

CALL TO UNITY, TRUTH AND HOLINESS

**First anniversary of the death of Fr Alfonso Navarro¹
May 11, 1978**

(...) the voice of Father Alfonso Navarro continues to be listened to, even though one year ago he fell to the ground disfigured by the criminal bullet of those who killed him (...).

The gathering in this Cathedral of so many brother priests and people from so many Christian communities is a sign of the faith of this pilgrim people. We are a community that cannot be stopped by death since death gifts us with these horizons (...) and stimulates us to continue our journey to its conclusion. We are also mindful at this time of our brother Luis Torres, who with Father Navarro was felled by the vile bullets that ended their innocent lives.

It would be good to remember the conference to which Father Navarro and Luis Torres were traveling but we also understand that for Christians death does not inspire consolation. Rather as we draw near to these two graves we find our inspiration in the priest who takes the child, Luis Torres, by the hand and leads him into eternity. I would like the Church to be able to take up these three testimonies that are taken from the disfigured lips of Father Alfonso Navarro who shed (...) and penetrate the depths of our hearts. We have been given a call to unity, a call to truth and a call to holiness (...).

A call to unity

Perhaps it was the priest in that historical meeting when he began his humble service here in the Archdiocese (...) he repeated that we had to be united together by some form of professional ethics and that our lack of unity was a form of suicide. Alfonso Navarro often repeated that phrase: *disunity is suicide*.

I want to embrace these words of Father Navarro and repeat them to my beloved brother priests and to all of you, my dear sisters and brothers: in the community of the Church we have to give this witness of unity. As Father Navarro speaks to us from the eternal destiny of this Pilgrim People, disunity appears to be most criminal and the beauty of unity appears to be most brilliant when we realize that we are on a pilgrimage to our destiny and when we realize that we are on a pilgrimage together to this destiny since all of us are part of this Pilgrim People.

May the anniversary of his death be an occasion that inspires us with this desire for unity. May the anniversary of his death inspire in us this eschatological perspective of the Church, this final moment when we walk toward the Kingdom of God and enable us to be witnesses of this destiny, of this origin of the Church community that Christ pointed out in his final words before his death: *so that they may all be one as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me* (a).

I received a letter from a brother bishop in Guatemala, the Bishop of the Diocese of Verapaz. A group of people had gathered together for pastoral formation and Bishop Gerardo Flores was asked to communicate an expression of fraternity from his diocese to ours. I find this to be an appropriate way to communicate to you, my dear priests and

laypeople this testimony that should be seen as a call to unity and a call to work together. Our brothers and sisters in Verapaz state: *Our week together has been characterized by a clear desire of all the participants to discover ways that will enable us to live in fidelity to the gospel. The participants in this Pastoral Week have asked me to send you and your community a message that express our solidarity and our admiration of the true, courageous and evangelical witness that the Church of San Salvador is giving to the Universal Church. We have followed attentively and with great admiration the suffering of our sister Church. We have tried to learn from you and even though we are far from you, we hope to be able to imitate your worthy example of Christian fidelity and courage.*

During our Eucharistic celebrations we often remember our sisters and brother in El Salvador and we pray that they will be given strength during these hours of trial. We are also encouraged by them and we call upon the saints to protect those who suffer persecution in our sister Republic, who suffer persecution on behalf of our people and on behalf of our pastoral ministry. Among the many martyrs for our faith we highlight this morning the example of Alfonso Navarro and as I said one year ago today, let us continue to follow the hand that is extended in the desert, the hand that signals the path of our pilgrimage. Let us continue on that pilgrimage together. Let us journey together to our encounter with the Lord.

A call to truth

The second reading today speaks to us about that truth that makes us free. Saint Paul in his letter to the Ephesians invites us to be courageous and not cowards and to live this newness of our Christianity among the evils of the world. We, however, must proclaim the beauty of God's truth that is so often dangerous to speak and proclaim. We are invited to denounce injustices, disorders and abuses. This is a very dangerous thing to say but we must make this proclamation as though Father Alfonso Navarro had not spoken or died.

Yet Father Navarro is proof of the gospel words that he proclaimed: *the truth will set you free* (b). The truth that is spoken courageously, as we have just been reminded by our brothers and sisters from Guatemala, is the truth that made Father Navarro a disputed and dangerous person --- so dangerous that many people are still not convinced of the beauty of his truth. Nevertheless, it was the truth that freed him from the chains of this earth and from all those things that make others cowards --- he was freed from the lies that lead so many people to betray their sisters and brothers who live on this earth.

Thus the death of Father Alfonso Navarro is a call to us, a call to be courageous in proclaiming the truth. I hope, my sisters and brothers, that today's celebration will inspire all of us with courage. A short time ago someone told me: *It is obvious that today there is a struggle between the truth and the lie.* There is no middle ground here because those who seek this middle ground between the truth and the lie are themselves liars and they do not give witness to the truth. Father Alfonso died giving witness to the truth. This morning, as we remember him with admiration, may he be for us this witness to the truth. We have gathered together his testimony in a pamphlet that is being studied now by many people².

We who listened to him and who shared his concerns cannot deny the truth of his testimony. Yes, like every human person he had defects and limitations and his flesh was fragile, but again we know the truth of his testimony. The Church has never been so true to herself than when she proclaimed during the Second Vatican Council that she is holy but needs to do penance (c). The Church is holy but seeks greater perfection. She proclaims the truth not because she feels superior to others. If there is something beautiful about our

Archdiocese it is the fact that we are all on a road and seeking the truth that we know is possessed only by Jesus. To encounter Jesus is to encounter the truth, to be faithful to his gospel, to be faithful to his presence in the world and to give witness of this presence despite our human failing and defects. This is what it means to give sincere testimony to the truth that we all seek and that we all follow because we have found this truth in the beauty of Jesus. During these times of confusion it is this following of Christ that gives us the courage to continue to proclaim this witness to the truth.

A call to holiness

Finally, my dear sisters and brothers, the gospel passage that we chose to proclaim on this first anniversary of Father Navarro's death is Jesus' discourse on the mountain --- his discourse about the Beatitudes which inspires us to holiness. When the Holiest of all holy people, Christ, the only Holy One, opened his mouth to speak to humanity, the words of beatitudes flowed like pearls and were shared with a world that thirsted for goodness. He proclaimed that those who suffered were blessed and concluded: *Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven* (d). With these words Jesus shows how the gospel is going to upset the world.

We must follow Jesus even when they call us mad, when they call us subversives and communists and all the other epithets they put on us, for we know that we only preach the subversive witness of the Beatitudes which have turned everything upside down --- the Beatitudes proclaim that the poor are blessed and those who thirst for justice are blessed and those who suffer are blessed.(e) It was on this road that Father Alfonso found the happiness of heaven that he now enjoys. From that place in the heaven, among the crowd of witnesses as the Council says (f), he tells us that the Gospel does not lie but speaks the truth. He tells us that the world is filled with lies, is sensual and promiscuous and unjust and does not speak the truth. Poor indeed are those who live with these lies and blessed are those who live the truth!

This holiness of Father Alfonso that is proclaimed to us in the gospel has many risks and the greatest risk is the one that he was willing to take: martyrdom. Listen, my sisters and brothers, to the way in which the Church speaks about this road that led Father Navarro and Luis Torres to eternity. As the Second Vatican Council spoke about the universal call to holiness, we read the following words: *By martyrdom a disciple is transformed into an image of his Master by freely accepting death for the salvation of the world --- as well as his conformity to Christ in the shedding of his blood. Though few are presented such an opportunity, nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men. They must be prepared to make this profession of faith even in the midst of persecutions, which will never be lacking to the Church, in following the way of the cross* (g). What a beautiful passage to use as an epithet for Father Navarro's tombstone! A more beautiful phrase could be found!

Here we are speaking about the way of the cross, the way of martyrdom and a singular grace. The Lord does not grant this grace to everyone, but we all desire this grace. We all try to follow the Lord and we know that in order to follow the Lord we need to have our hearts filled with love --- a love that makes us willing to offer our lives for the Lord. Blessed is Alfonso Navarro! Blessed is Father Grande! Blessed are those who have been persecuted and died for the Kingdom of God! Blessed too are those who have hated the faith but have been massacred, for they have been made blessed by criminal and bloody hands! God has given them the most precious pearl that could be given to our community!

With respect, admiration, and gratitude, with the love of a brother I take up the life and the example of Father Alfonso this morning and I tell him: *this pearl is the glory of our community, the beautiful crown of our Diocese. This pearl is the light that invites us to give witness to holiness, truth, and unity.*

Let us celebrate this Eucharist that nourished Father Alfonso Navarro until the last moment of his life. This morning I celebrate on the altar where Alfonso Navarro celebrated his last Mass and I am truly filled with emotion when I realize that the man/priest, when he celebrates his final Mass on earth, it is because the sacramental life of the Church is no longer necessary for him. The sacrament that involves these material elements of bread and wine that symbolize the smiling presence of Jesus --- this sacrament is no longer necessary. Father Navarro has broken these sacramental boundaries and rejoices now in the essential presence of Christ. May we as a pilgrim people continue to seek in this sacramental presence of our faith (at times a half blind faith) the beauty of Christ. Father Navarro, from his place in heaven, continues to nourish us as we travel the road that we must follow. Let us not lose sight of this road so that one day we might rejoice with him in heaven that began for him on May 11, 1977. Let us now offer our prayers for the community and the universal Church.

¹ The recording of this homily is missing , so the text used is the first version in Monseñor Oscar A. Romero, *Su pensamiento*, Vol. IV, San Salvador, 1981, pp. 223-227. Points in brackets indicate inaudible passages in the original recording.

² See *Testimonio, Alfonso Navarro O.*, Publicación Búsqueda, Arzobispado de San Salvador, 1978.

Margin References (a) Jn 17,21: (b) Jn 8,32: (c) LG 8: (d) Mt 5,11: (e) Mt 5,3-11: (f) LG 50: (g) LG 42.