

FADICA CATHOLIC LEADERSHIP AWARD CEREMONY

Remarks by Bishop Ricardo Ramírez, C.S.B.

Thank you, FADICA, for this great honor. As you present me with this award, and as I receive it, I am full of gratitude, first of all to God, *Padre, Hijo y Espritu Santo*, and then to the many people in my life whose inspiration and sharing of their wisdom, have contributed to my efforts as a shepherd of the People of God.

My vocation, I believe, came to me as a small child of about 4 years of age. It was a beautiful winter starry night when my family, my mother, grandparents and my brother, were walking from Tía Petra's home after she had led us in the novena prayers to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Fresh in my little mind was what I had just experienced: my family at prayer before the image of Our Lady. My grandfather was holding my hand and suddenly lifted me up to his shoulder, where I felt very close to the stars above. I looked at them and was sure they were mine. And in my heart, I recall, saying, "Whoever, you are who made these stars for me, I thank you!"

That was my first act of faith and my call to everything that has been grace for me ever since. It was the affirmation of my baptism and the acceptance all that was to come, good things and bad.

Later, when about six year of age, Fr. Max Murphy, C.S.B., asked me to be an altar server, and I am sure that through Fr. Max, God was calling me to be a priest like him, even though it took me many years to actually join the Basilian Fathers.

The Basilians are priest-teachers and that is what attracted me to enter their novitiate. After teaching a few years in our high schools, I was sent to Mexico to work as a missionary and specifically as a catechist. My work was among people who, while poor in material things, were rich in things spiritual.

That experience and later my years at the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) connected me with Latin America, its people, its Church, its poverty, centuries' old traditions of faith and rich cultures and its theology.

When I returned from my missionary sojourn in Mexico in 1976, the Hispanic Church was coming into its own. There were two Hispanic archbishops who inspired me: Archbishop Patrick Flores and Archbishop Robert Sánchez. Archbishop Flores showed me how to be a bishop.

MACC, under the leadership of Fr. Virgilio Elizondo, was having a profound influence on Hispanic ministry throughout the United States. It was the place of confluence of Hispanic laity, women and men religious, priests and bishops. To MACC came Chicano activists, poets, artists, novelists, and theologians and historians from Latin America. Non-hispanic pastoralists, theologians, seminarians and others came to learn the Spanish language and Latino cultures. It was an exciting time for the Hispanic Church and, indeed, for the whole U.S. Church.

Because of my interest in history, Fr. Elizondo asked me to represent MACC at meetings of the *Comisión de los Estudios de la Historia de Latinoamerica, (CEHILA)*. My relationship with CEHILA

lasted many years, and since the meetings were in a different country each year, I travelled to most of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

At the time the Church in Latin America was going through very repressive and violent times. In the name of “national security” dictatorships took over and many thousands were incarcerated, tortured and many thousands disappeared and presumably killed, including women religious, catechists and other lay leaders, as well as priests and bishops. In the meantime, the Church in Latin America was heroic in its defense of the poor, the innocent and people’s human rights. Many of us returning missionaries from Latin America joined the pastoral and social justice efforts in the U.S., inspired by what we had experienced as missionaries.

When I was named the first bishop of Las Cruces, I found that our border area was, in many ways, an extension of Latin America. To this day, this is true. We owe much in our diocese to the rich faith especially

of northern Mexico. We not only share the same Chihuahuan desert with its flora and fauna, but also the same Catholic tradition of faith and culture. A significant number of our parishioners are immigrants from northern Mexico and have brought with them an admirable work ethic, love of family and deep faith.

Las Cruces is a frontier Church, way out there, in the desert wilderness of the Southwest. The greatest pastoral challenge is the geographical distances that separate our parishes. Most of our parishes are small and with very limited material resources. Our treasure are the people whose faith inspires hope and generous service to promote the Reign of God.

My diocese, like so many in the Southwest and in the Deep South, and other isolated regions of the U.S., is considered a mission diocese, making it possible for us to receive grants from the Catholic Extension Society of America and from the Bishops' Home Mission collection. Please remember that dioceses such as ours are not only mission dioceses, but dioceses with a mission. We aspire to be

vibrant and strong local churches, but also, through the uniqueness of our situation, we experience wonderful graces which we share with the rest of the Church. Jesus came from the frontier, from Galilee, that far away place, far from the centers of power and political influence; but from there came hope for the world and produce Him who was worthy to announce that he was “the way, the truth and the life.”

In conclusion, allow me to take the opportunity to thank you for your help to our diocese, but also to all mission dioceses. Without you the Church might exist in our areas, but would not have the impact nor the means to continue God’s work on earth and the task of handing on the faith to future generations. May God bless you.

I end with the Prayer by Archbishop Oscar Romero:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

*The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying*

*that the kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.*

*This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.*

*We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.*

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation
in realizing that. This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well. It may be incomplete,
but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference
between the master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.
Amen.*