wealth of the Archdiocese, I speak about you and your communities, your suffering and your persecution. Yes, I feel like Saint Paul because I want to remain with you at this painful and dangerous time for our Church (2). But at the same time I feel the need to bring your voice with me and make that voice be heard in Puebla, make that voice be heard throughout the continent and throughout the world. I am weak and even though I am a Pastor, yet I am a poor Christian and I feel that my faith is strengthened by my contact with the Roman Pontiff.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I ask your permission to leave you as orphans for a little while so that I might bring to Puebla your treasure and then return here and bring you the strength of the Pope and of my brother bishops who are going to gather together in Puebla. I ask you for your prayers,. I want my presence in Puebla to be the presence of an Archdiocese at prayer and so I ask you to pray often. Today we have five new intercessors in heaven who love this Diocese and who, in their desire to serve this Diocese better, were preparing themselves in that gathering where they met with death. Let us pray, then, that Puebla might be what America and the world expect from her.

This is beautiful! I want to gather together the voice of all of you, my sisters and brothers, and hear in your voice the words that Father Alex Poprawa from Las Flores in Chalatenango sent to me in a telegram: *A poor elderly woman has offered a Mass for you and sends her best wishes for your trip to Mexico.* Just as this elderly woman is in prayer so I hope to be able to rely on the prayers of all of you who are the Church of the Archdiocese.

I also want to leave you with a recommendation. Be very careful about the manipulation of the news. Be careful because Puebla is becoming like a very delightful morsel for those persons who distort the truth of reality. Indeed, after having seen the brutal distortions of the events that we lament today, we have great reason to fear that such a sacred event, an event of great hope, may find its true significance manipulated by our political system and economic powers and the media. We must rise above all this and try to live the true message of Puebla that we will be careful to transmit to you in our Diocesan publications and broadcasts.

The community that is gathered here at the Cathedral is a community that, as we have been reminded by our esteemed brother, Jorge Lara Braud, celebrates the Octave for Christian Unity. In all the Catholic and Protestant churches people are praying with a hope for unity. Do not allow the gospel to be manipulated because the gospel is not some political or convenient game. The gospel must be above all those interests and able to speak clearly to all those persons who try to cover over the authentic message of the gospel. Together with our Protestant sisters and brothers, let us continue to search for the gospel that will enable us to serve our people who suffer so greatly.

At this time I also want to express our condolences to two brother priests: Father Gabriel Rodríguez who mourns the death of his father and Father Porfirio Martínez from the Diocese of San Vicente whose brother, Gilberto, was assassinated in San Francisco, Chinameca.

I am also pleased with you in this community and with the spirit of sharing that you try to cultivate and which is expressed from as far away as New York where a Christian from our community, Marcos Luis Maldonado, has sent me one hundred dollars and told me: *This is a small donation for the people who are in need at this time in my country ... With all my love I send you this donation that I have earned through my work. In order to survive I have had to separate myself from my loved ones and from my country, something that I least desired to do at this time of Christmas.*

The Church that is gathered together here has also received support from a great Prelate of South America, Bishop Leonidas Proaño from Rio Bamba, Ecuador. He wrote to me and yesterday I received his letter: *We follow with interest the painful events of San Salvador. We are united with you and with all Christians who are suffering because of the gospel. I hope that we are able to see one another during the Conference in Puebla and mutually comfort one another in our struggle to bring to birth a people who become the People of God and who walk toward their integral liberation.*

I cannot omit the news about the event that brings us here together today: the bloody and painful case of Octavio Ortiz Luna. Concerning this matter the Diocese states that the official statement that the media published² is filled with lies from the beginning to the end. The Church's means of communication are pointing out, one by one, all the lies and slanderous statements that are contained in the few lines of the official statement that should have guarded the faith of the country.

Thanks to God we are able to reconstruct the truth because of the testimony of many persons who survived this tragedy and who were brought to the prison of the National Guard. Thanks be to God the same thing did not occur here as in the case of our poor brother, Ernesto Barrera, where the only witness who could have clarified the truth concerning Father Barrera's death was also assassinated by the Security Forces so that there were no witnesses to that criminal act.

I share with you the first testimony that we have received. ... *today, at 6:00am, when I was sleeping ... Sleeping, keep in mind all these details. This was a gathering of young men who had come together for Christian formation. These were not men who were armed to defend themselves, they were sleeping. ... I was sleeping in the place where the retreat house is located, a center called El Despertar by the Christian community ... I invite those who are unfamiliar with this house to go there so that you can see that this is not some kind of barracks or a place that intends to train guerrilleros, but rather for many years this center has been dedicated to the formation of Christian groups and instilling in these groups Christian values and naturally, these values are dangerous at this time in our history. ... a center called El Despertar by the Christian community that is the property of the Archbishop of San Salvador and located in the parish of San Antonio Abad.*

The eye witness continues to speak: ... *in a violent way many uniformed members of the National Guard and the National Police entered the building and fired their weapons. At the same time, a large green vehicle, one of those vehicles that is called a military tank as well as a military jeep violently entered the Christian retreat center and parked on the central patio.*

The eye witness states: ... *in this Center, I, together with Father Octavio Ortiz Luna, a Catholic priest, and ten other young men were leading a meeting of Christian Initiation for twenty-eight young men whose ages ranged between thirteen and twenty-one. This place is dedicated exclusively to Christian formation. No other types of meetings have occurred here --- no meeting of persons who conspire against the State, no meetings that teach anarchist doctrine to be used against the public order. During this cursillo that is called Christian Initiation for Young People, a meeting that began on Friday, January 19th at 7:00pm, hymnals and musical instruments, such as guitars, were used. None of the participants in said Christian meeting possessed any weapons. Before being arrested by uniformed members of the National Police I was able to see on the floor and in front of the offices the body of the priest, Octavio Ortiz, who was lying in a pool of blood, bleeding from his head. The police transported me and another leader of the Christian formation team in a radio patrol vehicle to the central headquarters of the National Guard where we were interrogated and where I said all the things that I have stated in this document³. During the interrogation I was asked about the Archbishop and if it was true that he came to sow subversion in the Center.*

This statement of the Archdiocese (and thanks to God other testimonies⁴ will be added to this first statement) enables people to see the contrast between the government's version of this event --- a version filled with lies --- and the lived reality as recounted by eye witnesses. We can draw some conclusions;

First. Our Security Forces are incapable of recognizing their errors but make things worse by falsifying the truth with slander. Thus, our government and the media lose credibility with each day that passes and we are obliged to turn toward international organizations and publications because we no longer believe in the truth or the justice of our government.

Second. Therefore, the purification of the corrupt system of our nation's security is urgent. Our people's sense of frustration is heightened when they see a ray of hope because of a change in direction in certain groups dedicated to the nation's security⁵ and then experience that ray of hope as the darkness of night as they come face to face with the brutal reality that we are denouncing here.

Third. Once again the evil and the danger of the Law of Public Order is proven. Possible suspicions are legalized and used to justify actions that violate the freedom and the life of the people of El Salvador.

Fourth. Enough! We say this not with pessimism but with great optimism in the strength of our noble people. Our environment is saturated with brutality and we need to create an atmosphere of reflection that will enable us to experience ourselves as rational beings who are able to seek out the roots of our evil situation and then, without fear, make the bold and urgent changes that our society needs.

Finally, I want to remind you that the material and intellectual authors of the assassination of Father Octavio Cruz have incurred canonical excommunication, which in this case means excommunication from the Church. Many people may laugh at this but perhaps this will also make them think about the Church that identifies herself with the people and realize that it is the people who affirm this excommunication and repudiate the evil that they have done. The Church, however, even though she acts as a severe mother, is always mindful of mercy. Therefore, as the Church prays for the eternal rest of the victims of this violence and extends her comfort to the families who are in mourning, the same Church asks for and awaits the conversion of those who carried out this act of assassination.

The body of Father Octavio Ortiz Luna and the four young men who were killed with him yesterday, proclaim the Easter message. This is our Church! These five people who have died bring us a transcendental message and today, as we gather together before their bodies, we must listen to them in the silence of death.

Father Ortiz! A young priest who was born on March 23, 1944 in the village of Cacaopera in the Department of Morazán. He preserved his *campesino* simplicity and understood that the greatness of a human person has nothing to do with appearances but has everything to do with the search for the truth. His parents, Alejandro Ortiz and Exaltación Luna, proud of their *campesino* style of life, are with us today. To them and to the parents of the other four young men, I once again extend my condolences. Fr. Ortiz came to study in El Seminario San José de la Montaña and I had the pleasure of being the bishop who ordained him --- this was the beginning of my Episcopal ministry. Father Ortiz ministered in the community of Zacimil, a community that he always loved. At the time of his assassination he was fully involved in ministry.

If someone were to ask me how he spent his last day, I could describe it perfectly. In the morning he was working with those who had organized the week of reflection on the theme of priestly identity and was writing a synthesis of the rich message that had been produced during the week. In the afternoon he was in a meeting of the pro-seminario which I presided over. Octavio coordinated this meeting and he had a special gift of being able to lead these meetings in such a way that they were always productive. From there he went to San Antonio Abad where he celebrated Mass and then in the evening he began to share his reflections with a group of young men. Mother Chepita followed up his reflections by giving the group two questions to ponder before they woke up in El Despertar. What a horrible and tragic awakening --- the awakening to death that today gives us this sad message.

I want to reflect on the Biblical readings --- forgive me but I am not going to speak very long. I simply want to reflect on our reality from the perspective of the gospel, theology and our pastoral ministry. I want to reaffirm the fact that my homilies are not political discourses even though they are proclamations that touch on the political reality of our people. This is done, however, in order to illuminate these realities and tell you what God desires and what

God does not desire. We have already listened to the Word that now illuminates the bloody events that we commemorate --- even though there might have been some difficulty because of some defect in the sound system. We can say, however, that in this circumstance we give the following title to our message: an assassination that speaks to us about resurrection. I will develop the following three points: first: the presence of a new world which lives the resurrection of Christ; second: to live in this new world Christ calls us to conversion; third: to grow in this new world and become light of the earth, salt and light of the world, it is necessary to have faith.

Presence of a new world in the resurrection of Christ

The presence of this new world is emphasized in the three readings. In the first reading Nineveh is a prototype of the great cities: frivolous, selfish, sinful. God sends the message of Jonah to these people: *Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed* (3). Today's reading tells us that the people in the city took advantage of this time and everyone repented. God, then, forgave the people of that city.

Every state in life is a vocation and the social situation provides a framework in which one finds holiness. In the second reading Saint Paul speaks about the particular situation of people: some are married and others have no marital commitment, some are slaves and others are masters. He says that this situation provides the framework in which God desires to sanctify them and at the same time people must purify these different situations of sin. Every situation in the world is good for people to become holy as long as they demonstrate that they are not in agreement with sin. Thus the struggle of Christians is to repent and change the world of sin into the Kingdom of God that is near.

Jesus, the great teacher on this Sunday, tells us: *This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel* (4). This is the time of fulfillment because this is the time of the Risen Christ. Christ has begun a new era here on earth and blessed are those who discover the secret of the resurrection because for them, despite criminal actions and evil, life in the world becomes the power and the framework for salvation. *The time is running out ... For the world in its present form is passing away* (5). God saves in the particular history of each people and each person. Saint Paul says: *Let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.* Octavio found a treasure and was sharing this treasure with young people. This is the great message that Octavio and the four young men give us: the world in its present form is passing away and the only thing that will remain is the joy of having used this world in order to make the Kingdom of God present. All pomp, all triumphs, all selfish capitalism, and all the false successes of life will pass away. What will not pass away is love. When one has turned money, property, work in one's profession into service of others, then the joy of sharing and feeling that all are one's sisters and brothers does not pass away. *In the evening of life you will be judged on love*⁶. Octavio and the four young men who died with him are being judged by the Lord: judged concerning their love. How beautiful it is to be able to present oneself as a poor priest, one who has renounced everything with the simplicity of a *campesino* in which one glories. How beautiful to have made accessible all that can be found in the gospel concerning the poor and needy --- the great message that God communicates in order to save the world.

This new world is accepted by conversion

The use of the goods of this earth. This is what it means to repent and this is what St Paul has taught us in today's reading. The reason for this conversion is that no one is able to serve two masters. (6) There is only one God and that God will either be the true God who asks us to give things up when they become sinful or it will be the god of money who makes us turn our backs on Christianity's God. There are many people who prefer the god who turns their backs rather than the true God and therefore they criticize the Church and kill Octavio and try to destroy every movement that tries to overthrow the false gods and attempts to present the true God.

This new world is lived through faith

For this reason, my sisters and brothers, Jesus says: *This kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel* (7). The gospel then recounts the calling of the first four ecclesiastical members of the hierarchy: Peter and his brother Andrew, James and his brother, John. These men left everything when the Lord invited them to enter into this state of conversion. They did not simply put aside sin but also fulfilled the will of God.

I want to tell you, my dear brother priests, (and thank you also for being attentive to my words), that the hundred of you who are here, vested with stoles and gathered around the altar, you are the successors of Peter and Andrew and James and John. God asks the same thing of us as he did of those first apostles and that he asked of Octavio, for indeed Octavio has given all of us an example with his bloodied stole and his chasuble of pain and his disfigured face. Father Octavio died with his face crushed. How did this happen? We do not know the details but the doctor has stated: *He died as a result of being crushed*. To prepare his body for burial the undertaker at Funeria Auxiliadora had to work long hours because he did not want to leave him as he was. Father Octavio was transformed because he turned his face toward Jesus. This is what the Lord asks of all of us.

I am happy to tell you, my beloved sisters and brothers, that at a time when it is most dangerous to be a priest, there are many more young men entering the seminary. This year twenty-seven young men who have graduated from high school are at the doors of our seminary ready to begin their studies. Indeed, the Kingdom of God that is present in the midst of the world is the Kingdom that enables these noble young men to proclaim the words of the gospel: *Let us also go to die with him* (8).

But this community that has been reflecting here in light of the Word of God lives in a world where sin is enthroned and where people struggle to establish the Kingdom of God in their midst. In this struggle, however, there is no need for tanks or machine guns. In this struggle there is no need for swords or rifles. The only things necessary in this struggle are songbooks and guitars for these are able to plant seeds in the hearts of people and reform the world. "Violence, even for just causes, is always violence and is not effective, not worthy", says the Pope. I would hope that people who, in the face of events such as those that have just occurred, might be tempted to have recourse to vengeance and violence --- I would hope that people would control these feelings and realize that there is a violence that is superior to the violence of tanks and the violence of *guerrillas*, and that is the violence of Christ: *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do* (9). The recognition of this fact is more powerful than the violence of arms which only makes people more brutish, because not even the animals use weapons.

Events of the week

For this reason this week has been a time during which we must weep. The presence of these bodies serves as a synthesis of the abduction of Ernesto Liebes⁷. We still know nothing about his whereabouts and his ill health makes us fear a tragic ending. To those who have acted in this violent way, be aware of the fact that abduction is not a civilized act nor is the disappearance of loved ones and the imprisonment of people without a trial. This is savagery --- all of this is savagery!

I also want to speak about the two Englishmen and the man from Japan who were abducted. Their captors refuse to grant them liberty until five political prisoners are released. Hopefully the Lord will move their hearts and lead them to release these men, our brothers.

We must also remember that during this week members of the FAPO occupied the Embassy of Mexico, the offices of the Organization of American States and the Red Cross and also attempted to take over the lands of the Chanico estate. All of this was done to put pressure on the government to repeal the Law of Public Order. They also asked for a general amnesty. The result of all of this: thirty persons isolated, eight-six persons arrested, and nineteen persons sentenced before the Courts. This has shown the international community that there is no freedom of expression in our country and therefore people feel obliged to have recourse to these extreme measures of pressure but then the Security Forces react with inflexibility and brutality.

I also want to let you know that I have not been able to do anything in this conflict even though the Organization of American States in Washington has asked me to intervene in this situation. I had to tell them that when I sent some priests on this mission, their passports and personal identification papers were taken from them and they were not allowed to proceed. It is clear that the Church is not recognized here as a power that loves the rights of human beings.

Despite all that is happening in our country, the President has stated in Mexico that the Church is not persecuted. And he committed our newspapers, putting on the first page⁸ a fact we are witnessing here today in the Cathedral that shows his words are not true. The President has stated that the Church's crisis is caused by third-world clergy. He denounced the preaching of the Archbishop as political discourse and said that I do not proclaim the spirituality that many other priests continue to preach. He also stated that I am using my homilies to promote my candidacy for the Nobel Prize. Does he really believe that I am that vain? When asked about the fourteen families that control the land and the economic power of the country⁹, the President denied the truth of such statements and also said that there were no political prisoners and that no one had disappeared in the country.

Last night a reporter from Mexico called me and asked me what I thought about the President's statement. I told him that I was unaware of any statement that he had made. The reporter then read me his statements and I replied: *The best response that you can give is to publish in your newspaper the events that we are living at this time: a priest and four young men were assassinated by the National Guard.* He was interested in this news. When he asked me to explain the campaign of slander and defamation against the Archbishop and the clergy I said: *this is precisely why we say that the Church is persecuted: the psychotic campaign against Christian communities --- isn't this persecution? Isn't the trampling of the*

people's human rights also persecution? The Church considers this her ministry: to defend God's image in human beings. I concluded by saying: The Church is with the people and thanks be to God, the people are with the Church.

My sisters and brothers, in light of the Word of God, these events and realities speak to us about the fact that there is only one salvation: that which is found in Christ, the Lord. Thus, the gospel of Saint Mark that we bring to the altar tells us: *The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel* (10). Lord, today our conversion and faith are supported in these bodies that are before us in these coffins. They are messengers of the reality of our people and the noble aspirations of the Church that desires nothing more than the salvation of people. Look, Lord, upon the multitude gathered together in the Cathedral. Hear the prayers of the people who cry out and weep yet are not discouraged because they believe that Jesus has not lied. The kingdom of God is near and you only ask us to repent and believe in Jesus.

Let us respond now with the Creed. We believe...

¹ On January 20 Fr Octavio Ortiz Luna, a diocesan priest, was assassinated by the National Guard together with four youths in the retreat house *El Despertar*, in the parish of San Antonio Abad. See Boletín informativo n° 55 of the Secretariat for Social Communications of the Archdiocese of San Salvador (20 January 1979), in *ECA* 363/364 (1979) pp. 87-88.

² See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 21 January 1979.

³ Statement from Sister María José Forrier. See *Manuscritos de los esquemas de la homilias de monseñor Oscar A. Romero*, Office for the Canonization of Mons. Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador.

⁴ See "Terror en El Salvador" (21 January 1979), *Orientación*, 28 January 1979, and "¡Basta ya!", Communiqué of the Archdiocese and priests of San Salvador on the occasion of the assassination of the martyrs of *El Despertar*, San Antonio Abad (22 January 1979), *Orientación*, 28 January 1979.

⁵ On January 3 1979 Colonel José Antonio Corleto was appointed director of the National Guard. See *El Diario de Hoy*, 4 January 1979.

⁶ See St John of the Cross, *Obras completas*, Madrid, 1988, p. 94.

⁷ Ernesto Liebes, a Salvadoran businessman and general consul for Israel in El Salvador, was kidnapped by FARN on 17 January 1979. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 18 January 1979.

⁸ See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 21 January 1979.

⁹ El Salvador is known as the "country of the fourteen families", the small group of land-owners who possess most of the country's wealth.

Marginal References (1) SC 106; (2) Ph 1,23-24; (3) Jon 3,4; (4) Mk 1,15; (5) 1Cor 7,29-31; (6) Mt 6,24; (7) Mki 1,15; (8) Jn 11,16; (9) Lk 23,34; (10) Mk 1,15.