Homily of the 25th Anniversary of the Martyrs

Mass Community College UCA, Rector homily P. Andreu Oliva, SJ. Friday November 14, 2014

Good evening, dear friends of Martyrs and UCA; dear John and Manuela, brother and sister of Father Ignacio Ellacuría; dear friends visiting us from various parties, especially those who come from afar; dear Provincial and Jesuit Superiors; dear Presidents of various Jesuit Universities, who have come to commemorate the martyrs of the UCA tonight; dear friends and colleagues of the community of the UCA; very dear Monsignor José Luis Escobar, archbishop of San Salvador; dear Bishops of the dioceses of El Salvador; dear Father Provincial Rolando Alvarado; dear brothers in the priesthood, thanks for concelebrating this Mass of Thanksgiving for the life and generous dedication of our Jesuit brothers and Julia Elba and Celina Ramos.

I want to thank Monsignor José Luis for giving me the opportunity to share with you the homily at this Mass. And I do it gladly, because since I was given the mission of assuming the Rectorate of the UCA, I have lived in a privileged time and I have come to know much better the life and the cause of the Jesuit Martyrs and the University project they conceived and launched for the UCA. This has been a source of inspiration for my work as Rector, but also for my life as a Jesuit and Christian. Personally, I am very grateful to the Jesuit martyrs for their lives’ work, their thoughts and their understanding of the UCA. It has prompted me to seek to be more human, more Jesuit, and a better Christian.

We are here tonight to commemorate and celebrate the life of our martyrs, a full life, a life in the service of the Kingdom of God, a life in defense of truth, freedom, justice and peace. And it was precisely this life they lived that brought them to death. They were killed for how they lived, the way they thought, what they did, because they defended the poor from those powers that abused them, denying them their human dignity, condemning them to death. Because they wanted a Savior for all, with peace. For this they raised their voice, and did their best to encourage people to raise their voices against war and for peace. They saw that most would favor the poor, the majority, and that that was the only way to bring an end to much suffering, so much barbarism, and to start a different life for the people they loved so much.

Today's readings help us understand better that what inspired our colleagues was the love of God and neighbor. Who they were, what they did, and how they lived, has a clear and precise source, their faith in Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. The Life of Jesus, the Word of God, the Father's love, the life of the people, especially the poor, was forming them and was pushing them to where they ended up.

The first reading of the Book Jesus the Son of Sirach is somehow an icon of the Salvadoran reality, 25 years ago and now. The reading refers to a society in which the poor, the afflicted, the hungry, the oppressed, the orphans and their mothers, are unprotected, helpless, and their needs are a cry to society. And Jesus the son of Sirach calls, or rather commands, an imperative for the believer to take responsibility for them and serve their needs. Especially strong I think is the first sentence, "do not pretend to be blind and deaf to those looking to you with pleading.” And we should personally examine whether we have become deaf and blind to the majority of our people living in exclusion. And we should consider as an institution, as a university, whether we are responding to the needs of our people, the 40% living in exclusion, victims of violence, young people who are as if lost, who do not know where to go and are pushed toward gangs. The martyrs of the UCA did not close their eyes or stop their ears to the reality of that time, made much harder by the pain and more difficult by the absence of freedom. And they did not close their eyes or stop their ears because they knew they were on the side of the people: they went to shelters to listen to and accompany the communities evicted from their territories under threat of death. They went to rural communities, suburban communities, the grassroots, to the slums, and there they saw and heard the poor, their sufferings, their problems and needs, and this filled them with compassion. And so they could not stop applying their intelligence, their specialty, their university work in defense of the poor and those oppressed by an unjust and oppressive regime.

Many people in El Salvador emulated them and had compassion and commitment to that reality. How many people were tender and loving with those who suffer, how many people were moved because they felt that reality was not responding to the will of God? They joined the popular struggle, the struggle for liberation, the grassroots, to find a structural solution to that reality that generated more and more poverty, more of the oppressed and needy! But the Book Jesus the Son of Sirach, talks about other ways to respond, ways that are accursed, that show no mercy with those who are desperate. They pass by the needy, do not want to see the poor, the beggar, nor assist them in their needs. There are some who act well, yesterday and today--those who took the option of being with the poor and needy, who cried out for justice and wanted to "free the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor.” They came to martyrdom.

This interpretation leaves a very clear message to us all, but I mean in a special way to the UCA as an institution and university. We say we want to be faithful to the legacy of the martyrs, we want to be a university of Christian inspiration, we want to change society. But if we turn away the face of the needy in our society, if we do not feel solidarity with the reality of poverty, injustice and oppression, if we are not able to let be moved at our center by so many needs and do not provide in our university work a response to this reality, then as a university we will receive the curse of these people that once saw the UCA as a university that defended the poor, attending them in their needs, in solidarity with them, and God will listen. On the contrary, if we act as the Martyrs did and offer tenderness, love, understanding, genuine and structural solutions to their needs, we will be true children of God and God will love us more than a mother.

The second reading from the First Letter of John and the Gospel according to John is a beautiful call to live loving each other, to do the will of God, to remain in his love. For the Christian community of the evangelist John, these words were full of meaning, for it was a community living in conflict: conflict with those who expelled them from the synagogues, harassed them in their faith, having significant doubts about it and internal conflicts. Therefore the one Shepherd Jesus, the beloved of God, who so loved the community that he gave his life for it, who is its friend, invites it to stay in love, stay faithful, united, doing the Father's will, not as slaves but as friends. For Jesus has shared with them everything he heard from His Father. He has chosen and destined them to bear abundant and lasting fruit.

The lives of Salvadoran martyrs, from Monsignor Romero to ... (name them all) show that it is possible to live well. They lived as they did because they loved much, because they felt in their gut the pain of the people, because they were offended by the injustices and abuses of the poor, because doing the will of God led them to raise their voices in defense of the people against those who violated fundamental human rights, because they felt that work for building the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of truth and justice, love and freedom, solidarity and peace, was the will of Jesus, God the Father, and could not stop. His love for Jesus, his love for the poor, did not allow them to be indifferent, to ignore this reality. They stood up and took responsibility for it. They sided with the weak, as they learned from Jesus.

The call of Jesus to love one another obliges us to immerse ourselves in the light of our reality as did the martyrs. The love that Jesus refers is not romantic, it is a love which presupposes action, giving one's life for others. A love that is internal, deep, real, truthful. A love that means keeping the word of God. Act on it, bring it to life. It supposes knowing how to be at the side of the other, close and in solidarity, going out from ourselves to encounter those whom we love. As St. Ignatius taught, love should show itself more in deeds than in words. It is a sharing in which those who love give to the other what each has that the other does not. The martyrs knew how to love, because they gave what they had—their word, their intelligence, their affection and closeness, their work—and gave it to the service of those who had almost nothing and had almost everything taken away. For those for whom they worked, they fought to give life in abundance and not lose what they already had. And therein they were asked to give the gift of life in martyrdom.

Today our reality also invites us to love one another, following the prophetic tradition and Jesus, love the weak, the small who have no one for them, who struggle daily for life, who are denied basic and fundamental rights. Do our hearts really reach to their situation? Are we moved in our depths by poverty, violence, by how hard and difficult it is to make a living on the street every day? By those who are unemployed? By those mothers who see their children murdered? By those who are incarcerated in inhumane conditions and never allowed rehabilitation? By those who do not find justice? By young people who join gangs and destroy their lives forever? Are we willing to love?

This attitude, this desire to love our brother (preferentially to the poor and needy), to do the will of God, should mark our life, the life of the UCA, our institutional activities, teaching, research and social projection. And it will make us happier; it will enable us to bear abundant and lasting fruit; it will fill us with joy; it will make us friends of God.

From the UCA we can light up the darkness, discover the evil that lurks in the dark, strive to know the truth. That truth uncovers lies and injustice, it shows what the current political, economic and social system hides and how it causes the dehumanization of our society.

In our country there is a small group that wants to continue the darkness, who pass over the needs of their brothers, those whom Archbishop Romero called to conversion. If we are faithful to what we have read as the Word God, even today, with humility and love, we have to continue to encourage them to open their heart, to look at a brother in need and respond to his cry. For only then will they walk in the light and may actually love God. To those who oppose working against poverty in our country; those who do not want quality public education for the poor; those who do not share their goods with those in need, using money only for their own benefit and do not want it at the service of the common good; those who defraud the public and deny the State's resources to do their work for the common good; to those who steal and exploit public goods, which are for all but that should come first serve the poor; to those who defend the rights of the rich and deny the rights of the poor; we want to tell them with St. John, *you're wrong: you do not know God of truth and so you do not do the will of God*. Their foolishness leads them to hate their brother, to walk in darkness, not knowing where to go. Do the will of God, do not go hating your brother, do not go breaking fraternity, and then the darkness will disappear from El Salvador and the true light will shine, and be full joy and happiness in our country.

As I said there are few who act and think thus, but they have much power and that is why their conversion is so important. Still, among us there are so many good people, so many people living fully evangelical values! There is so much love, so much solidarity, so much hunger and thirst for righteousness, so many people who are meek and humble of heart, crying for compassion for the suffering of one another, they are blessed! Learn from them, let their heart and spirit be contagious and build the best country in the world. So these people have so much love for their martyrs, and feel so grateful, because they were their friends, their brothers, who knew solidarity, defending them and standing at their side.

Pray to the Lord that even today the UCA and all the men and women of good will will follow Jesus, come close to and pay attention to the needy, sincerely loving each other and doing the will of God the Father.