

THE VOICE OF BLOOD

Homily at the funeral of Father Rafael Palacios¹ June 21, 1979

Honourable Bishop Rivera of Santiago de María, beloved priests of the Archdiocese and of our sister dioceses, thanks for sharing this time of pain with us.

My dear sisters and brothers, the voice of blood is more eloquent than words. Therefore this seat of learning experiences a unity that is the result of the testimony of blood that has almost become the ordinary voice that is heard in this Cathedral. Here the blood of priests and so many people has been spilled on our soil. So in this Cathedral we have attempted to interpret the language of all this blood that has been shed in the mountains and the streets and the highways and the beaches of our nation. The Cathedral, which interprets the language of pain and anguish, attempts to view this bloodshed as a message of comfort and hope.

Today in the cathedral the blood of a priest, the blood of Rafael Palacios, cries out. He offered his life not only yesterday when he was machine-gunned in the streets of Santa Tecla, but this element of sacrifice was a part of his life from the very beginning. He was born in the village of Talcyualuya in San Luis Talpa in the Department of La Paz on October 16th, 1938. His parents are Don Rafael and Doña Concepción. He remained faithful to this love between son and parents and this love inspired him and provided him with a guarantee that he walked on the path of goodness. His family later moved to Suchitoto and this place became the adoptive home of Rafael and his family who are present with us today. Rafael ministered in the parish of Tecoluca and the Cathedral parish in the diocese of San Vicente. Later he ministered here in the Archdiocese in Santa Tecla, Ilopango and finally in San Francisco, Mejicanos.

This long journey of Father Palacios tells us that we are dealing with a life that has been characterized by righteousness, a desire for knowledge, an intransigence with regard to the truth --- perhaps in this matter even a bit exaggerated. But all of this is what has made him the victim that we now gather up: the fifth priest assassinated in the Archdiocese². We gather up his body with the same respect and love that we have shown to the other priests and that we have shared with so many countless people who have died in our country as a result of assassination. The event that we are celebrating is very serious not only because it involves a priest --- though this certainly seems to be inconceivable in a nation that proclaims herself to be Christian --- but because the blood that has been shed cries out from the depths. This morning in this message of blood we are invited to listen to three ideas: One: a revelation of the mystery of iniquity; Two: a revelation of the mystery of fidelity to Jesus; Three: a message of hope for our people.

A revelation of the mystery of iniquity

In the assassination of Father Rafael, the voice of blood denounces the evil that exists in our people: the evil of sin (1). The most eloquent manifestation, the logic of sin, is death. The Bible tells us that through sin death entered the world (2) and when death is so directly connected with sin that it becomes a criminal disobedience of the fifth commandment, *You shall not kill*, then it also becomes very clear that sin and death are mysteries of iniquity.

In the silence of death Father Rafael denounces the sins of the world, but with great respect it can also be said that he also denounces the sins of the Church and his own personal sins.

First, the sins of the world. The Church, like Christ, continues to denounce the sins of the world, continues to uproot it and is willing, if necessary, to be crucified in order to do all of these things. The sin of the world is so evident in the death of Father Rafael that we can say that in his death we have seen a stupid violence and an irrational vengeance. Why does the extreme right seek to revenge the supposed sin of the extreme left by taking the life of a priest? This is sinful. The fact that we view people in this country as polarized between the right and left leads us to the realization that there is a very serious crisis in the structures of our nation. The bishops in Medellin spoke about sinful structures (3), structures of violence and as long as these structures do not change they will continue to claim victims, victims from both the left and the right (4).

It is irrational and stupid to seek revenge in such a criminal, treacherous and premeditated way. It is irrational and stupid to seek revenge by killing a priest and then attempting to blame the left for this action. The priest is neither a leftist nor a rightist. From the depths of his heart the priest loves everyone. The priest is the voice of the Church, the voice of love that affirms a preferential option for the poor, a voice that does not exclude the wealthy but that proclaims to them that they cannot be saved as long as they distance and separate themselves from the anxiety of the poor. The priests are the Lord's ministers who, like God, are called to be happy but not in some selfish way but by sharing their gifts and talents with all people.

On Saturday night, Father Rafael was looking for me and gave me a letter in which he spoke about the threats that the UGB had made against him on Thursday. They had painted the ill-fated hand of vengeance on his car. Yesterday when the meeting of the Vicariate of Mejicanos was concluded, (a meeting that was led by Father Palacios since his parish was located within this Vicariate) he said: *Today someone in the military was killed³ and I have been threatened and fear something very serious is going to happen in Santa Tecla.* He was afraid and his fear was realized. It seemed to me that he was exaggerating but yesterday when I received the tragic news, I thought: *How serious indeed is the situation of our country.*

If it is true that the death of Father Palacios was an act of revenge for the death that occurred the previous day (the same thing was said about the death of Father Navarro: an act of revenge for the abduction and assassination that occurred the previous day), then we can ask: what is the basis of this revenge? I believe that the denunciation of the death of Father is a demand for justice. Those who have in their hands the power to control these forces of hell, these forces of assassination --- these persons must control them. When they want to they can control these forces. I remember when the same phantom organization threatened the Jesuit community, the President of the Republic called upon people to use common sense and the killings were halted. Thus we see that this can be done if there is a will to do this.

How long must we support these crimes without being able to have recourse to justice? Where is the justice of our nation? What is the Supreme Court of Justice doing? Where is the honor of our democracy if people are allowed to die like dogs and then these deaths, like that of Father Rafael, are not investigated? In the name of the citizens of this nation I ask, I demand that this criminal action be investigated. Since at least one of the branches of these organizations is under the control of people who can hold the group responsible, I ask, I demand that a stop be put to this growing spiral of violence.

Structured institutional sin has taken a hold of and penetrated our society and as a result we have become insensitive. It is incredible to think that because of the fear of a possible communist threat we forget about the sins that have become a reality in our midst. At this time as we gather up another victim of these unjust structures, it is necessary to reflect on how we can restructure the life

of our nation. Those who have in their hands the leadership of our nation and those members of the political classes --- these people have to understand that the power of repression is experienced most violently. Why do they do not use their power to restrain the forces of the right? These forces are also stupid and violent.

Poor Father Palacios, you paid the price that logically awaited you in your ministry of denouncing and clarifying of the situation of our country. Rafael knew our reality and focused on this reality but did so in light of the gospel that always illuminates the injustices, disorders and abuses of society. Naturally this leads arrogant sinners to raise up their hands in anger and hatred because they do not want to listen to someone who speaks about sin.

With great respect and humility I also say that the death of Father Rafael denounces the sins of the Church. Excuse me, my sisters and brothers, we are the Church and at this time when the family gathers together to receive the body of one of its members, we have to examine ourselves: perhaps we have some culpability in all of this. Let us accept our responsibility. Sin is the sad inheritance of the Church that is composed of women and men. Although her uniqueness is seen in the continual call to conversion yet there are many who do not embrace this invitation to change their lives. Here we have the case of a priest who attempted to be faithful to this call and denounced injustice in the world and perhaps did not find support in his bishop, his brother priests or the People of God. Perhaps we have collaborated in this unjust finger pointing that assigned this priest a death sentence.

I believe that the death of Father Rafael ought to make us think and react and reflect on the doctrine that we preach. We must expand our horizons in order to understand the revolution of the Church. Instead of feeling comfortable and secure in our position that resists any evolution in the life of the Church, we should have the courage to follow those persons who are concerned about being authentic voices of the Church rather than condemn or slander or doubt them. Any fraternal correction must be based on love. Denunciation made with love, even within the Church, is necessary. But we should never give our hand to the enemy and put in the hands of our enemies weapons that can and will be used to terminate the lives of the beloved members of our Church.

This is the time to reflect on the sins of the Church, sins that we are all capable of committing. The one who denounces sin and injustice must be willing to be denounced. I speak with Christian and evangelical honesty to the Christian community and invite everyone to examine their conduct with regard to the demands of the Church, demands that do not allow us to turn aside from our preferential option for the poor, from our denunciation of sin or from all those realities that make us followers of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, I also say that the voice of Father Rafael's blood has called us together to celebrate this Eucharist and to ask for mercy for our brother, to ask God to forgive him his sins. What priest does not experience his sinfulness? When celebrating the Eucharist he is the first one to remind the people of his sinfulness: *I confess before God that I am a sinner and I ask you to pray for me.*

The hour of sincerity and the hour of death is not a time to veil the sins, defects and weaknesses of a person who has died. Anyone of us could point out certain defects of Fr. Palacios, but this is the time to say: *Father, forgive him because he needs your mercy and forgiveness.*

Therefore with complete honesty it must be admitted that his blood cries out against sin wherever it is found.

A revelation of the mystery of fidelity to Jesus

I said that the voice of the blood that was shed by Father Rafael also reveals to us the mystery of fidelity. There is no fidelity without bloodshed. Last Sunday we were reminded of this fact when we heard the Word of God proclaim that God himself sealed the covenant of faithfulness with the people by sprinkling blood over the altar and the people.⁽⁵⁾ This was done as a sign to express the intimate union between God and the people, a sign that could not be expressed without blood. Therefore I believe that Jesus, the model for all Christians, had to seal his fidelity to the Father with blood. Thus everyone who wants to be a faithful follower of Christ and God has to ritualize this following with blood.

I also want to state that the great witness that Rafael Palacios gives us this morning is the following: faithfulness to his vocation, faithfulness that led him to the extreme of being machine-gunned while fulfilling his priestly duty. I can affirm his fidelity to the Church: a fidelity that was inspired by the gospel and a fidelity that from the perspective of the gospel was bold in denouncing the sins of the Church because he wanted the Church to be faithful to Jesus and because the voice of those who want to be faithful to Jesus Christ will have to find in the Church something to say to others.

Fidelity to the poor. Despite his dignified posture, always clean and groomed, he was nonetheless poor. I can honestly say that his faithfulness to poverty led him to be a priest who had no desire for money. He celebrated Mass and served people with no concern for stipends or payment of any kind. How easily is priestly ministry prostituted and commercialized! How wonderful to uphold this fidelity to poverty! This, a witness to lived poverty, is what allows the priest to speak to the rich.

A message of hope for our people

Finally, my sisters and brothers, at this time of the Church's suffering I want all of us to hear a message of hope. When a Christian or a priest is killed we are pained. I have seen people cry and I have been touched by the profound grief of the communities that knew Father Rafael. Yesterday a lay person told me: *he sowed love but they killed him!* Why can we weep and yet be hopeful at the same time? I believe that this weeping indicates that Father Rafael leaves behind profound marks of the evangelization that he was engaged in and so we are given the seeds of a very fertile evangelization process and asked to continue to move this process forward.

I believe that the priestly witness of Rafael, sealed with the shedding of his blood, is a reason for hope. In him we see the new man and the desire that he had to bring forth new men and women that are so urgently needed in Latin America.⁽⁶⁾ Changing structures is not enough --- we need to change hearts. This is the voice of conversion and the voice of an authentic evangelization. That is what gives us great hope. We have the example of priests who, like Father Rafael, know how to motivate people with the gospel. Two days before his death, Rafael led the vicariate of Mejicanos in a process of evaluation and reflected with the group on a passage from Saint Luke's gospel. He saw the importance of renewing ourselves and our ministry because he realized that no matter how holy we might be, we can easily fall into sin. We need people like Father Rafael because he was not only demanding of other people but also demanding of himself. He was demanding because he wanted people to be cleansed of their sins and wanted all of us to live according to the will of God.

His death opens to us the perspective of transcendence and the absolute. Rafael has died and his word cannot be confused with the voices of this earth. If slander or misunderstanding led people to

confuse his voice with the voices of others who seek freedom only here on earth, then now through the light of death we can understand that his message elevates us to a level that moves beyond history and the realities of this earth. His death is not silence but the most eloquent voice because through his blood that was shed on earth and through his spirit that has ascended to heaven he now tells us: *Work even to the extreme of leaving your blood in the streets, but die with the hope that everything will be accomplished in God. So be it.**

¹ Fr Rafael Palacios Campos, priest of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, was assassinated on 20 June 1979. See Boletín informativo n.º 66 of the Secretaría de Comunicación del Arzobispado de San Salvador (20 June 1979), *Orientación*, 24 June 1979, and Pronunciamiento del Arzobispado de San Salvador con ocasión de la muerte del Padre Rafael Palacios (27 June 1979), *Orientación*, 8 July 1979.

² The other priests assassinated are: Rutilio Grande García, 12 March 1977; Alfonso Navarro Oviedo, 11 May 1977; Ernesto Barrera Motto, 28 November 1978; and Octavio Ortiz Luna, 20 January 1979.

³ Major Armando de Paz was assassinated on 19 June 1979. See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 20 June 1979.

Marginal References (1) Rm 5,12; (2) Ex 20,13; (3) M 2,1; (4) M 2,16; (5) Ex 24,3-8; (6) M 1,3.