

125

AN ASSASSINATION THAT SPEAKS TO US OF RESURRECTION

Funeral Mass for Father Octavio Ortiz Luna¹
Third Sunday of Ordinary Time
21 January 1979

Jonah 3:1-5,10
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Matthew 1:14-20

My beloved fellow priests, thank you for coming to express your solidarity even though you're sacrificing your own Sunday obligations. Solemn moments like these make us feel our brotherhood in a special way. I'm also grateful for the ecumenical words of our fellow pastor, Jorge Lara Braud, who in his brief message² gave us great encouragement. In our joint pilgrimage we are trying to be loyal to that Gospel which profoundly unites all of us—Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic—who are trying to interpret faithfully a Gospel that is very difficult during this time of great uncertainties.

As a Catholic people with ecumenical and eschatological perspectives, we gather today around the bodies of a dearly loved priest, Father Octavio Ortiz, and four young men who were gunned down with him: Ángel Morales, Jorge Alberto Gómez, Roberto Orellana, and David Alberto Caballero. The multitude that fills the cathedral and the park outside is a multitude that is not circumscribed to this locale; through the radio it extends to almost all the republic; it extends beyond the diocese and even beyond the country. It is a multitude that feels united in faith and hope with all the people of God as they journey through all the countries of the earth.

I believe, sisters and brothers, that seldom do we grasp the meaning of Sunday Mass as we do today. The Second Vatican Council defined the Mass as «a tradition handed down from the apostles which took its origin from the very day of Christ's resurrection and which

¹ On January 20 Father Octavio Ortiz Luna, a diocesan priest, was assassinated by the National Guard together with four youths in the retreat house *El Despertar* in the parish of San Antonio Abad. See «Bulletin No. 55 of the Social Communications Secretariat of the Archdiocese of San Salvador», 20 January 1979, reprinted in *Estudios Centroamericanos* 363/364 (1979) 87-88.

² Before the homily, Doctor Jorge Lara Braud, representative of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and the National Council of Churches in the United States, delivered a short message of solidarity. [Among other things he said, «I can hear the priest, Octavio Ortiz Luna, speaking from eternity, from the place where there is no more weeping or mourning or death. He speaks to each one of us, his sisters and brothers who continue to journey here on earth: "I rejoice now in what I have suffered for you, and in my flesh I complete what was lacking in the afflictions of Christ, afflictions that were offered up for the good of his body, the church". As a representative of my adopted country, the United States, and as a representative of Christians in my adopted country, I ask pardon of you, my sisters and brothers of El Salvador, because my country has supported a social order that impoverishes the masses and rewards oppressors. The World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches are united with all of you at this time of mourning. We unite with you in the subversive joy that is able to proclaim that they have *not* killed Octavio Ortiz Luna and his brothers. No, they have not assassinated them; they have given them eternal life!»] N.B. The bracketed text is not in the Spanish original.

celebrates the paschal mystery of death and resurrection». Our Catholic Church declares that «on this day Christ's faithful are bound to come together into one place so that, by hearing the word of God and taking part in the Eucharist, they may call to mind the passion, the resurrection, and the glorification of the Lord Jesus, and may thank God who has begotten them again, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto a living hope» (SC 106). This hope and this participation in the death and the resurrection of Christ become painfully real for us today as we gather around these bodies which proclaim to us the precise meaning of the three readings we have just heard.

But before reflecting on these readings I want to reflect on who *you* are, those of you who form this multitude. You are members of communities who have come from every part of the diocese and nation to this Mass in the cathedral, a cathedral that now seems tiny in the face of the invasion of the faithful love of all of you, so that you've had to spill out into the streets. As we come together here, we feel a sense of close communion which unites us with the liturgy of heaven and gives us an almost palpable awareness that these bodies are not dead but are pilgrims who are already arriving in the land of true life so that we, as a community that is still on its way, will be strengthened even more in the hope that already looms large in the hearts of all of us. We are an ecclesial community, and this week, like every week, we are able to tell the story of what is happening in our midst.

Life of the church

There is great expectation in our continent as the pope's journey to Mexico and the meeting in Puebla draw near. My own heart is divided as I anticipate these events. I have a sincere desire to go to this meeting with the pope and my fellow bishops of the continent, which will not be a time of vacation or rest but a time of searching for ways to serve the diocese better. I want to contribute in Puebla some of the unfathomable riches of our great archdiocese, which is you the people, your communities, your faith, your suffering, your persecution. (Applause) My feelings, then, are like those of Paul (Phil 1:23-24). I would like to stay with you at this moment that is so sorrowful and so dangerous for our church. But I also feel the need to make all your voices heard in Puebla and in every corner of the continent and the world. I feel weak because, although I'm a pastor, I am also just a poor Christian. Still, I hope my faith will grow stronger through my contact with the Roman pontiff.

Therefore, my sisters and brothers, I ask your permission to leave you as orphans so that I may carry your wealth to Puebla and bring back to you the strength of the pope and my fellow bishops who will be meeting there. I ask you, then, for your prayers. (Applause). There in Puebla I want to *be the presence* of an archdiocese in prayer. Let no one fail to pray hard. Today we have five more intercessors in heaven who love this diocese. Indeed, these men encountered death precisely as they were preparing an event that would give great service to the diocese. Let us pray, then, that Puebla is everything that our America and the world is hoping it will be.

I have here a beautiful telegram which echoes the voices of all of you, dear sisters and brothers. It is from Father Alex Poprawa of Las Flores in Chalatenango, who sends me fraternal good wishes and tells me, «Poor old lady pays Mass for good trip to Mexico, archbishop. Rejoice her profound faith. Greetings». Along with the prayers of that old woman, I want to be able to count on the prayers of everyone who forms part of this church of the archdiocese. (Applause)

I also want to leave you with a recommendation: be very careful of manipulation of the news. Take great care because Puebla is becoming a delicious morsel for those who twist the truth of things. We've already seen the brutal distortion of the deeds we are lamenting this morning, so there is good reason to fear that an event as sacred and as hopeful as Puebla will be seized on to serve the petty interests of our politicians, our economic potentates, and our mass media. Let us rise about all that and try to live true to the message of Puebla, which our archdiocesan communications media will transmit with great care.

This community that's gathered here in the cathedral is a community that is now celebrating the octave of church unity, as our esteemed brother Jorge Lara Braud has just reminded us. This hope for unity is the reason for prayer in all those churches, both Catholic and Protestant, that do not allow their Gospel to be manipulated but rather know that the Gospel is not a plaything of politics or of convenience. Our churches recognize the need to reject and rise above everything that tarnishes the genuine message of the Gospel. Along with our Protestant sisters and brothers, we Catholics will continue to preach a Gospel that truly serves our suffering people.

In these moments of sorrow we also want to express our condolences to two fellow priests, Father Gabriel Rodríguez, who mourns the death of his father, and Father Porfirio Martínez, of the Diocese of San Vicente, whose brother Gilberto was killed in San Francisco, Chinameca.

I also want to express my pleasure, along with the rest of you in this community, at the spirit of sharing that you are all trying to promote. The same sentiment is expressed by Marcos Luis Maldonado, a Christian from one of our communities, who sends 100 *colones* from New York and tells me, «This is a small donation for the neediest people in my country at this time. With great affection do I send what I've earned through my labor because in order to survive I've had to take leave of my loved ones and my country, which is what I want least during these days of Christmas».

This church gathered here has also received a strong vote of support from a great prelate of South America, Bishop Leonidas Proaño, who wrote to me from Riobamba, Ecuador. I received a letter from him yesterday, in which he tells me, «We follow with interest the painful events in El Salvador. We join together with you and with all Christians who are suffering for the cause of the Gospel. I hope we will be able to meet at the Puebla Conference and support one another mutually in our struggle to bring to birth a people that will become God's people and advance toward true integral liberation».(Applause)

I pass over many other interesting news items relating to the life of our diocese in these days; you'll hear about them in our communications media. But certainly I cannot pass over the reality that brings us here today, a deed that reveals the richness of our archdiocesan life: the bloody and painful death of Octavio Ortiz Luna. The diocese has declared that the official communiqué published in the media regarding this case is mendacious from beginning to end³. (Applause) Our own media are already pointing out, one by one, all the falsehoods that are woven into the few lines of that communiqué, which should have encouraged faith in our homeland rather than mistrust.

³ *La Prensa Gráfica* (21 January 1979).

Thank God, we can reconstruct the truth with the help of the testimony of many who survived the tragedy and were taken to the prison of the National Guard. We therefore thank God that the same thing didn't happen here with Octavio Ortiz as happened with our poor brother Ernesto Barrera. In his case the only witness who might have clarified the truth was murdered by government security agents so that no witnesses to that crime were left to testify. (Applause)

The first testimony we have received starts thus: «On this day at six o'clock in the morning, while I was still asleep...» Pay attention to all these details. It was a gathering of young people preparing for Christian initiation; they weren't men armed to defend themselves. They were sleeping in the locale called El Despertar⁴, a retreat house for Christian groups. If you don't know that house, I urge you to go there so that you can see that it's nothing like an army barracks nor is it designed as a place to train guerrillas. For many years now it has been used by groups of Christians who live by Gospel principles—which evidently are very dangerous for these times! The property belongs to the archbishop of San Salvador and is located in the parish of San Antonio Abad.

The eyewitness continues her testimony: «A great many uniformed members of the security forces barged violently into the locale while firing their weapons. At the same time a military jeep and a large green vehicle, what they call a military tank, drove violently into the center for Christian retreats and stopped in the central courtyard. I was there in the center along with the Catholic priest, Octavio Ortiz Luna, and ten other youths. We were running an encounter of Christian initiation for twenty-eight young men between the ages of twelve and twenty. This place is used exclusively for Christian formation. In this place there have never been any meetings that conspired against the government, nor have there been meetings that promote anarchist doctrines contrary to the public order. We were conducting a course called «Encounter for the Christian Initiation of Young People» that had begun at five p.m. on Friday the nineteenth. We made use of Catholic hymnals and musical instruments that were found there, such as guitars. None of the participants in that Christian encounter were in possession of any kind of weapon. Before being captured by the uniformed soldiers, I could see Father Ortiz right in front of the offices near the main entrance; he was lying on the ground and bleeding from the head. The agents arrested me and took me in a patrol car to the central headquarters of the National Guard, where they interrogated us. There I declared everything that I have stated thus far in the present document»⁵. During the interrogations there were also questions about the bishop and whether it was true that he was using those centers to sow subversion.

The communiqué of our archdiocese, which, thank God, will be followed by other testimonies, seeks to show how the mendacious version of the government contrasts with the reality experienced by the eyewitnesses⁶. We can draw some conclusions. First, our security forces are incapable of acknowledging their errors; rather, they make things worse by

⁴ The name of the retreat center, El Despertar, means «The Awakening».

⁵ Testimony of Sister María José Forrier. Cf. *Manuscripts of the Homily Outlines of Archbishop Óscar A. Romero*, Office for the Canonization of Archbishop Óscar A. Romero, Office of the Archbishop of San Salvador.

⁶ «Terror in El Salvador», 21 January 1979, in *Orientación* (28 January 1979); and «¡Basta ya!», Communiqué of the Archdiocese and the Priests of San Salvador Regarding the Assassination of the Martyrs of El Despertar, San Antonio Abad », 22 January 1979, in *Orientación* (28 January 1979).

falsifying the truth with slander. They are consequently weakening our government's credibility day by day as well as the credibility of the mass media. They are obliging us to turn to international organizations and publications in other countries because we have no faith in the justice and the truthfulness of our own society. (Applause)

Second, it follows that there is an urgent need for the corrupt security system of our country to be purified. (Applause) Our people's sense of frustration grows ever deeper because the slight ray of hope that appeared with the change of command in a certain security force now seems to be suffocated in the brutal reality we are here denouncing⁷.

Third, once again evidence is given of the evil and dangerous nature of the Law of Public Order since it legalizes the use of mere suspicion as justification for actions that violate the freedom and the lives of Salvadorans.

Fourth, enough is enough! And we say this not out of pessimism but with great optimism regarding the strengths of our noble people. Our surroundings are drenched in brutality, and we need to turn to reflection to recover the sense that we are rational beings who can search out the causes of the evils among us and fearlessly make the bold and urgent changes that our society needs. (Applause)

Finally, I want to remind you that the material and intellectual authors of the murder of Father Octavio Cruz have incurred canonical excommunication. (Applause) Many people laugh at the idea of excommunication from the church, but maybe they'll think again if they realize that their excommunication from this church that is so closely identified with the people should make them feel that they have been repudiated by the people themselves. (Applause) As a mother, however, the church in her severity does not forget mercy. Even as we pray for the eternal rest of the victims and the consolation of their mourning families, let us also ask and hope for the conversion of the murderers. (Applause)

This is our church standing alongside our people and beholding the four corpses of these young men, who we might say bring us a transcendent message. They were meeting under the direction of Father Ortiz, and Father Ortiz also is someone to whom we must listen in the silence of death.

Father Ortiz was a young priest, born on March 22, 1944, in the village of Cacaopera in the department of Morazán. He preserved his rural simplicity and understood that the greatness of a person lies not in appearances but in truth. His parents, Don Alejandro Ortiz and Doña Exaltación Luna, both of them salt of the earth, are with us today. To them and to the parents of the other deceased we offer our condolences. Father Ortiz studied at our San José de la Montaña Seminary, and I was blessed to be the bishop who consecrated him. He was one of the first fruits of my episcopal ministry. His first priestly work was in the community of Zacamil, a community he always loved. At the time of his assassination Father Octavio Ortiz Luna was at the height of his powers.

If someone were to ask me what his last day was like, I could describe it perfectly. In the morning he was working with those who were organizing the week of reflection on priestly

⁷ On 3 January 1979 Colonel José Antonio Corleto was appointed director of the National Guard. *El Diario de Hoy* (4 January 1979).

identity; they were writing a synthesis of the rich message that came out of the week. In the afternoon he was coordinating a seminary meeting at which I presided. He had a very special gift for conducting these meetings and making them fruitful. After that he left for San Antonio Abad, where he celebrated the Mass of their patron saint. In the evening he gave points for spiritual reflection to the thirty-odd youngsters, and Sister Chepita followed up by giving the group two concrete questions to ponder. The next day began in El Despertar with the horrible awakening to death and has left this sorrowful consequence for those of us reflecting here today in the cathedral.

Getting to the biblical readings, I ask your pardon—I'm not going to go on much longer. I just want to focus on the gospel from a theological and pastoral perspective, because I want to reaffirm that my sermons are not political. Naturally, they touch on politics, and they touch on the reality of the people, but their aim is to shed light and to tell you what it is that God wants and what it is that God doesn't want. We have now heard words that shed light on this bloody deed, though we heard them with difficulty because the sound system is poor. We might say that, given the present circumstance, the whole message could be titled, «An Assassination that Speaks to Us of Resurrection». Today's readings reveal to me, first, that a new world is present in this actual world, a new world that is embodied in the resurrection of Christ; second, that Christ is calling us today to conversion so that we can live in this new world; and third, that we need to have faith so that we can grow in this new world and be light for the world and salt for the earth.

The presence of a new world embodied in the resurrection of Christ

The three readings reveal to us the presence of this new world. In the first reading Nineveh appears as a prototype of the great cities that are frivolous, self-centered, and sinful. Into the midst of that frivolous world God sent Jonah with this message: «Within forty days, God will destroy this city if it is not converted» (Jon 3:4). But today's reading tells us that Nineveh took heed of that warning: all its inhabitants did penance, and God pardoned the city.

In the second reading Paul speaks about the concrete situations of sin in which people live: some are married, others are without matrimonial commitment; some are slaves, others are masters. Paul tells these people that God desires to sanctify them in those same concrete social situations in which they live but that they must first remove all sin from their historical condition. Every situation in the world can help people to be holy as long as those living in the situation refuse to sin. Therefore, Christians must themselves struggle to be converted and to turn the whole world away from sin and toward the kingdom of God, which is already at hand.

Christ, the great teacher on this Sunday, tells us, «The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near» (Mark 1:15). The time is fulfilled precisely in the risen Christ, who has opened up a new stage in world history. Blessed are those who find this secret of the resurrection because life in the world, despite all the crimes and evils, becomes for those Christians the power and the scenario for salvation. God saves us within the concrete history of each people and each individual. But Saint Paul tells us that «those who are married must live as if they were not married; those who suffer as if they did not suffer; and those who enjoy life as if there were no pleasure, for we know that the world in its present form is passing away» (1 Cor 7:29-31). This is the great message of our deceased Octavio: the present world is passing away, and there remains only the joy of having implanted in this world the kingdom of God. All

kinds of pomp and triumph will pass through this world, along with the greed of capitalism and the phony successes of life. All that passes. What does not pass away is love, which means using your wealth, your assets, your profession for the service of others. What does not pass away is the joy of sharing and feeling ourselves sisters and brothers of all humanity. «In the evening of life you will be judged on love»⁸. Octavio and the four young men who died with him have been judged by God on the basis of their love. How wonderful it is to be able to contemplate this poor priest, a man who renounced everything and gloried in living as simply as a *campesino*. He did so to make himself more accessible to all those who were seeking this Gospel that is preached to the poor and needy, this great message of God for the salvation of the world.

This new world is received through conversion

In today's readings Paul teaches us how a truly converted person uses the goods of the earth. We need to be converted because «it is impossible to serve two masters» (Matt 6:24). There is only one God, and that God will be for us either the true God who asks us to renounce anything that leads us into sin, or the monetary god who makes us turn our backs on the Christian God. Many people want a god who is opposed to the true God, and so they criticize this church and murder Octavio and kill every movement that tries to knock down the idols of the false gods and reveal to us the true God.

Faith is needed for us to grow in this new world

In conclusion, then, sisters and brothers, Christ tells us, «The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Good News» (Mark 1:15). That is faith. The gospel goes on to tell us today about the first four vocations to the ecclesiastical hierarchy: Peter and his brother Andrew, John and his brother James. The four of them leave everything when the Lord calls them, for their conversion involves not just turning away from sin but doing the will of God.

I want to address my beloved brother priests and thank them for paying heed to my words. As the hundred of you gather here around the altar, wearing your priestly stoles, you are the successors of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. What God asks of us is the same as what he asked of them and what he asked of Octavio. Today that long line of succession sets us an example with a bloody stole, a chasuble of pain, and a face disfigured. Poor Octavio died with his face disfigured. What ran over him? We don't know, but the doctor said he was crushed to death. In the Auxiliadora funeral home they tried to fix it; they couldn't leave it as it was. Octavio was transformed because he gave his face for the sake of Christ. That is what the Lord asks of us.

I am happy to tell you, dear fellow Christians, that at this time when being a priest is a dangerous business, we are receiving more vocations to the seminary than ever. This will be a record year. (Applause) Twenty-seven young high-school graduates are ready to start their studies in the seminary because God's kingdom in the world is a kingdom that truly speaks to the noblest youths and makes them declare, «Let us also go, that we may die with him!» (John 11:16).

This community of ours that has been reflecting here in light of the word of God is living in a world where sin is enthroned. The struggle for the kingdom of God is a struggle that has no

⁸ JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Obras completas*, Madrid, 1988, 94.

need of tanks and machine guns; it is a struggle that has no need of swords or rifles. (Applause) The battle is fought with guitars and the hymns of the church. Our struggle grows from the heart and reforms the world because, as the pope said, «Violence, even when motivated by just causes, is still violence, and it is neither effective nor worthy of us». Let us hope that those who may understandably be moved to vengeance and violence by deeds such as these will control themselves and realize that there is a violence that is far superior to that of the tanks and also to that of the guerrillas—it is the violence of Christ: «Father, forgive them for they are ignorant—the poor things, they know nothing» (Luke 23:24). The recognition of that superiority is stronger than the violence of weapons. Indeed, violence only makes people more brutish than the animals, for animals have no weapons. (Applause)

Events of the week

This, then, has been a week in which we have had to weep. The presence of these bodies is of a piece with the kidnapping of Ernesto Liebes, whose whereabouts are unknown⁹ and whose poor health makes us fear the worst. Keep this in mind, you who kidnap by violence! Kidnapping is not civilized, and neither is making people disappear or keeping them imprisoned without trial. All that is savagery! (Applause)

I also want to say that the two Englishmen and the Japanese man remain kidnapped, and they won't be freed until the five disappeared persons are released. Let us pray that the Lord will move the hearts of those responsible so that our brothers are given their freedom.

This week we must also recall how militants of FAPU forcibly occupied the Red Cross, the embassy of Mexico, and the offices of the Organization of American States (OAS). They also tried to take over the Chanmico estate. In doing this, they were seeking to publicize their demands for amnesty and for the repeal of the Law of Public Order. As a result of their actions, thirty persons have been given asylum, eighty-six have been arrested, and nineteen have been publicly accused. These events received international attention and gave clear evidence of the lack of freedom of expression in our country. When they're unable to express themselves, people apply other measures of pressure, and the security forces react to these with unyielding brutality.

I also want to make it know that I could do nothing to respond to the request that was made to me by the OAS in Washington. I had to tell them that when I sent a delegation of priests to mediate, the authorities took their passports and identification away and refused to deal with them. In this country there is no recognition of the church as a force that cares about the rights of human beings.

Despite all this, the president has stated in Mexico that the church is not being persecuted. He also compromised our newspapers by having them publish front-page headlines announcing a lie of which this cathedral itself gives evidence. (Applause) The papers publicized the accusation the president made in Mexico: «Crisis in the Church Caused by Revolutionary Clergy»¹⁰. He denounced the archbishop for preaching politics and not observing the spirituality that other priests are faithfully preaching. He said that I am using my

⁹ Ernesto Liebes, a Salvadoran businessman and general consul for Israel in El Salvador, was kidnapped by the FARN on 17 January 1979. Cf. *La Prensa Gráfica* (18 January 1979).

¹⁰ *La Prensa Gráfica* (21 January 1979).

preaching to promote my candidacy for the Nobel Prize. So conceited they think I am! (Applause) When asked whether the fourteen families¹¹ exist in El Salvador, the president denied it; he said that nothing like that exists, just as he denied the existence of disappeared persons and political prisoners.

Just last night a reporter from Mexico called to ask me what I thought about the president's declarations. When I told him I wasn't yet aware of them, he read them to me over the telephone. I told him, «Well, the best answer I can give is that you should publish in your paper what we are going through here at the present time. A priest was killed by the National Guard, and four young men died along with him». He was very interested in that news. When he asked me to explain the campaign of slander and defamation against the archbishop and the clergy, I told him, «That's exactly the reason why we say that there is persecution of the church. Is not this psychotic campaign against the Christian communities evidence of persecution? Is not the assault on the people's human rights evidence of persecution? The church is convinced that her ministry consists in defending the image of God in human beings». And I finished by saying, «Understand this: the conflict is not between the church and the government. It is between the government and the people. The church is with the people, and the people are with the church, thanks be to God!» (Applause).

My sisters and brothers, in the light of the word of God, these events and these realities of ours tell us that there is only one salvation, Christ the Lord. Therefore, as we approach the altar, let us pay heed to the Gospel of Mark, which tells us, «The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe» (Mark 1:15). Lord, today our conversion and our faith are strengthened by these men who lie before us in coffins. They are heralds of the reality of our people and of the noble aspirations of the church, which desires nothing more than people's salvation. Behold, Lord, this multitude gathered in your cathedral. Our prayer is that of a people that groans, that weeps, but that does not despair because we know that Christ has not lied. The kingdom is near, and we are asked only to repent and to believe in him. So let us respond with the creed.

¹¹ El Salvador is known as the «country of the fourteen families», an allusion to the small group of landowners who possess most of the country's wealth.

