

In Memoriam

Fr. Francisco Álvarez Rodríguez

(26 July 1944 – 9 January 2015)

FIVE TALENTS

You worked hard / he gave you five talents/ and you earned another five (J. M^a Pemán)

Father Francisco Alvarez, a Camillian religious, died in the Camillian nursing home of Tres Cantos (Madrid) at about midday on 9 January 2015, at the age of seventy. He died as though he had foreseen his end – surrounded by the religious brothers of his community, by his family and by his friends. All of them were praying and singing, accompanying his farewell in all serenity.

During the last years of his life, because of the brain tumour which led to his death, observing him from the outside it appeared that the thoughts, the deeds and the words of Father Francisco were slowly withdrawing from the things of this world, almost in order to adapt his life to a new dimension of existence.

The signs of this new dimension were highlighted in his serene and luminous face which was calm as he moved towards the sunset of this world. During these moments Fr. Francisco, helped by the atmosphere in his room, immersed himself in a more intimate and personal prayer which he never left – the Rosary. I remember that it was said that he had adopted the habit of ending his day with the Rosary and litanies, in Latin naturally enough. Those prayers learnt by heart narrated the principal chapters of his biography as a Camillian religious: health of the sick...Queen of the Patriarchs...Queen of the Prophets...Queen of the Apostles...!

Patriarch

Father Francisco Alvarez had the appearance of a Patriarch. His death at the age of seventy impeded us from seeing him in the fullness of that image but his personality expressed many paternal features, patriarchal characteristics, characteristics of the chief of a clan, of the founder of a tribe, like those of our Biblical ancestors, the faithful custodians of the covenant with the Lord and steady guides in the difficulties of their families and their villages. Father Francisco, like them, wanted to found, and did found, new communities. He felt at home in the assemblies of the religious families that sought his advice. He accompanied the spiritual retreats and exercises of many institutes, especially institutes for women. He supported many women religious Superiors in their decisions as regards the government of their institutes with sound advice. His spiritual and wise advice was asked for by various Congregations on the subject of the ageing of their members – a subject where Fr. Francisco had a great deal of experience and expertise.

But a Patriarch also has temptations, amongst which are those of his mission. At times patriarchal guides conserved or maintained relationships that were absorbing, directive or excessively protective with their peoples or with the members of the tribe to which they belonged. At other times they were seen, or they saw themselves, as the owners of the heritage that they managed or administered for the Lord, the only owner of the earth. Fr. Francisco also experienced these temptations and ran the risk of falling into some of them. But like the Patriarch St. Joseph, who was warned in dreams during his sleepless nights, he also knew how to react in time.

2. Prophet

I believe that there is no doubt that we can see Fr. Francisco Alvarez as a prophet of our times, understanding his service for individuals and communities as the mediation of a man who spoke on behalf of the Lord, proclaiming his words and denouncing the abuses that could be made of them. Francisco from an early age took on the role of the leader of the Province with spoken or written words, with his preaching and his pastoral letters. In airports, railway stations and journeys in general, it was unusual not to see him with a pen in his hand preparing a letter for the community that he was going to see or because he had been asked to give a lecture or write an article or a book.

Francis had the gift of discernment and this was used without ever forgetting that the Word of the Lord comes to us through signs of the times as well. In him was achieved to perfection the advice of St. Paul: proclaim in all occasions, whether suitable or not. In this sense, Francis in an effective way contributed to the definition and extension of Camillian spirituality and to the promotion of the study of the new Constitution in the communities of the Institute. He summed up his teaching in a valuable book that could nourish our communal prayer.

3. Apostle

An apostle in the Church is a person invited to carry out a mission. This was perhaps the most evident element in the personality of Fr. Francisco Alvarez. He felt that he was first and foremost a person called by the Lord and invited to serve him in the Camillian Order. ‘This is the gift of God that has most pleased me – being felt that I am called to religious life and sent out to serve the sick’, he said modestly on a number of occasions. But when he confided this fact, Francisco was moved internally to the point of having tears in his eyes. Just as Jesus of Nazareth, the Teacher, never said ‘I’ but, rather, defined himself as ‘he whom the Lord has sent’ (Jn 6:29), so our Father Francisco Alvarez felt that he and his mission were deeply identified. In reality, he never refused any service that the Church or the Order asked of him. He felt that he was deeply defined by his Camillian mission.

4. Promotor of Health

In the life of Fr. Francisco it was becoming increasingly clear that his mission was to promote health, a health that would have culminated in Salvation. It is no exaggeration to say, here, that in Francis his ‘self’ was closely connected with the promotion of health. He demonstrated this in Rome when during his young years he was the first secretary of the Camillianum International Institute for the Theology of Pastoral Care in Health. It was also shown through his ongoing work for the review *Humanizar*, through the three-year period when he coordinated the National Department for Pastoral Care in Health of the Spanish Bishops’ Conference, and through his work for the diocesan delegation for pastoral care in health of the diocese of Sant Feliu de Llobregat (Barcelona).

Father Francisco also demonstrated his personal talents in theological thought about pastoral care in health. In this field, a land of evangelisation as he called it, he found his personal treasure which he generously shared with his readers, with those who listened to his lectures, and health-care professionals, always being directed towards the humanisation of people, of programmes and of health-care services. His fertile work in this field culminated in the publication of his doctoral thesis which was entitled – logically enough – *The Theology of Health*.

5. Sick but Healthy

But the wisest and most intriguing lesson of his career as a teacher was given by Fr. Francisco during his illness. Because of the cancer that had gained a foothold in his brain, namely multiform glioblastoma multiforme, Fr. Francisco lost his memory and was very limited in his movement and verbal communication. Over a two-year period he gradually became totally dependent on the people who helped him. But like the poor widow of the Gospel, it was specifically in his poverty that he gave his best and greatest offering.

His wheelchair became the new teaching chair of the new PhD holder. And from that wheelchair Fr. Francisco showed that he was an authentic witness to everything that he had previously taught. From that wheelchair he offered the most profound and wisest lessons: true love, life as tender and real as newly baked bread.

Francisco, in silence, from his wheelchair, offered the broadest smiles and the closest and warmest embraces. He caressed children, young people and the old with a gospel joy, showing that the Kingdom of Heaven is for those who become children. Before his illness he had never expressed such sincere and spontaneous emotions or shed such clear tears. Through his silence, in a friendly and eloquent way he taught us the most important thing in life and if at times he raised his voice the shout came from an impelling need that brooked no delays, and not from a whim or a selfish concern.

Through his poverty he evangelised us; through his illness he made us all healthier; and through his vulnerability he made us all stronger.

He now rests in the peace of the Lord.

Jesus Maria Ruiz Irigoyen