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## **A CALL TO UNITY, TO TRUTH, AND TO HOLINESS**

**First anniversary of the death of Father Alfonso Navarro<sup>1</sup>  
11 May 1978**

*Ephesians 6:10-20*

*Matthew 5:1-12*

... The voice of Father Alfonso Navarro continues to be heard, even though one year ago he fell to the ground disfigured by the criminal bullets of those who killed him. . . . The gathering in this cathedral of so many brother priests and of people from so many Christian communities is a sign of the faith of this pilgrim church. We are a community that death cannot deter; rather, death gifts us with new horizons . . . and stimulates us to continue our journey to the end. With fraternal affection we remember also our little brother Luis Torres who along with Alfonso was cut down by the vile bullets that reap innocent lives.

It would be good to recall the conference to which Father Navarro Oviedo and the young Torres were traveling. For Christians death does not inspire regrets. Rather we draw near to these two graves contemplating the priest who takes the child Luis by the hand on the way to eternity. It is an inspiration. I would like us to gather what the church needs from this threefold testimony that the disfigured lips of Alfonso Navarro poured out to his witnesses; . . . they 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**

... He was perhaps the only priest present in that historic meeting when he began his humble service here in the archdiocese. . . . He kept repeating that we had to be united at least by a sense of professional ethics and that the disunity among us was equivalent to suicide. Alfonso Navarro often repeated that phrase, «Disunity is suicide».

I want to take these gripping words of Father Navarro and repeat them to my beloved brother priests and to all of you, dear faithful: «In the community of the church we have to bear witness above all to unity». Especially now, as Alfonso Navarro speaks to us from the eternal destiny of our pilgrim church, disunity appears more criminal than ever, and the beauty of unity appears more brilliant, for we realize that we are all on a pilgrimage to that destiny and that all together we form the community which will lead us toward that destiny.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the recording of this homily is missing, we have followed the transcription of the first edition. Cf. ROMERO O.A., *His Thought*, Vol. IV, San Salvador 1981, 223-227. The ellipses indicate inaudible passages in the original homily, which was poorly recorded.

May the anniversary of his death inspire this unity in us. May it inspire in us the church's eschatological perspective and make us aware of that final moment toward which the kingdom of God moves. Above all, may it enable us to be witnesses of our destiny, of our origin, and of the church community that Christ revealed in his final words before dying: «Father, may they all be one as you are in me and I in you, that the world may believe that you sent me» (John 17:21).

I received a letter from a brother bishop in Guatemala, of the diocese of Verapaz. There they had a week-long course of pastoral formation, and Bishop Gerardo Flores was urged by the participants to send an expression of fraternity from that diocese to ours. I think this is the most appropriate way to communicate this testimony to you, my dear priests and faithful. It should be seen precisely as a call to unity and a call to work together. Our brothers and sisters of Verapaz state:

Our week together has been characterized by a clear desire of all the participants to discover ways to live in complete fidelity to the Gospel. The participants in this pastoral week have expressly asked me to send you and your community a message manifesting our solidarity and our admiration for the compelling, courageous, and evangelical witness the church of San Salvador is giving to the whole universal church. We have followed with keen attention and admiration the suffering of our sister church, and we have tried to learn from you. 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 Salvadoran sisters and brothers, and we pray that they will be given strength during these times of trial. We are also moved to ask that the saints who are suffering persecution in our sister republic intercede for our own people and our pastoral ministry.

Among the martyrs for our faith we draw attention this morning to the example of Alfonso Navarro who, as I said one year ago, continues to be the hand extended in the desert of this world, pointing out the path of our pilgrimage. United as brothers and sisters, let us move forward to the 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 urges us to be courageous not cowardly and to live this newness of our Christian identity so that we can discern, among the evils of the world, the beauty of God's truth, which is so very dangerous to declare and proclaim. That identity inspires us to denounce injustices, disorders, and abuses. Doing so is dangerous: if Alfonso Navarro had not spoken out, he would not have died.

Yet he is proof of the gospel words he proclaimed, «Only the truth will set you free» (John 8:32). The truth spoken courageously, as we were just reminded by our brothers and sisters of Guatemala, is what made Father Navarro a controversial and dangerous character—so dangerous that many people are still not convinced of the beauty of his truth. Nevertheless, it was the truth that made him free of earthly ties and of all those things that bind so many people on earth with cowardice, treason, and falsehood.

The death of Father Alfonso Navarro is therefore a call for us to be courageous in proclaiming the truth. May today's memorial, sisters and brothers, inspire courage in all of us. Recently someone said to me, «It's obvious that at the present time there is a struggle between truth and the lie». Yes, there is no middle ground because those who try to mediate between truth and falsehood are already liars; they do not give witness to the truth. Father Alfonso Navarro died giving witness to the truth. On this morning when we remember him with admiration, may he be for us this wonderful witness of all the truth recounted in the superb pamphlet about him that is now available to everybody<sup>2</sup>.

Those of us who heard him and shared his concerns know that he suffered fragility of the flesh like every man; we cannot deny the defects and limitations, but these also bear witness to the truth. The church has never been so true to herself as when at the Second Vatican Council she proclaimed herself holy but with the need to do penance (LG 8); the church is holy but seeks greater perfection. Those who preach the truth do not do so because they feel superior to others. If there is something beautiful about our archdiocese, it is that we are all sincerely in search of the truth that we know is possessed only by Christ. To encounter Christ is to encounter the truth; it means being faithful to his Gospel and to his presence in the world; it means trying to bear witness to this presence despite our human calamities. 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 incarnate in the beauty of Christ. 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, dear sisters and brothers, the gospel passage chosen to recall this first anniversary of the murder of Father Navarro is the discourse on the Beatitudes, which is an inspiration to holiness. When the holiest of saints, Christ, the uniquely holy One, opened his mouth to speak to humanity, the Beatitudes flowed like pearls from his lips and were shared with a world that thirsted for goodness. Proclaiming that those who suffered were blessed, he concluded, «Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you because of me» (Matt 5:11). With these words Jesus shows that the Gospel is causing an upheaval in the world.

It is only by following Jesus, even when they call us mad, when they call us subversives and communists and all the other epithets they put on us, that we will realize that we are doing no more than preaching the subversive witness of the Beatitudes, which have turned everything upside down by proclaiming that the blessed ones are the poor and those who thirst for justice and those who suffer (Matt 5:3-11). It was by this road that Alfonso Navarro entered the happiness of heaven that he now enjoys. He is now among that «crowd of witnesses» telling us, as the Council says (LG 50), that the Gospel does not lie but speaks the truth. It is the world, mendacious and sensual, sinful and unjust, that does not speak the truth. Poor indeed are those who live in falsehood, and blessed are those who live in truth!

This holiness of Father Alfonso Navarro as proclaimed to us in the gospel has many risks, and the greatest risk is the one he ran: martyrdom. But listen, sisters and brothers, to how the church regards this road that led Father Navarro and Luisito Torres to eternity. The Second Vatican Council spoke about the universal call to holiness, holiness for all people, in all states of life, in all situations: «By martyrdom a disciple is transformed into an image of his

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<sup>2</sup> *Testimonio, Alfonso Navarro*, Publicación Búsqueda, Arzobispado de San Salvador, 1978.

Master by freely accepting death for the salvation of the world and by his conformity to Christ in the shedding of his blood. Though few are presented such an opportunity, all must nevertheless 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» (LG 42). What a beautiful passage to place as an epitaph on Alfonso Navarro's tombstone! A more beautiful statement could hardly be found!

It is the way of the cross; it is the way of martyrdom, a most exceptional grace. The Lord does not grant it to everyone, but we all yearn for it. We all try to follow the Lord, but we know that we cannot follow him without great love in our hearts, love that makes us willing to offer our lives for him. Blessed is Alfonso Navarro! Blessed is Father Grande! Blessed are those who have been persecuted and who have died for the kingdom of Christ! Blessed are those who have been massacred out of hatred for the faith. They are blessed because God, by means of those bloody criminal hands, has given our community the most precious pearl!

With respect, admiration, gratitude, and brotherly love I raise up the life and the example of Father Alfonso this morning, and I tell you: this pearl is the glory of our community, the beautiful crown of our diocese. It is the light that inspires us to give witness to holiness, to truth, and to unity.

Let us celebrate, then, the same Eucharist that nourished Alfonso Navarro until the last moment of his life. Earlier this morning I celebrated on the altar where Alfonso Navarro celebrated his last Mass, and I was truly filled with emotion as I realized that when a priest celebrates his final Mass on earth, it is because the sacramental life of the church is no longer necessary for him. He no longer has any need of this sacrament with these material elements of bread and wine, symbolizing the smiling presence of Christ. For Alfonso Navarro these sacramental containers have already been broken open, and he now enjoys the purest essence of the magnificent presence of Christ. As we pilgrim people continue to seek the beauty of Christ in this sacramental presence with our meager, half-blind faith, may he keep nourishing us from heaven. As we continue on the road, let us not lose our way, so that one day we may rejoice with him in that heaven that began for him on May 11, 1977. Let us now offer our prayers for the community and the universal church.