

THE IDEAL THAT NEVER DIES

Funeral Mass of Father Alfonso Navarro¹

Parish of the Resurrection

Colonia Miramonte

12 May 1977

Beloved brother priests, dear faithful and radio audience.

There is a story about a caravan that was traveling through the desert with a Bedouin as guide. The travelers had become desperate and thirsty and were searching for water in the mirages of the desert, but their Bedouin guide kept saying, «Not that way, but this way». He had spoken these words so many times that a member of the caravan became frustrated, took out a gun and shot the guide. As the guide was dying, he extended his hand and said one last time, «Not that way, but this way». He died pointing the way to a well.

This legend becomes a reality today in our midst: a priest is gunned down; he dies forgiving; he dies praying. As we gather now for his funeral services, he shares with all of us his message, and we desire to receive it. We might say that we have before us a beautiful view of the Apocalypse: at least two hundred priests are gathered here from all the dioceses of El Salvador, fraternally accompanying the archdiocese in its sorrow. Above all, they are embracing the message of Alfonso Navarro, a priest who has died, but a priest who is always preaching, because the voice of a priest never dies. And the people of the parish are here also, gathered under the roof of this well-named Church of the Resurrection, where everything sings of joy and hope. The faithful from other communities have also gathered here in order to feel this breath of happiness, of hope, of alleluia. Here on this calvary of blood there is a resurrection of hope.

No to violence

My sisters and brothers, what does this episode tell us, the apotheosis of this afternoon, these Easter alleluias of resurrection? In the message of Father Navarro I find that message of the Bedouin riddled by bullets. First of all, a protest against violence, a rejection of violence: «They kill me because I show them the way». And we as church repeat once again: violence resolves nothing, and violence is neither Christian nor human. Violence, especially when it violates the fifth commandment, «You shall not kill» (Exod 20:13), brings with it tears, pain, and anxiety rather than anything good. And in this case, let us not forget that there is also another family in mourning along with the family of Father Navarro and all his spiritual family which is the diocese and the church. I refer to the family of Luisito who agonized and died at the side of his pastor; we extend

¹ On 11 May Father Alfonso Navarro Oviedo was assassinated, together with the child Luis Alfredo Torres, in the rectory of the Parish of the Resurrection where he was pastor. See «Informative Bulletin of the Archbishop's Office, No.15» in *Orientación* (15 May 1977).

our condolences to them as well. And in the presence of this innocent body of a child, sisters and brothers, we raise up our cry in protest against violence because the life of a layperson is just as sacred as that of a priest.

We say now, here before Father Navarro, the same as we said yesterday before the foreign minister Borgonovo Pohl: life is sacred, even in the humblest *campesino*, even in the priest. Even the life of a person thought to be a criminal is always sacred, not to speak of when this title «criminal» is given as the result of slander or defamation. Such calumny should cause horror in those who take the life of another, and I mean not only those who fire the pistol or assault rifle, but also those who motivate such killers with their defamatory campaign against the church. Violence is produced by all of them: not only by those who actually kill, but by those who impel others to kill. From this pulpit I would like to direct my words to the President of the Republic: Mister President, I hope the statements you made to me yesterday by telephone are sincere, namely, that you are committed to investigating this crime, just as you are to investigating the crime against your foreign minister. The life of Mauricio Borgonovo is just as sacred as the life of the priest who has just perished, and it is just as sacred as the life of Father Grande, who was similarly gunned down two months ago—and in his case, despite the promise of an investigation, we are still very far from knowing the truth of this matter.

Dear sisters and brothers, violence is criminal, even in those who fail to do what they should to discover its origins. They are as sinful as the ones who actually fire the arms that kill. In this time of slanderous campaigns, these deaths are criminal. And how is it possible that people can say that this is only the beginning? How is it possible that threats can be issued against more lives? Life is sacred, and the church is present to defend life without considering political or other motivations. She is present because it is a sin to take the life of another; it is a sin against the law of God.

The fifth commandment weighs now as excommunication also upon the intellectual and the material authors of this murder. For many unbelievers, the penalty of excommunication perhaps appears to be ridiculous. Maybe they will be more deeply impressed when they realize it is not simply a spiritual penalty; it is the repudiation of the whole people of God; it is ostracism from the people of God, who say to the criminal, «You no longer have anything to do with this people who walk in hope and in obedience to the law of God. We do not want blood; we want love, we want peace, we want reconciliation». This excommunicating gesture of the people is without hatred, just as the cry rejecting violence is without hatred. It is a cry like that of Jesus who said, «Repent and return to the right way» (Mark 1:15). It is the cry of the Bedouin who like Father Navarro dies forgiving those who fill him with bullets. I am thankful for the testimony of that good woman who held him as he lay in his blood agony. When she asked him if he was feeling pain, he responded, «I have no pain except the forgiveness that I want to give to my assassins, to those who shot me, and the pain I feel for my sins. May the Lord forgive me». Then he began to pray. That is how all who believe in God die, even though they have defects and sins. We priests live with a hope. We cannot be communists because communism mutilates this hope in the great beyond. We believe in God, we preach hope, and we die convinced of this hope.

The ideal that never dies

This then, is the second aspect of Alfonso Navarro's message: it is an ideal that never dies; it is a hand extended like that of the Bedouin in the desert who kept saying, «Not that way». Let us not walk guided by the mirages of hatred or by the philosophy of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—no, that is criminal. Let us be guided by this other philosophy: «Love one another» (John 15:12). Do not walk on those roads of sin and violence. A new world is being built, so walk on the roads of love. And for all of us, dear brother priests, this is a solemn hour. This hour ratifies our priestly ordination. Even now I seem to see Alfonso Navarro prostrated here, not to receive the anointing of death, but rather to receive the sacred anointing of priesthood during the solemn ceremony that was celebrated years ago in the National Gymnasium. When he and his companions were ordained, the Serra Club wanted to bring home to the Republic of El Salvador the full significance of these young priests who were being consecrated to the service of God. How different was that environment when the significance of our sacred vocation was understood and loved!

My dear brother priests, at that wonderfully happy hour of priestly ordination, our hearts were filled with hope and desire to work for God's glory and for God's people. So also now, this anointing of death by which Alfonso's body descends to the grave while his spirit ascends to heaven is also the triumph of priesthood. This ideal which makes us his brothers is an ideal that never dies. In every priest who is murdered there is a new impulse of hope and joy and fervor in those who continue this priestly ministry. It is an ideal that cannot wither; it is an ideal that makes life arise from death itself. This is the ideal of Alfonso Navarro who said, as if sensing death was near, «Do not cry for me, but sing. Give me red carnations, for it will be my joy to emigrate with this ideal toward heaven». Who could have told him that his murder would become a banner that he left for us who continue on our pilgrimage! We feel that this ideal that sustained the life of Father Alfonso will never die and that, purified of human imperfections, the transmission of this divine message cannot be stopped by anyone. And here, before the body of a dead priest, we priests reaffirm what we said in our communiqué of a few days ago: we want to ratify «our oath of fidelity to the word of God and to the teaching of the church».² Urged on by this word of God and the teaching of the church, we feel the courage of those first apostles as we say, «We must obey God rather than men» (Acts 5:29).

This is the banner that cannot fall. As we bury our brother today, we should not feel defeated. We are sorry that a soldier is missing from our ranks, but we feel that someone else must take the place that has been vacated because the preaching of the word and the teaching that the church now desires are obligations similar to the ones that made the prophets tremble before their tremendous mission, but they were faithful to God and never betrayed his message.

² «Declaration of the Archbishop and Clergy of the Archdiocese of San Salvador on Recent Events» in *Orientación* (8 May 1977).

A call to all moral forces

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, the message of this Bedouin on his way to eternity is a call to all moral forces of our land. Sisters and brothers, if Alfonso Navarro is the image of the bullet-riddled church at this time, then the church, like that Bedouin, keeps pointing and calling out to the others, «Go this way». If they do not want to believe the church, if they want to confuse our priests with guerrilla fighters, if our Gospel mission is being misconstrued as Marxism and communism, then this is simply unjust. But if the slander continues to spread, then we must ask the other moral forces that remain in the world, «What are *you* doing?»

I call upon Protestantism; I call upon all honorable organizations; I call upon all the goodness that is in each family and each heart. Why are we being pessimistic, sisters and brothers, in this hour when violence seems to be holding its banner high? As one parishioner from this church told me last night, «Bishop, be very careful because beasts are running wild and are thirsty for blood». So, my sisters and brothers, like the Bedouin guide, we say to you who are not in danger, «Continue to work because you are church». It is wonderful to think at this time about how much spiritual force is being awakened in many families and communities by the persecution of the church. This is not the time to divide ourselves into two churches. It is the time to feel that we are only one church struggling on behalf of the resurrection of Christ, who brings redemption not only after death but here on earth. We struggle for a more just and more human world, we struggle so that greater social sensitivity will be felt in every sphere, and we struggle against violence and against crime. Oh, if only all of us would propose sincerely this afternoon to unite our moral forces! When I say *all*, I mean not only those of us who belong to the Catholic church, but also all those forces which may not believe in the church, but are still afraid of dying like Father Alfonso Navarro, and which do not want the banner of violence and hatred to remain victorious.

And please, stop the slander! Stop persecuting the mission of the church! Stop sowing discord and rancor! Stop spreading that philosophy of malevolence and vengeance! Let us unite together to make our country a more tranquil place, a place where there is less distrust among ourselves, a place we no longer have to flee as if we were escaping from wild beasts in a jungle, a place where we truly live together as sisters and brothers, if not through faith in a risen Christ, then at least through a sense of nation, a sense of humanism, a sense of fraternity.

This is the message, dear sisters and brothers, that I gather from the mouth of Father Alfonso Navarro, disfigured by bullets. I beg you to take seriously, dear brother priests, this power of love that the church preaches. Let us distance ourselves from feelings of hatred and violence; let us repudiate them completely. Let us also distance ourselves from those feelings that destroy and kill and cannot build a better world or bring happiness to anybody. May the Lord grant us the fruit of this Eucharist which we priests of the earth celebrate together with our brother priest who has gone to eternity, but who still has one foot in this parish of Miramonte and the other in heaven. Dear Alfonso, help us who are your brothers, for we still fear what you feared. But we also hope that a sense of humanity will direct the hearts of Salvadorans, so that your death, instead of inciting people to more violence, will become a Christian message about the new strength of love in your church.