

**115**

## **A JUDGEMENT OF GOD**

### **Funeral Mass of Father Ernesto Barrera Motto<sup>1</sup>**

**Parish of La Asunción, Mejicanos**

**29 November 1978**

Dear fellow priests; grieving relatives of Father Neto and of the three other deceased who along with him will receive Christian burial; dear sisters and brothers.

In the face of death there is always a sense of the mystery of iniquity. God did not desire death. Death is the negation of the happiness, the peace, the blessedness for which God has created us. But in some circumstances death is more clearly seen as the mystery of iniquity, a mystery in need of redemption, and that is why we pray in the presence of this enigma of death. When death is surrounded by anxiety and doubt, and as often happens, when death is accompanied by calumny, bloodshed, and violence, then there is an even greater sense of what Christ called the mystery of iniquity. Faced, therefore, with the incomprehensibility of this mystery, this uncertain step toward the beyond, we cling close to Christ. He is the only explanation. Only Christ can shed the light of transcendence and eternity on mortal life and on the passage from this life to what lies beyond. There are three dimensions that must be considered whenever we stand, as we do right now, before departed sisters and brothers.

### **The human dimension**

First there is the human dimension. The one who is here before the altar, surrounded by his family of fellow priests and by all the people, is a human being. Similarly human are the three dead brethren who also await the moment of their burial. Their families are also here among us. They are «human beings»—with what great respect these words should be pronounced! As the present pope has said, the human being is the image of God, the possessor of rights and duty, the son or daughter of a family. Every concrete human being of a particular time and place is a reflection of God that illuminates the work of creation and redemption on earth<sup>2</sup>. It is in this concrete, human dimension that we now think of Father Neto, and we want to express our sympathy especially with his beloved mother and with his sisters and brothers. We also sympathize in a special way with Father Manuel, who shares with Father Neto not only the general fraternity of all human beings but also more intimate fraternity of priesthood. My

---

<sup>1</sup> On 28 November 1978 Father Ernesto Barrera Motto, José Isidro Portillo Paz, Rafael Santos Ortiz, and Valentín Martínez Piche were murdered. Both the official communiqué of the Secretariat of the President of the Republic and press reports stated that Father Ernesto Barrera and his three companions had died in an armed confrontation with the security forces. Since there were many contradictions and inaccuracies in those reports, Archbishop Romero set up a commission of the archdiocese to investigate what had happened. The commission concluded that it was doubtful Father Ernesto Barrera and his companions had died in a confrontation. See Bulletins 51 and 52 of the Social Communications Secretariat of the Archdiocese of San Salvador and *Orientación* (3 & 10 December 1978).

<sup>2</sup> JOHN PAUL II, «Homily in the Official Inaugural Mass of his Pontificate», 22 October 1978, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (29 October 1978).

sympathy also to all the faithful of the parish of San Sebastián, where Father Neto ministered with the enthusiasm so characteristic of a young priest.

This human dimension can provide us with so many memories that would help us write his biography; we could tell of his boyhood aspirations to be a priest. While receiving his formation in the Seminary of San José de la Montaña, he developed new ideas about doing pastoral work, ideas that are perhaps hard for many people to understand. He felt a special calling to dedicate himself to helping workers. He used to tell me, «These ministries are new fields to which the Lord is directing us. They are commitments that are often not understood by traditional Christians». What he says is true. This church tries to become incarnate in human beings of every age in order to carry Christ's message to new frontiers. The church constantly finds herself in new situations with new conflicts, and she is always seeking out persons who are restless and perhaps even audacious. These are rare vocations, but when they remain in communion with the church and in communion with Christ, they are the ones who carry the message of salvation to the rest of the people, especially those who most need it because they are the most estranged.

Neto felt happy in his priesthood. I had the pleasure of bringing him personally to the parish of San Sebastián. With him I took part in some meetings with young people who questioned me about some of the concerns Christians have these days. I can assure you that this man, consecrated through priestly ordination, remained in communion with his fellow priests and with his bishop, and that is what made his ministry authentic and legitimate. There may be some difficult aspects of present-day priesthood, especially among the younger priests, but as long as they maintain a firm desire to serve and to place all their human qualities at the service of the church and the kingdom of God, then we should have confidence in them, sisters and brothers. Those who are priests have the job of bringing from eternity a message that is relevant for the men and women of their time and place.

This human dimension of Father Neto unites him with the other men who lie here with him today as corpses. We also want to affirm in them this human dimension. If there are some who criticize the church's presence alongside those who die in mysterious circumstances such as these, then we can only tell them they are not Christians. The church must be wherever there are human values. The church must save all that is authentically human. She must accompany the sorrows of mothers, of spouses, of children, of all those whose humanity feels the repercussions of pain, of misery, of iniquity. For this reason, sisters and brothers, we have every right to hold these funeral celebrations, and we do so without any fear. They are something profoundly human, and nothing human is foreign to the church's heart (GS 1).

### **The transcendent dimension**

But these men confronted a second dimension, the dimension of transcendence. Every person who comes into this world is a reflection of the eternal God. Every person has a life that began in a certain moment but will never end. Here we have a dead body, a man with his face turned toward heaven, for his hope was in a church that does not end in death but walks in pilgrimage beyond the grave. Here we have a man entering an eternity that becomes sublimely present at the moment of death. A priest must by definition be a man of eternity, a man of the eternal kingdom, a man who sees beyond the anxious desires and concerns of earth, a man who embodies the aims and horizons of eternity.

It's for that reason that we stated in our pastoral letter that the church tries to identify with all the efforts made for human betterment, but in doing so she does not remain just with the things of earth<sup>3</sup>. It is slanderous to criticize priests or bishops who are working for earthly liberation in social, economic, or political realms. Their aim is not to remain there at the earthly level; rather, they are trying to liberate temporal goods from earthly servitude and incorporate them into the great liberty of heaven. Neto Barrera now fully understands that all liberation struggles, all hopes for a better world here on this earth, ultimately become reality in the bliss of eternity. Only the liberation that Christ brings from the transcendent realm can impart true value to the liberation struggles of earth. Some myopic people listen to a priest's words as he cries out against the world's injustice, against the abuses of power, against the assaults on human dignity in this world, and then they criticize him as a communist, as a politician, as someone who has lost his way. They are myopic because they don't realize that the man calling out for liberation is a priest who keeps before his eyes the transcendent perspective.

That is why it is we priests and other Christians who are the true liberators of earth. Since we have this doctrine that tells us about the transcendence of what lies beyond, we are called by God to join together with all the other people who are struggling to make this world more human, more equal, more Christian, more fraternal—and to give them true hope and true strength. Therefore, those who are laid low because of their profound convictions are still followers of the same Christ, even if their goals are confused with earthly aims.

At this time when death has gathered us together around these brothers of ours, especially Father Neto, we must reaffirm as Christians that we cannot just look piously toward eternity and transcendence while failing to put our feet firmly on earth. We must reaffirm that precisely because we hope for a heaven that will reward our struggles on earth, we must still work vigorously for a better world according to the vocation each of us has. It seems to me that the best message we can learn from this dead body of our brother priest Neto is this: we must sow deep our hope for heaven, but we must also work hard for our earthly hopes. We should not dissociate these twin hopes but see them as complementary and completely realistic. We should be Christians whose hearts are set on heaven but whose hands and feet are busy with the temporal realities of earth.

### **The dimension of God's judgment**

I'm going to end my words, sisters and brothers, with a reflection on the third dimension, which is God's judgment. Neto and José Isidro and Rafael Santos and Valentín have come face to face with God's judgment, and it is God's judgment that endures. God's judgment is eternal but also encompasses the temporal. It is by God's judgment that our days on earth and our wanderings on the highways and byways of the world will be judged. It is God's judgment that will give us definitive reward or punishment because the Judge accepts no bribes; he cannot be paid off. He is a Judge who will give to us according to our works.

Considering this judgment of God, brothers and sisters, I appeal for prudence and serenity in the face of earthly judgments. It is regrettable how people are trying to manipulate these events. It is scandalous that radio broadcasts and newspaper reports are smearing the intentions and the memories of those who have died, as if there were no definitive judgment. I beg you not to let yourselves be swayed by judgments made too quickly, especially when

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Church and the People's Political Organizations* (6 August 1978) 27.

special interests and cunning are involved. It is for this reason that the church, in its desire to reflect God's justice on earth, tells her children, «Let us wait and reflect. Let us analyze the facts». A commission has been named to investigate these deaths, and we have already collected information that completely contradicts many of the scandalous reports of our newspapers and radio stations<sup>4</sup>. Neto Barrera was flogged. A forensic physician has written a statement that details the frightful tortures inflicted on Neto Barrera. He must have suffered greatly before handing over his spirit to the Lord's judgment. It is therefore unjust to judge a dead man who has no voice and cannot complain of the pain inflicted on him in the service of worldly interests. At the very least we must wait for some pallid reflection of God's judgment before we can hope to understand the mystery of iniquity that enshrouds this death and many other lamentable deaths, deaths that have occurred without the benefit of serene human judgment but only as the result of the biased judgment of bastard earthly interests.

As far as possible we must judge with the mind of the Lord, who desires mercy more than justice. That is what brings us together this afternoon: a plea for the Lord's mercy. We pray for mercy because nothing human presents itself before God's holiness without the stains of earth. We must tell the Lord, «Have mercy! Cleanse me of these stains, and forgive me these sins!» What we mean to say, then, is that our departed brothers are in need of the Lord's mercy, and for that reason we have come to the house of God, this house of prayer that was built by Neto's own brother. We have come to pray, «Lord, keep in mind the good will of this family. Keep in mind the good will of these vocations. Lord, hear the prayers of these fellow priests as we surround our deceased brother. We pray to you on behalf of our beloved dead». God's mercy is real, but at the same time there is God's justice which decisively counters the iniquitous machinations of those who would use even death and human pain for their perverse ends.

May the Lord have mercy on us, and may these victims of pain and violent death be also a supplication to the Lord: «Lord, enough violence! Enough deaths shrouded in the mystery of iniquity! Enough suffering inflicted on countless families, some whose names are not even known—you know them better than anybody. Have mercy on our people, Lord. This is the prayer we raise up to you this afternoon as we stand before Neto and our departed brothers. Lord, as we serenely wait upon your justice, the only true justice, grant them eternal rest, and may perpetual light shine upon them». Let it be so. [Applause]

---

<sup>4</sup> See «Four Terrorists Die in Shootout. One Priest among Them» in *El Diario de Hoy* (29 November 1978); «Three Dead in Confrontation» in *La Prensa Gráfica* (29 November 1978); «Armed Clash in La Providencia. Curia Analyzes Death of Priest» in *El Mundo* (29 November 1989); and «Subversives Confront Police. Priest Killed with Three Terrorists» in *Diario Latino* (29 November 1978).