

## A JUDGEMENT OF GOD

**Homily at the Funeral Rites of Fr Ernesto Barrera Motto<sup>1</sup>  
November 29, 1978**

My dear sisters and brothers, esteemed family members of Father Neto and the three persons who together with him are about to receive Christian burial.

In the face of death one always experiences the mystery of iniquity. God did not desire death. Indeed, death is a contradiction of the happiness, the peace and blessedness for which God has created us. But there are circumstances in which death reflects more clearly this mystery of iniquity, this mystery that is in need of redemption. Therefore, we pray together as we confront the enigma of death. When death surrounds our concerns and doubts and when death is the result of slander, bloodshed, violence and suffering, people feel closer to this mystery of iniquity that Christ himself named. Thus we cling to Christ when we are faced with this incomprehensible mystery and this mysterious passage to that which is beyond. Christ is the only explanation! With transcendent and eternal lights he illuminates life and the passage to the next life, that is, he illuminates the three dimensions that must be considered when we stand before our deceased brothers and sisters.

### **The human dimension**

In the first place we have the human dimension. In front of the altar, surrounded by his companions and brother priests, surrounded by so many people and by his own family, lies a man. He is a man like the other three men who died with him and await the hour of their burial and whose families are with us today. The present Pope has said that the name *man* should be pronounced with great respect<sup>2</sup>. Man: the image of God and the subject of rights and obligations, the child of a family, a concrete person in a specific era and a reflection of God who has charged him with illuminating here on earth God's work of creation and redemption. We think specifically of Father Neto and from this human and concrete dimension we want to express our condolences to his beloved mother and his brothers, especially Father Manuel who shares with Father Neto not only this general brotherhood of all men but also this brotherhood that is formed as a result of the priestly character which unites them even more intimately. We also express our condolences to all the members of the parish of San Sebastián where Father Neto exercised his ministry with the enthusiasm that is so proper to a new priest.

It is in this human dimension where we discover so many memories. We could write his biography with these memories: his childhood aspirations, his desire to become a priest, his decision to enter the seminary of San José de la Montaña, his new concerns (perhaps incomprehensible to many) and his ministry with new pastoral models, especially his ministry among the workers where he experienced a special charism and dedication. He said: *These new pastoral methodologies and areas of ministry that the Lord points out to us, these new commitments are often incomprehensible to traditional Christians.* It is true that the Church that is incarnated in the human person in every age and that brings the message of Christ to new frontiers and as a result experiences new conflicts and new situations --- this

Church also seek out concerned young men, perhaps even daring young men for this strange vocation of priesthood. Yet as long as these men remain in communion with the Church and with Christ, then they are able to bring the message of salvation to their sisters and brothers, to those who are most in need because perhaps they are furthest removed from the Church.

Neto experienced happiness in his priesthood. I brought him to the parish of San Sebastián and participated in several meetings with him and the young women and men of the parish who spoke to me about their concerns as they attempted to live as Christians in the present time. I can assure you that this man, consecrated through priestly ordination, maintained bonds of communion with his brother priests and with his bishop and this is a guarantee that his ministry has been authentic and legitimate. We may see some characteristics in the present priests, especially the young priests, that are difficult to understand, but as long as there is this desire to serve, this desire to place all one's human qualities at the service of the Church and the Kingdom of God, then we have reason to trust them. The man-priest has to be an individual who communicates an eternal message to the people of every era.

This human dimension of Father Neto unites him with the other men who together with him have also died. We also want to affirm this human dimension that is characteristic of each of these men. If someone criticizes the Church's presence in these situations where people have mysteriously died, then we could say that such a person is not Christian. The Church must be present where there are human values. The Church must save everything that is authentically human and has to accompany the pain of the mothers, wives and children of those who experience the human repercussions of suffering and the mystery of iniquity. Therefore my sisters and brothers, it is right and we have no fear as we celebrate these funeral rites because this is something profoundly human and the Church cannot be a stranger to anything that is human.

### **Transcendence**

These men also confront a second dimension: the dimension of transcendence. Every person that comes into the world is a reflection of the eternal God. Every person has a beginning but there is never an end. Here we have the body of a man with his face turned toward heaven, the image of a Church that does not end in death but journeys and walks beyond the grave. This man enters eternity and eternity is solemnly reflected at the time of death. The priest, par excellence, has to be a man concerned about eternal matters, a man of the eternal Kingdom, a man who rises above the ambitions, desires and concerns of the earth, a man of sublime aspirations and eternal horizons.

Therefore we said in our Pastoral Letter that the Church tries to understand all the efforts that are exerted on behalf of the just demands of people<sup>3</sup>. The Church identifies herself with these efforts but does not remain focused on the things of this world (it is slanderous when people criticize the priest or the bishop because they are involved in the liberation of the earth and therefore they characterize them in social, economic and political terminology), nor does she remain focused on earthly realities but incorporates the liberation of temporal realities and the liberation from earthly slavery into the great liberation of heaven. At this time Neto Barrera understands that all the efforts on behalf of liberation, all the hopes for a better world, even on this earth, are complemented and achieved in this eternal happiness. Only the transcendent liberation of Christ gives true value and meaning to the liberation efforts of the earth. One is myopic when one listens to the words of the priest who cries out against the

injustices of the world, against the abuses of power, against the abuses of human dignity in the world and then criticizes and labels this priest as communist, political and a man who has lost his orientation. One is myopic when one forgets that this man is a priest who has before his eyes the transcendent perspective.

For this reason priests and Christians, all of us, are authentic liberators of the earth. As a result of this doctrine of transcendence and this belief in life beyond the grave, we are called by God to accompany all these efforts to make the world more human, to establish among women and men an equality that is more Christian and more fraternal. Although one might fall and be beaten down, nevertheless because one is a person of conviction then one is a follower of Christ even though others might view this same person as simply a person who walks this earth.

At this time when we gather together around these bodies of our brothers, especially the body of Father Neto, it is necessary to reaffirm the fact that as Christians we cannot live a piety or the gospel or transcendence by glancing toward the heavens and forgetting to put our feet on the ground. It is necessary to reaffirm this fact because we hope for a heaven that will be the reward for our efforts on earth. Therefore, each one of us, according to our vocation, must work intensely for a better world. It seems to me that the best message that we can gather up from the body of our brother priest, Neto, is the following: to root people more deeply in the hope of heaven but to work with all one's strength to achieve the hopes of this world. Let us not separate these realities but let us see them as complementary. Let us live these realities as Christians who have their hearts in heaven but their hands and feet working among the temporal realities of the world.

### **A judgement of God**

Thus, my sisters and brothers, we reflect on the third dimension and with this I will conclude my humble words: the judgment of God. Neto and José Isidro and Rafael Santos and Valentín have come face to face with God's judgment. The judgment of God is permanent. The judgment of God is eternal but also embraces all that which is of this earth. At the time of God's judgment our days on earth and our journey along the paths of this world will be examined. We will be definitively rewarded or punished and the Judge will accept no bribes, no pay off. The Judge will deal with every person according to their acts.

And before this judgement of God, brothers and sisters, I appeal for prudence and serenity with regard to earthly judgements. It is sad how people try to manipulate these events. It is scandalous that the radio and the press throw dirt on the faces and the memory of those who have died and act in this way as though there were no such thing as a final judgment. I beg you not to take seriously the first judgment that is being made about our deceased brothers, especially since these judgments are the result of clever and interested persons. For this reason the Church that wishes to reflect the justice of God on earth calls our to her children: *Wait, reflect, and analyze the facts! An investigative commission has been named to examine these deaths more closely!* We are gathering data and information that contradicts much of the scandalous news that is being published in the press and on radio<sup>4</sup>. Neto Barrera was whipped. A forensic physician has written a statement that clearly details the torture that Neto Barrera experienced. Neto Barrera had to suffer greatly before handing over his spirit to the Lord's judgment. It is unfair that a dead person should be judged because that person is unable to speak and unable to complain about the pain that was inflicted on him as a result of worldly interests. It is necessary to wait, to wait for even a slight reflection of the judgment of God who understands the mystery of iniquity in which we

bury our deceased brother and the many other persons who have also died without having had the opportunity of a calm judgment among men but rather were judged according to the illegitimate interests of the world.

As far as possible, it is necessary to judge with the mind of the Lord, who desires mercy more than justice. This is what brings us together this afternoon, a prayer for the Lord's mercy. We pray for mercy because no one who is human is able to present themselves before the Lord spotless and without sin. It is necessary to pray to the Lord: *Have mercy! Cleanse me of these stains and forgive me my sins!* We want to say that our deceased brothers are in need of the Lord's mercy and for this reason we have gathered together in the house of God, the house of prayer, a house of prayer that was built by our brother, Neto, in order to tell the Lord: *Lord, keep in mind the good will of this family. Keep in mind the good will of these new vocations! Listen, Lord, to the prayers of these brother priests that surround our deceased brother and we ask you to intercede on behalf of all those who are deceased.* This is the Lord's mercy. At the same time we are aware of the strong repudiation of God's justice in front of the manipulations of iniquity and before those who want to use even the death and suffering of others for their perverse objectives.

May the Lord have mercy on us and on these victims of pain and violent death! May those who have died pray for us before the Lord and say: *Enough violence! Enough deaths that are shrouded in the mystery of iniquity! Enough of the suffering that has afflicted so many families, countless families and families whose names are not known. You, Lord, know these people better than anyone else. Have mercy Lord, on our people.* This is the prayer that, together with Neto and our deceased brothers, we lift up to the Lord this afternoon and we say: *Lord, waiting serenely for your justice, a justice that is unique, give eternal rest and perpetual light to our brothers.* So be it.

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<sup>1</sup> On 28 November 1978 Fr. Ernesto Barrera Motto, José Isidro Portillo Paz, Rafael Santos Ortiz and Valentín Martínez Piche were assassinated. Both the official communiqué of the Secretariat of the President of the Republic and various versions in the press claimed that they had died in an armed confrontation with the Security Forces. But there were many contradictions and inaccuracies in the different versions and Mons. Romero set up a commission of the Archdiocese to investigate what had happened. It concluded that it was doubtful Fr. Ernesto Barrera and his companions had died in an armed confrontation. See Boletín informativo nº 51 & 52, Secretaría de Comunicación Social del Arzobispado de San Salvador, *Orientación*, 3 & 10 December 1978.

<sup>2</sup> See Homily of John Paul II on the official inauguration of his Pontificate (22 October 1978), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29 October 1978.

<sup>3</sup> See *La Iglesia y las organizaciones políticas populares*, (6 August 1978), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> See "Cuatro terroristas mueren en tiroteo. Un Sacerdote entre ellos", *El Diario de Hoy*, 29 November 1978. "Tres muertos en enfrentamiento", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 29 November 1978, "Choque armado en La Providencia. Curia analiza hoy muerte de sacerdote", *El Mundo*, 29 November 1989, "Subversivos enfrentan a la policía. Sacerdote muerto con tres terroristas", *Diario Latino*, 29 November 1978.