

147

THE VOICE OF BLOOD

Funeral Mass for Father Rafael Palacios¹

21 June 1979

Esteemed Bishop Rivera of Santiago de María and dear fellow priests of this archdiocese and our sister dioceses, I thank you for sharing this time of pain with us.

Dear sisters and brothers, the voice of blood speaks the most eloquent language of all. That is why this *cathedra* feels strengthened by the testimony of blood that has now become an oft-heard voice in this cathedral. Here has been spilled the blood of the people and the blood of priests. In this cathedral we have tried to interpret the language of all the blood that has been shed around our country: in the mountains, on the highways, on the beaches, in the streets of our cities. What place has not already been flooded with the blood which this cathedral, as interpreter of this language of pain and anguish, has tried to make into a message of consolation and hope?

Today in the cathedral it is the blood of a priest that is crying out. Rafael Palacios gave his life not only yesterday, when he was gunned down in a street of Santa Tecla, but he gave it from the moment that life began and was dedicated to God. There in the village of Talcualuya in San Luis Talpa, in the department of La Paz, he was born of Don Rafael and Doña Concepción on October 16, 1938. The mutual love of child and parents remained always strong, inspiring Rafael with a sense of family and guaranteeing that he would always trod the path of goodness. They moved to Suchitoto, which became the adoptive town of Rafael and his brothers and sisters, who are here present. He served as priest in the parish of Tecoluca and in the cathedral of the diocese of San Vicente. Later he ministered in this archdiocese, first in Santa Tecla and Ilopango and most recently in the parish of San Francisco in Mejicanos.

This long trajectory of Rafael Palacios tells us that his was a life characterized by integrity, love of study, and pursuit of the truth, perhaps almost to excess. For that is what made him the victim that we accept here today, the fifth priest killed in our diocese.² We hold him with the same respect and love with which we have held the other priests and with which we have bowed before so many other cruel deaths, which are now uncountable. We are celebrating here now with great solemnity not only because he was a priest—whose murder seems inconceivable in a people that claims to be Christian—but because his blood cries out from the depths and invites us all to listen intently this morning to this message of blood, which I think is expressed in three ideas: it is a revelation of the mystery of iniquity; it is a revelation of the mystery of fidelity to Jesus; and it is a message of hope for our people.

¹ On 20 June 1979 Father Rafael Palacios Campos, priest of the archdiocese of San Salvador, was assassinated. See «Information Bulletin No. 66 of the Secretariat for Social Communication of the Archdiocese of San Salvador», 20 June 1979, in *Orientación* (24 June 1979), and «Declaration of the Archbishop's Office of Salvador on the Occasion of the Death of Father Padre Rafael Palacios», 27 June 1979, in *Orientación* (8 July 1979).

² The other priests killed were Rutilio Grande García, 12 March 1977; Alfonso Navarro Oviedo, 11 May 1977; Ernesto Barrera Motto, 28 November 1978; and Octavio Ortiz Luna, 20 January 1979.

A revelation of the mystery of iniquity

More than anything, I hear in the murder of Father Rafael the voice of his blood denouncing the iniquity of our people, which is sin. The most logical and eloquent manifestation of sin is death—«by sin death entered the world», says the Bible (Rom 5:12). But when death results directly from sin, then it is due to criminal disobedience of the fifth commandment, «You shall not kill» (Exod 20:13), and we see clearly how sin and death are the mystery of iniquity.

In the silence of death Father Rafael denounces the sin of the world, but with respect I say that he also denounces the sin of the church, and in all sincerity I say that he also denounces his own personal sin.

The sin of the world, first of all. Like Christ, the church must continue to denounce the sin of the world. She must root out the sin of the world, even to the point of being crucified if necessary. We can say that the sin of the world is so evident in this death of Rafael that it puts on display the stupidity of violence and irrational vengeance. Why must the extreme right avenge the supposed sin of the extreme left by taking the life of a priest? These extremes constitute a sinful structure. Seeing the people of our country so polarized between right and left helps us to understand how serious the structural crisis in our nation is. There is a structure of sin and a structure of violence, as the bishops said in Medellín (M 2,1; 2,16), and as long as that doesn't change, it will continue to reap victims, from both the left and the right.

It is irrational and stupid to take out on a priest what is supposedly the fault of the left. The priest belongs to neither the right nor the left. The priest has the loftiness of heart to love one and all. As a voice of the church, the priest is love, and if by preferential option he takes the side of the poor, he does so not to exclude those who have wealth but to tell them that they will not be saved until they feel as their own the anguish of the poor and take their side as ministers of the Lord. They will be happy not by selfishly holding their wealth but by sharing it with everyone, just as God shares his.

It is wrong to kill a priest so criminally, so treacherously, so deliberately. On Saturday night Father Rafael came to look for me; he gave me a letter telling about the threats made against him by the UGB on Thursday. On his little car they had painted their fateful hand of vengeance. Yesterday, or rather the day before, Father Palacios was with me at a vicariate meeting in his parish in Mejicanos. At the end he said to me, «Today they killed a soldier³ and I've been threatened. Something serious is going to happen in Santa Tecla». He sensed the danger, and so it was. I thought he was exaggerating, but yesterday I was shocked by the tragic news. I thought: how dire is the situation of our native land!

If it's true that the death of Father Palacios was a vendetta for the soldier's death the day before—the same was said about the death of Father Navarro, which was supposed to avenge the kidnapping and murder of the day before—then what basis is there for these acts of vengeance? For that reason I believe that our denunciation of the death of Father constitutes a demand for justice. Those who have in their hands the power to control these hellish, murderous forces must control them. When they want to do so, they can. I remember when the same phantom organization was threatening the Jesuit Fathers; the president of the republic

³ Major Armando de Paz was assassinated on 19 June 1979. *La Prensa Gráfica* (20 June 1979).

made a plea for sanity and the threats stopped. So action is possible when there is a desire to take action.

How long will we put up with these crimes without justice being done? Where is the justice of our nation? Where is the Supreme Court of Justice? Where is the honor of our democracy if people must die this way, like dogs, without even investigating deaths like that of Father Rafael? In the name of the citizenry I ask and demand that investigations be carried out and that this growing spiral of violence be halted, since at least one of the groups is controlled by persons who can rein them in.

This structural sin has infested our society so thoroughly that we have become almost insensitive to it. It is incredible to think that our fear of a possible communist threat has made us forget about the awful sin that is already a reality in our midst. At this moment when we have before us yet another victim of these unjust structures, we must reflect on the urgent need to organize the life of our country in a different way. The powerful classes that control the government of the country need to evaluate these forces that have been made so violent by repression. Why has no sanction been placed as well on the forces of the right, which are also stupid and violent?

Poor Father Palacios! You have paid the price that logically awaited you in your ministry of revealing and denouncing the situation of our country. Rafael knew our reality, and he studied it in the light of the Gospel, which cannot fail to throw light on the injustices, the disorders, and the violence. Doing that naturally incites the arrogant hands of those who are sinning but don't want to be told that they are sinning.

That is why I also say, with great respect and humility, that the death of Father Rafael denounces the sins of the church. Pardon me, sisters and brothers, but we are all church, and when family members gather before a corpse, they must say honestly, «Maybe we are partly to blame». Let us accept our guilt. Sin is a sad inheritance of a church that is composed of human beings. Although by grace she is continually tending toward conversion, there are many people who don't allow themselves to be carried by this current of conversion. What happens, then, is that the priest who is faithfully trying to denounce an unjust situation in the world perhaps gets no support from his pastors or his fellow priests or the people of God themselves. It's possible, sisters and brothers, that we have in some way collaborated with the unjust accusations that make the priest a man sentenced to death.

I think that Father Rafael's death should make us reflect and react. We should study what is being preached and try to understand how the church is being renewed. Instead of installing ourselves in a cozy corner that resists any evolution in the life of the church, we should have the courage to follow those who strive to keep up with the voice of the church. We should not condemn or malign their voices, nor should we doubt them. Love and fraternal correction come first. Condemnation done with love is necessary for us, even within the church, but we should never help our enemies by putting in their hands the weapons they will later use to do away with the dear members of our church.

This is the time to reflect on the sins of the church, which we all commit. And the person who denounces must also be willing to be denounced. I am saying this with Christian and evangelical bluntness to all the faithful, beginning with myself: we must analyze our conduct with regard to the demands of a church that cannot renege on her preferential

commitment to the poor, on her denunciation of sin, and on everything else that makes her a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's why I also say that the voice of Father Rafael's blood has called us together at this moment to celebrate this Eucharist and to ask for mercy for him and for his own sin. What priest does not feel that he is a sinner? At the moment of offering the sacrifice, he is the first to remind the people, «I confess before God that I am a sinner, and I ask you to pray for me».

This moment of sincerity at the hour of death is not the time for us to throw veils of hypocrisy over the sins, the defects, or the weaknesses of the deceased. Any one of us could point out defects in Father Palacios, but now is the time to say, «Father, forgive him because he also needs your mercy and your forgiveness».

In this way, then, his blood in all sincerity cries out against sin wherever it may be found.

A revelation of the mystery of fidelity to Jesus

My second point is that this voice of the blood shed by Father Rafael reveals to us the mystery of fidelity. There is no fidelity without blood. God himself used blood to sign his covenant of fidelity with humankind. We were reminded of this last Sunday in the first reading, which spoke of the blood sprinkled on the altar and on the people (Exod 24:3-8). True communion cannot be manifested or expressed without blood. That's why I believe Christ, the model for Christians, had to seal his fidelity to our God with blood. And all those who wish to be faithful followers of Christ and of God must also authenticate their following under the seal of blood.

This is the great testimony that Rafael Palacios is giving us this morning: he was faithful to his vocation to the point of being gunned down for fulfilling his priestly duty. His fidelity to the church is something I have often witnessed: it was a fidelity inspired in the Gospel and from the Gospel, a fidelity bold enough to denounce the very sins of the church. What is important is that the church be faithful to Jesus Christ, and in the church the voice of those who want to be faithful to Jesus Christ will often have something important to say to other members of the church.

There was his fidelity to the poor. Rafael was poor. He was always clean and well-groomed and carried himself with dignity, but he was poor. I can say that with all sincerity. His fidelity to poverty led him to be a priest without attachment to money. He used to celebrate Mass and serve the people in other ways without concern for stipends or what people might pay him. Priestly ministry is truly prostituted when it becomes a business! Fidelity to poverty is admirable when priestly ministry is guided by it, for then the poor priest can speak also to the wealthy since the best testimony is the experience of living poverty.

A message of hope for our people

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, from this hour of the church's suffering I want us to gather a message of hope. When a Christian or a priest is killed, certainly we feel grief. We have heard the deep wailing and seen the tears of the communities that knew Father Rafael, and I have been moved by it. «If he sowed love, why did they kill him?», asked one of his faithful

yesterday. But we should not weep without hope. I believe that the people's grieving shows that Rafael's testimony, which leaves behind a firm imprint of the Gospel of love, will be for us the seed of even more fruitful evangelization.

So I believe that the priestly witness of Rafael, sealed with the shedding of his blood, is truly a reason for hope. In him we behold the new man, and we feel the great desire he had to bring forth the new men and the new women so urgently needed today in Latin America to change not only structures but above all hearts (M 1,3). That is the voice of conversion, the voice of genuine evangelization. We are given great hope when priests know how to motivate others, and that's what Rafael did just two days ago: he motivated us to do the evaluation of the vicariate of Mejicanos with a passage from the Gospel of Saint Luke. In this way we renew ourselves in our various tasks, which can sometimes be mixed in with sin, no matter how holy they may seem to be. To keep them pure and clean according to the heart of God, we need to be strict not only with others but with ourselves, as Rafael was.

Finally, this death opens to us the perspectives of transcendence and the absolute. Now that Rafael has died, his words can no longer be confused with the voices of this earth. Perhaps slander or misunderstanding led people to confuse his voice with the voices of those seeking only earthly liberation, but now in the light of his death we can understand that his message lifts us beyond history and beyond earthly realities. His death is not silence. His death is a most eloquent voice. It is not only the voice of his blood, which has drenched the earth, but also the voice of his spirit, which has soared to heaven and from there speaks to us: «Work to the point of leaving blood in the streets, but die with a hope that rescues your spirit for God alone». Let it be so. (Applause)