

AN IDEAL THAT DOESN'T DIE

Funeral Mass of Fr. Alfonso Navarro¹

May 12, 1977

My beloved brother priests, faithful and radio audience.

There is a story about a caravan that was traveling through the desert and being guided by a Bedouin. They had become desperate and thirsty and were searching for water in the mirages of the desert. Their guide said: *Not there, over there*. He had spoken these words so many times that the members of the caravan became frustrated, took out a gun and shot the guide. As the guide was dying, he extended his hand and said one last time: *Not there, over there*. He died pointing the way.

This legend becomes a reality in our midst: a priest, shot through the mouth, dies forgiving and praying for his assassins. At this time when we gather for his funeral services, Father Navarro shares with us his message. Let us receive this message. It can be said that we have before us a beautiful view of the apocalypse. At least two hundred priests, from all the dioceses of El Salvador, have gathered here to accompany the Archdiocese at this time of sorrow and, above all, to embrace the message of Father Alfonso Navarro, a priest who has died, but a priest who is always preaching, because the voice of a priest never dies. So many people have gathered together beneath the roof of this parish that bears a most significant name, the Church of the Resurrection and everyone is singing about life, and happiness, and hope. Men and women from many other Christian communities have come together here to embrace Father Navarro's message and feel themselves clothed with this breath of happiness, hope and Alleluia. On this Calvary of blood there is a resurrection of hope.

No to violence

My sisters and brothers, what is the meaning of these events, these exaltations, and these Easter Alleluia's? First of all, I find in Father Navarro's death, the message of that bedouin riddled by bullets that is a protest against violence, a rejection of violence: "they kill me because I show them the way". We, as Church, repeat once again: violence resolves nothing; violence is not Christian or human; violence, especially because it violates the Fifth Commandment: *you shall not kill* (a), brings with it tears, pain and anxiety rather than anything that is good.

In this case, let us also be mindful that a whole family is also in mourning with the family of Father Navarro and his spiritual family which is the diocese and the Church. I refer to the family of Luisito who suffered and died at the side of his pastor. We extend our condolences to them as well and in the presence of this innocent body, we raise up our voice in protest against this violence. We do so, my sisters and brothers, because the life of a layperson is as sacred as the life of a priest.

Now, in the presence of Father Navarro's body, I repeat what I said yesterday at the funeral services of Chancellor Borgonovo Pohl: life is sacred, even the life of the humblest *campesino*, even the life of the priest. Yes, even the life of a criminal, even when this title "criminal" is obtained through slander or defamation that ought to cause horror in those who would take the life of another, not only those who would fire the pistol, or use a machinegun,

but those who are “behind the scene” in this defamation campaign against the Church. Violence is produced by everyone, not only by those who kill another but also by those who impel someone else to kill. So from this pulpit I want to direct the following words to the President: when we spoke yesterday by telephone, if your words were sincere when you said that you would investigate this crime, just as you were concerned and, I suppose, still are concerned about investigating the crime against your Chancellor. Because the life of Mauricio Borgonovo is as sacred as the life of the priest who has just perished, as sacred as the life of Father Grande who was assassinated two months ago and in his case, despite the promise of an investigation, we are still very far from knowing the truth of this matter.

My dear sisters and brothers, those who make it impossible to discover the truth of the origins of these criminal actions are also committing an act of violence and their action is as sinful as the one who pulls the trigger to kill another, as sinful as those who wage this slanderous campaign against the Church. How is it possible that people say that this is only the beginning? How is it possible that people can threaten to kill even more people? Human life is sacred and the Church is present to defend life without giving any consideration to a person’s politics or any other characteristic. The Church is present to defend life because it is sinful to take the life of another; it is a sin against God’s Law.

This violation of the Fifth Commandment results in the imposition of the penalty of excommunication upon the intellectual and the material authors of this crime. For many unbelievers, the penalty of excommunication appears as ridiculous. Perhaps this will make a deeper impression on them when they realize that excommunication is not simply a spiritual penalty. It is the repudiation of the whole People of God; in other words, the People of God have placed the excommunicated person on the margin of society. Through excommunication, the community says to the criminal: *You are no longer related to this people that walks in hope and in obedience to the Law of God. For we want nothing to do with blood but are about love and peace and reconciliation.* This act of excommunication is not hateful, but is the voice that rejects violence. It is a voice that cries out like Jesus: *Repent and believe in the gospel* (b). The voice of the Bedouin is like that of Father Navarro who died forgiving those who had shot him. I want to thank the testimony of that good woman who helped Father in his dying moments. She asked him what hurt, and Father responded: *I have no pain except the forgiveness that I want to give to my assassins and to those who shot me and the only sorrow I have is sorrow for my sins. May the Lord forgive me.* Then he began to pray. This is the way that all who believe in Christ die, even though they have defects and sins. We, as priests, live with a hope. We cannot be communists because they have mutilated this hope in a life hereafter. We believe in God; we preach a hope in this same God and we die convinced of this hope.

An ideal that doesn’t die

This then, is the second part of Father Alfonso Navarro’s message: Hope is an ideal that never dies. It is like the guide in the desert who extends his hand and says: *Not there, not for those mirages of hatred, not for that philosophy of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth --- no that is criminal. Over there: love one another* (c). Do not walk on those roads of sin and violence; you are going to build a new world, so walk on the road of love. My dear brother priests, for all of us this is a solemn hour, for it is the hour that ratifies our priestly ordination. I can see Alfonso Navarro prostrated here --- not to receive the anointing of death but rather to receive the sacred anointing of priesthood during the solemn ceremony that was celebrated in the National Gymnasium, when the Serra Club wanted to highlight for the people of El Salvador, Father Navarro’s consecration and that of his nine classmates --- a

consecration to serve the people of God. How different was that environment when the significance of our sacred vocation was understood and loved!

My dear brother priests, at that glorious and happy hour of our ordination, our hearts were filled with visions and hope to work for the people of God and for the glory of God. As we gather together to celebrate the death of Alfonso and bury his body in the tomb while his spirit ascends to heaven, we also celebrate the triumph of the priesthood and the triumph of that ideal that unites us to him. It is an ideal that never dies, for with each priest that is assassinated, there is a new impetus of hope and joy and fervor in those of us who now continue this priestly ministry. It is an ideal that cannot be corrupted, for from death itself arises new life. It is the ideal that Father Navarro referred to when he knew that death was near: *Do not cry for me. Give me red carnations for it is a joy to move from this ideal into the Kingdom.*

Who will tell him [Fr. Navarro] that his assassination has become a banner for us who continue the pilgrimage! We feel that the ideal that sustained the life of Father Alfonso will never die. But rather purifying our human imperfections, the transmission of this divine message cannot be detained by anyone. Here, in front of Father Nabarro's body, we, as priests, using the words of the message that was published a few days ago, we promise to "*reaffirm our oath of fidelity to the Word of God and to the teaching of the Church*"². Urged on by this Word of God and the teaching of the Church we speak with courage the words of those first Apostles: *We must obey God rather than men* (d).

This banner cannot fall. So when we bury our brother today, we should not feel as though we have been defeated, but rather we should feel that one of our soldiers is missing from our ranks. We should also feel that someone must take the place that has been vacated because the preaching of the Word of God and the teaching of the Church is a demand, similar to the demand placed on the prophets, a demand that made them tremble in light of their awesome mission but to which they were faithful, never betraying God's word..

A call to all moral forces

Lastly my dear sisters and brothers, the message of the bedouin, speaking to us from that eternal place, is a calling that is made to all the moral forces of our country. Yes, Father Alfonso is the image of the bullet-riddled Church, and the Church, like the bedouin, continues to call everyone: follow here. If they do not want to believe in the Church, if they confuse our priests as guerrilla fighters, if our evangelical mission is confused with Marxism and communism, then this is simply unjust. If the slander continues to spread, then we must ask the other moral forces of our country: you who remain in the world, what are you doing ?

I call upon our Protestant sisters and brothers, all the honorable organizations, the good that is in each family and each heart --- Why are we going to be pessimists if in this hour of violence our banner is held on high? A parishioner from this church told me last night: *Bishop, be careful because madmen run wild and are thirsty for blood.* Then my sisters and brother, like the bedouin, we say to you who are in danger: *continue to work because you are the church.* In this hour I am pleased to see that the persecution of the Church is awakening a new spiritual strength in many families and communities. This is not the time to divide ourselves into two churches but as one Church we must continue the struggle on behalf of the resurrection of Christ who gives us redemption not only in the

afterlife but here on earth. Through this gift of redemption we are able to struggle for a more just and more human world, for a greater social sensitivity that impacts every institution, and for an end to the violence and the crime. How different it would be if we all made a sincere resolution to unite our moral strength. When I say *all* I refer not only to those who are members of the Catholic Church, but to all those elements who believe in the Church and who are not afraid of dying like Father Alfonso Navarro and who want to trample on the banner of violence and hatred.

Please, stop the slander! Stop persecuting the mission of the Church! Stop sowing seeds of division and rancor! Stop spreading this popular philosophy of evil and vengeance! Let us unite together to make our country a more tranquil place; a place where people trust one another; a place where people no longer have to flee as if they were in a jungle fleeing from some fierce beast; a place where we can live as sisters and brothers, if not through faith in the Risen Lord then at least through a sense of nationalism or humanism or fraternity.

My dear sisters and brothers, this is the message that I take from the bullet-riddled, disfigured mouth of Father Navarro. My beloved priests, I beg you to take seriously this power of love that the Church preaches. Let us distance ourselves from hatred and violence; in fact let us repudiate them. Let us also distance ourselves from those who destroy and kill and refuse to build or better the world or bring happiness to others. Lord, God, in this Eucharist that we, priests of the earth, celebrate together with our brother priest who has gone to eternity, who has one foot in the parish in Miramonte and the other in the Kingdom of God, grant us the grace to fear what you, Alfonso, feared and also grant us the grace to see that your death is not an invitation to incite people to violence but rather it is a Christian message about the new strength of love in your Church.

¹ On 11 May Fr Alfonso Navarro Oviedo was assassinated, together with the child Luis Alfredo Torres, in the presbytery of the Resurrection Parish where he was parish priest. See “Boletín informativo del arzobispado, no 15”, *Orientación*, 15 May 1977.

² “Declaration of the Archbishop and Clergy of the Archdiocese of San Salvador on recent events”, *Orientación*, 8 May 1977.

Margin References: (a) Ex 20,13: (b) Mk 1,15: (c) Jn 15,12: (d) Ac 5,29.