

## WHY DID THEY KILL RAFAEL PALACIOS?

**30 day anniversary of the death of Rafael Palacios**  
**20 July 1979.**

My dear sisters and brothers

There is an absence among the priests that I want to interpret with a word that denounces a new injustice that has just been committed. Father Astor Ruíz was returning from Medellín Colombia and he was not allowed to enter the country but deported to Guatemala. He had time to leave a letter that he brought from Medellín --- a letter that was signed by all the priests, religious and lay persons who participated in a course on the document of Puebla. Father was doing nothing wrong, simply studying the official document of the Church in order to understand it better and learn how to apply this document. At the airport he was able to leave the following letter.

*Dear Bishop: In light of the latest event in the history of the Church of our sister nation, the assassination of Father Rafael Palacios that occurred on June 20<sup>th</sup>, from this part of America where we are gathered together from diverse parts of the continent trying to study the Latin American reality, we want you to hear our voice that repudiates the attitude of those who eliminate the agents of evangelization and we want you to hear our voice of solidarity with you and with your clergy. Be assured, Bishop, that we follow step by step the events of your country and we have taken on an attitude of prayer and study hoping that your country will find a definitive liberation --- a problem that is common to all of our countries. Your sisters and brothers from Latin America.* The letter is signed by all the participants.

The reason for this letter is the same reason that brings us together here in the Cathedral. The violent death that victimized Father Rafael Palacios makes us think first of all about prayer on this anniversary of his death. This is precisely what we are doing here in the Cathedral. Today, July 20<sup>th</sup>, thirty days after the assassination that left Father Palacios bathed in his own blood on the streets of Santa Tecla, we are praying. It is natural --- and every family has this right --- that the Church family, following a Christian tradition, invites and gathers together to celebrate this anniversary with prayers for the deceased. We are doing nothing wrong that we should be watched in such a spectacular way. When I arrived at the Cathedral I was surprised by the barriers of the police and the army at the three entrances. We are not doing anything wrong by coming here. We simply want to pray for our deceased brother. Every family has a right to pray for those who have died and our Church is a family. One of our members has been killed and we have the intention of praying for his eternal rest. Clearly this moment is such a solemn time that prayer for his eternal rest transcends life.

For Rafael Palacios there is no longer such a reality as thirty days. It is we who continue our pilgrimage through history, who continue to count the days that the Lord divided by nights. But in eternity, where we are all journeying toward that transcendence, eternity is an eternal day illuminated by the light of the Lamb. Thanks to God that there are people like you who believe in Christ and experience the need for this light. Then as we reflect on the reality of eternity, the prayers for our deceased members become a message of light for us who continue to count days and nights, who continue to journey among the difficulties of persecution and the consolations of God.

(1)

## Message of prayer and reflection

In this message of those who are alive and in light of the death of Father Palacios, I find, in the first place, a message of prayer and reflection. I support and congratulate the Vicars who promoted not only the celebration of the Mass but a long vigil of prayer and reflection here in the Cathedral. Throughout the rest of today, if circumstances permit us, we will continue to pray, we will continue this prayer vigil until tomorrow. What meaning do we want to give to this action? It is a message about our death. Prayer and reflection are the power of the Church as she proclaims her immortal message.

Prayer is power. Prayer indicates the origin of our convictions, the goal of our pilgrimage, the source of our joy and hope in the midst of pain and suffering. Prayer is breath for the Church and is the Church's great need. When we organize a prayer vigil we are revealing the health of the Church that is able to breathe. Those who are able to breathe are able to pray and realize that their power is not rooted here on earth but is transcendent and rooted in God. But prayer must not become an opium of the people or a prayer that is blind to the present realities. Prayer that is not submissive is the prayer that unites us to God.

Men and women are made in the image and likeness of God. (2) They are God's collaborators in the construction of the world and history. To pray and wait for God to do everything is not prayer; it is laziness and alienation and passivity and submissive. This is not the time to say: *this is the will of God*. Many things that occur here that are not the will of God. When people live out their vocation in order to better our circumstances and ask God for the courage to accomplish this task, then there is prayer. When people do all they can and wait for God to do the rest, when people integrate their action and thoughts and ability to organize with a hope in the Divine, a hope in God, then we have the type of prayer that we are trying to promote in our Church. This is the meaning of the long prayer vigil. We are promoting that prayer that exists in the heart of Christians and that allows them to be the glory of God here, in this life. The Council states: *This is not the time to wait for many things that before were awaited only in prayer. When the technology and the ability of women and men, their reflection and awareness ... all of these bring forth from the human person a strength that is perhaps not recognized. Thus prayer enables people to do what they have to do and not wait for these things to be done by God.*(3)

During this extended time of prayer there are themes for reflection, there is the Word of God in the Bible and there is mutual sharing. Everything is inspired by the Word of the Lord. I want to remind you that the Council gives thanks to God for the ability of the People of God to reflect.(4) They say that the apostolic tradition, with the help of the Holy Spirit, is developing in the Church as people try to understand, contemplate and study the message of God. When people deepen themselves in the mysteries of Divine revelation they not only enrich themselves but the whole People of God. The whole community is enriched by this reflection.

Therefore I believe and am grateful that during the time of prayer and reflection not only do those communities that have promoted this prayer vigil receive benefits, but a great good is being done for all the communities of the Archdiocese and even for the universal Church. A community, no matter how small it may be, or a Christian, no matter how humble he/she may be --- if these people seek holiness and enrichment in reflection then they collaborate in the development and the enrichment of the universal Church. How much good is being done for the Church by those people who come together at this time of profound prayer and reflection! Incidentally, this time of prayer and reflection has been provoked by the thirty day anniversary of the death of Father Palacios and so in his own way Father Palacios is helping us to enrich our communities.

## **The death of Father Rafael continues to be a denunciation of sin and a call to conversion**

Our reflection leads us to a question that should not be answered superficially. I want to deepen in the hearts of all who are part of the presbyterite and the community of the Archdiocese a response to a question. Therefore from the depths of their hearts I invite people to ask themselves: Why have they killed him? Why have they killed our catechists? Why is the Church persecuted? Those who are convinced of the reality of the Church's persecution know that this is not some fantasy but an actual fact. Members of the Organization of the American States, after having lived here in El Salvador, reported that there is a systematic persecution of the Church and recommended that this action against our work of evangelization has to come to an end. It might be asked: *Why are some people persecuted and others not?*

*Why was Rafael Palacios killed?* It is difficult to give an answer but underneath all of this there is a reality that I would like us to reflect upon in our pastoral ministry. Without a doubt there exists a sinful institution and injustice that the Pope himself denounced when he came to Latin America (5) and without any hesitation denounced this situation *as a sin that cries out to heaven*. When in Puebla the Church made a preferential option for the poor, she did this as a gesture of solidarity with the great majority of people whose poverty is increasing while others have an abundance of this world's goods.(6) Here we are not speaking about some partisan demagogy but rather we are indicating the path of conversion that in Latin American means a conversion toward those who are poor, a denunciation of injustice and abuse and a participation in the life of those who are deprived of participation, of those who live on the margins of society.

To place ourselves in this position is very dangerous and can even be fatal. This is a place where those who are privileged do not want things to be touched and slander the Church as communist and political and subversive and her gatherings are held suspect. This is a reality and Catholics who do not see this reality or who do not want to unite themselves to the voice of the Church that denounces this reality and cries out for a more just world --- such persons are not true members of the authentic Church that the Lord desires for our time. To involve ourselves, however, in this reality is to expose ourselves to the risks that I have already mentioned. This is why they kill those who preach about true justice in the Church of the Lord! This is why they kill those who from within the Church speak about God's plan for humankind and denounce those things in our society that are displeasing to God!

The death of Father Palacios that occurred thirty days ago continues to be the same --- it continues to be a call to the communities that he belonged to, urging them not to become discouraged and to understand that what has been proclaimed in today's gospel is the truth, a truth that is seen in our own time: *if they persecuted me for preaching justice and truth, then you also, because you are dedicated to preaching and truth and justice will also be persecuted* (7). This is a clear sign of the truth of our Church.

## **Charism that Father Rafael has left us**

My sisters and brothers, on this anniversary of the death of Father Rafael I would like us to take up the charisms and gifts of the deceased. During this past month various communities have reflected on the person and the message of Father Palacios. Many people continue to point out, unjustly, that it was his fault that he was killed because he became involved in things that he should have left alone. This makes these people accomplices in his death! This is unjust! He became involved in those things that his priesthood demanded: proclaiming the message of the Lord. He knew how to be calm in the face of threats and persecution. This is a charism that we should

embrace at this time when we need serenity, courage and prudence. Calmness and boldness, just like John Paul II told me: *boldness and prudence*. Yes, we all need the serenity that Rafael exhibited during the difficult moments of his life and persecution, a violence that became more intense and eventually claimed his life.

And then his love of the truth. Love of the truth naturally had to clash with those twisted realities of life. When people want to live rightly in truth, they will clash with distortions, hypocrisy and lies. This is another call in our present situation: *The truth will make you free* (8). Father Rafael revealed this rectitude and truth very clearly because he sought these virtues in his studies. Rafael spent much time in study and he continually renewed himself by studying the documents of the Church. He was aware of the fact that the Church had made advances that were dangerous and very demanding especially in the difficult situations where the Church desired to develop her authentic mission. Who among us does not feel their hearts burning when John Paul II preaches or when they read the reflections of the bishops in Puebla and Medellín? These are movements of the Holy Spirit and these documents of the Church renew Christians in their present day situation. Those who are unaware of this, those who do not study --- these people will naturally see these legitimate advances in the Church's social doctrine, especially in the area of politics, as subversive and evil. Study and love of the truth is another message that our beloved Father Rafael has left us. Therefore, my sisters and brothers, let us move forward with calmness, seeking the truth and embracing the strength that comes from God, the source of all strength.

To the divine transcendence of our work we also unite another charism that is so necessary in the pastoral ministry of the Archdiocese: ministry to the communities. Father Palacios said: *a priest cannot be understood apart from the community*. The priest is made to bring together humankind, the believing community in the Kingdom of God that is achieved initially in the ecclesial community. Therefore the priest is exercising his true role when he accomplishes this ideal of creating community. It is for this reason that I believe that the prayer vigil is in harmony with the spirit of Father Rafael and without a doubt our pastoral ministry will receive great benefit from it.

Here in the Cathedral representatives from the different communities will continue to pray and reflect. The communities who are following this vigil on radio will come to an awareness of how to guide themselves by those realities that the Church wants to reveal in the midst of a world that is so complicated --- they will know how to do this in a clearer and more solid way and with an authentic identity of Church. May each community be a true expression of the Church --- the Church that clothes her spirit, her efforts and her message in divine transcendence so that she might live in the immanence of history. The Church must be concerned for the realities of the earth and know how to speak in the language of the people.

My dear sisters and brothers, this is the significance of our coming together this morning and it is for this reason that I invite you at this time, the transcendental moment of this day as the priests gather around the altar to concelebrate the Eucharist, to give a profound sense of prayer to this gathering. Beneath all of this may our Christian friendship cry out to the Lord for Father Rafael: *Grant him, Lord, eternal rest and may perpetual light shine upon him and may this light that he enjoys become a message so that we who are on pilgrimage might know how to walk in pursuit of the great truths of our Church*. So be it!\*