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WHY DID THEY KILL RAFAEL PALACIOS?

One Month Memorial Mass for Father Rafael Palacios 20 July 1979

Dear sisters and brothers, I wish to explain an absence among our priests and at the same time pronounce a word of judgment against a new injustice that has just been committed. Father Ástor Ruíz was coming here from Medellín, Colombia, and they did not let him enter the country but instead deported him to Guatemala. Before departing he had time to leave this letter he was bringing from Medellín, a letter signed by all the priests, religious, and lay persons who took part in a course on the document of Puebla. He was doing nothing wrong there, simply studying the official documents of the church in order to understand them better and learn how to put them into practice. When he arrived at the airport, however, all he could do was leave behind this letter.

It reads thus: «Dear Archbishop: Considering the sad recent event in the history of the church of our sister nation, the murder of Father Rafael Palacios on June 20, we wish to send you a message from this place in our America where we have gathered together from diverse parts for the purpose of studying the Latin American reality. We want to voice our repudiation of the attitude of those who want to eliminate the agents of evangelization, and we affirm our solidarity with you and with your clergy. Be assured, dear Archbishop, that we are closely following what is happening, and in our prayer and study we will continue to search for the way to definitive liberation since we are facing a problem that is common to all our countries. Your sisters and brothers of Latin America». The letter is signed by all the participants.

Please understand that we have come together here in the cathedral today for the same reason that this letter was written. The violent death of Father Rafael Palacios makes us think first of all about prayer on this one-month memorial of his death. And that is what we're doing here in the cathedral. Today, July 20, is exactly thirty days since that murder which left Father Palacios covered with his own blood, lying on a street of Santa Tecla. So it is natural for our church family to follow Christian tradition, as any family has the right to do, by coming together to celebrate the month's memorial for the deceased and especially to pray for him. We are doing nothing wrong, nothing that warrants our being kept under such extraordinary surveillance. When I arrived at the cathedral, I was surprised at the barriers the police and the soldiers had set up at the three entrances. We are not doing anything evil in coming to pray for our deceased brother. Any family has a right to pray for their deceased, and our church is a family. They have killed a member of our family, and so we intend to pray for his eternal rest. Clearly, this moment is so solemn that prayer for his eternal rest transcends life.

For Rafael Palacios there is no month to remember. It is left to us to continue our pilgrimage through history; it is we who continue to count the days that the Lord has divided with nights. But we are headed for the transcendence of eternity, the eternal day illuminated by the light of the Lamb, and thanks be to God, we who believe in him feel a great need for that light. Therefore, praying for our beloved dead, as we reflect on that eternity where they have

already arrived, becomes a message of light for us, who keep counting days and nights and continue on our pilgrimage amid the hardships of persecution and the consolations of God.

A message of prayer and reflection

I find a message of prayer and reflection first of all in what we the living are experiencing as we consider the death of Father Palacios. I have supported and congratulated the vicariates for they have not simply celebrated a Mass but have conducted long vigils of prayer and reflection here in the cathedral. This morning as well, if circumstances do not prohibit it, we will continue this long vigil of prayer until tomorrow. What do we mean to say with this vigil? It is the message of our deceased brother. Prayer and reflection give the church strength for announcing her immortal message.

Prayer is power. It reveals the origin of our convictions, the goal of our pilgrimage, and the source of the joy and hope we feel in the midst of sorrow and suffering. Prayer is the breathing of the church, her greatest need. When we organize a prayer vigil, we are not doing anything more than manifesting the health of this church that can still breathe, because prayer is her breath and in praying she knows that her strength is not on earth but reaches for God. But our prayer is not a kind of opium; it does not put people to sleep or make them conform. It is prayer that unites us to God.

Human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and collaborate with him in the construction of the world and history (Gen 1:26). True prayer is not expecting everything from God and doing nothing ourselves. That is just laziness; that is alienation; that is passivity; that is conformism. Dear sisters and brothers, this is not the time for us to say, «It's the will of God». Many things that happen are not the will of God. When we do our part to improve a situation and ask God for the courage to take action, then there is prayer. People should do all they can and then hope that God will do the rest; they combine their capacity for action, thought, and organization with hope for divine action. That is the kind of prayer we're trying to foster in our church, and this long vigil of prayer is a symbol of that attitude. Prayer should awaken in the hearts of Christians a desire to embody the glory of God in their lives. The human being is God's glory. The Council tells us that this is not the time for us to expect from prayer many things that before seemed impossible without prayer. In our day human beings, by dint of their conscious reflection and technological ability, have discovered forces that before were unknown (GS 33). Therefore, prayer should inspire people to do what they can do for themselves and not expect those things from God.

That is the purpose of reflection. The program for this long vigil has various themes for reflection. People will read the word of God from the Bible and then share thoughts together. Everything will be inspired by the word of the Lord. I want to remind you that the Council gives thanks to God because the people of God nowadays has such great capacity for reflection. The Council states that the apostolic tradition continues to grow in the church whenever people, with the help of the Holy Spirit, are studying and contemplating the message of God and trying to understand it (DV 8). When people make an effort to go deeper into the mysteries of divine revelation, then the benefit accrues not only to those who are reflecting and meditating but to the whole people of God; the whole community is enriched by that reflection.

That is why I believe that this vigil of prayer and reflection will benefit more than just the communities that have promoted it. I am thankful that it will do much good for all the

communities of the archdiocese and even for the universal church. No matter how small a community may be, nor matter how unimportant a Christian may be, if they grow richer in holiness and reflection, then they are contributing to the growth and the enrichment of the universal church. What tremendous good the faithful are doing for all the church by joining together, as they're doing now, in profound prayer and reflection! This vigil has in reality been inspired by our celebration of the month's memorial for Father Rafael, so in this way Rafael Palacios is helping us to enrich our communities.

The death of Rafael continues to be a denunciation of sin and a call to conversion

A second thought is this: the death of Rafael continues to be a denunciation of sin and a call to conversion. Our reflection leads us directly to this matter, which should not be treated casually. I want to probe deeply into the hearts of all of us who form the community of the archdiocese and the priesthood that serves it. All of us—priests, religious, faithful—must go deep into our souls and ask ourselves: why did they kill him? why are they persecuting the church? I speak to those of you who are convinced that the church is truly being persecuted, for this is not a fantasy. It is a reality that the Organization of the American States itself, the OAS, affirmed in its report after examining what is happening here in El Salvador. It clearly states that there is systematic persecution of the church, and it recommended that a stop be put to the campaign being waged against our work of evangelization. But you may ask: why are they persecuting some and not others?

Why did they kill Rafael Palacios? It is very difficult to say, but there is something at the root of this that I would like us to reflect on with regard to our pastoral ministry. Without a doubt there exists institutionalized sin and injustice; the pope himself denounced it when he came to Latin America, and he did so without hesitation (P 281). This is a sin that cries out to heaven. When the church at Puebla proclaims her preferential option for the poor, she does so as a gesture of solidarity with that vast majority of people who are progressively more lacking in the goods that others have in great abundance (P 1134). This is not demagogic prejudice. Rather, Puebla is clearly indicating that the road to conversion in America is by way of conversion to the poor and condemnation of injustices and atrocities. Conversion means participating in the reality of those who are marginalized and denied participation in society.

Taking that position is quite dangerous! It can even be fatal when those who are privileged don't want anyone to touch what is theirs. That's when the church is maligned as communist, as political, as subversive; that's when even her meetings become suspect. Such is our reality, but there are Catholics who do not see it that way and do not agree with the voice of the church, which denounces this reality and cries out for a more just world. They are not true members of the authentic church that the Lord wants in our time. Making that commitment to the poor means exposing ourselves to the risks we are mentioning here. That is why they are killing those who are preaching the true justice of the church of the Lord. That is why they are killing those who, inspired by a church which should be the voice of God, are declaring what God does not like in society.

After thirty days, then, the death of Father Palacios continues to tell this community to which he belonged not to be discouraged; it tells us that today's gospel is a clear account of what is happening in our time: «If they persecuted me for preaching justice and truth, then they will also persecute you if you commit yourselves to preaching justice and truth» (John 15:20). This is a clear sign of the truth of our church.

The charisms that Father Rafael has left us

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, at this month's memorial of his death, I want all of us to receive the charism of our beloved deceased. During this month various communities have reflected extensively on the person and the message of Father Palacios. Many people still believe the unjust charge of complicity, saying that it was his own fault that they killed him; he was involved where he shouldn't have been. That is unjust. He was involved where a priest should be involved: in preaching the message of the Lord. He knew how to remain calm in the face of threats and persecution. That is a charism we should embrace at this time when we truly need serenity, courage, and prudence. Calmness and boldness—that's what John Paul II told me: «Boldness and prudence». That's what is necessary: the calmness with which Rafael sustained those difficult moments of his life when persecution became so fierce that it killed him.

Then there was his love of the truth, which naturally had to clash with those devious realities of life. When people want to live in righteousness and truth, they inevitably clash with distortions, hypocrisy, and falsehood. This is another call for our time: «The truth will make you free» (John 8:32). Rafael manifested sincere rectitude and truth, which he acquired by serious study. He spent much time in study and so was familiar with the documents of the church. He knew that the church of today was making dangerous proposals and that these needed to be implemented, especially in the difficult situations where the church wants to carry out her authentic mission. Who has a spirit that is not enflamed when hearing the preaching of John Paul II or when reading the reflections of the bishops at Puebla and Medellín? These are moments of the Holy Spirit, when church documents are renewing the Christians of our day. If some people fail to read documents and study them, well, naturally they'll think them strange or perhaps even perverse and subversive, but these documents represent legitimate advances in the church's social doctrine and also in the church's political views. So serious study and love of the truth are also part of the message that our beloved Father Rafael has left us. Therefore, dear sisters and brothers, let us move forward with calmness, seeking the truth and loving the mighty God who is the source of all strength.

To the divine transcendence of our work we unite still another charism that is much needed in the pastoral work of our archdiocese: the ministry to the communities. Father Palacios was quite right when he said that a priest cannot be understood apart from the community. The priest's job is to bring people together, to convoke the community of those who believe in the kingdom of God, a kingdom that becomes real in the ecclesial community. The priest is therefore exercising his proper role when he pursues this ideal of creating communities. That's why I believe that this vigil is quite in tune with the spirit of Father Rafael, and it will no doubt be of great benefit to our pastoral ministry.

Here in the cathedral, groups from the different communities will continue to pray and reflect, along with the communities following this vigil by radio. Together they will know how to progress ever more firmly in search of the authentic identity which the church wants to manifest in the midst of a very complicated world. May every community be a true expression of a church that absorbs all her spirit and strength and message from divine transcendence, but that then knows also how to become immanent in history, concerned for the realities of the earth and able to speak in human language.

Dear sisters and brothers, this is the significance of our coming together this morning, and that is why I want us truly to surround this supreme moment of the day, the concelebration with our beloved priests, with a profound aura of prayer. And beneath it all, our Christian fellowship pleads to the Lord for Father Rafael: «Grant him, Lord, eternal rest, and may perpetual light shine upon him». And may the light he enjoys also guide us who are still pilgrims so that we will be able to walk in pursuit of the great truths of our church. Let it be so! (Applause)